



Story of Change

From darkroom to limelight: advocacy and awareness change Liberia's forest governance

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The formation of the Liberia Forest Media Watch (LFMW) group of investigative journalists, and the creation of an hour-long radio programme, "Forest Hour", in 2019, has enabled forest communities and civil society organizations (CSOs), to express grievances, advocate for benefits, and call for transparency in forest contracts and management. The regular, weekly programme, coordinated with in-depth newspaper stories by LFMW journalists, has shone a light onto the hidden issues in the forest sector and made it impossible for the authorities to ignore major issues in the sector as people are now talking, and rights can no longer be so easily compromised or ignored.

Since the Forest Hour was launched in April 2019, it hosted about 84 shows. The show has covered illegal logging, benefit sharing, the process to obtain Authorised Forest Community status, labour conditions, and environmental hazards. It has brought local and national forest stakeholders, journalists, CSO actors, and forest experts together to discuss and debate trending forest issues. In particular, it has looked at governance issues both within forest communities themselves and within the state institutions. The show has exposed forest illegalities including non-compliance with the forest laws, failure to uphold company-community agreements, policy failures and weak administration by both local and national forest leaders.

Where the programme has shone a spotlight, supported by associated stories in the print media, issues have played out in the communities, and often the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) has been on the back foot whilst forest communities and their leaders take decisions as enshrined by laws. As a result, key issues from the show have been discussed at internal FDA meetings. For example, in Sewacajua forest, the Community Forest Management Body was [replaced](#) for misrepresentation and mismanagement; in Gba forest two leaders were [arrested](#) for



misappropriation of US\$200,000; and the FDA are said to have suspended some staff in Sinoe County for taking ill-informed decisions.

Context: what did we set out to do?

The history of Liberian forestry and forest resource management is replete with conflicts, disenchantments, corruption and international sanctions. Bribery, collusion, environmental abuse and illegal logging are other grave attributes of the sector that have left devastating effects on a country where almost everyone is dependent on forest resources for food, fuel, building materials, medicines – all the basics in life. The civil conflict between 1989 and 2003 claimed an estimated 250,000 lives according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, prolonged due to the timber trade being used to pay for weapons, but that was ultimately stopped by UN trade sanctions. As reported in 2016 by [Mongabay](#), “historically, the business of logging in Liberia has been tightly controlled by the central government. Contracts were handed out to companies in which few – if any – benefits were likely to trickle down to the communities that lived in the area”.

The post-conflict restart of the sector included a new legislative framework that, for the first time, gives communities a say in the management of their forests and a right to benefit from them. A 2017 Global Witness [report](#), however, demonstrated how all of Liberia’s large logging contracts are illegal on multiple counts. A more recent and authoritative review commissioned by the World Bank and Norway came to the same conclusion, and, according to LFMW [coverage of the report](#), stated that “holders of forest contracts are rarely held accountable for contravention of contractual and legal obligations. This is largely due to systemic lapses from regulatory bodies in discharging their monitoring and enforcement responsibilities”.

Over the last decade there has been a shift from concessions to community forestry. Nowadays, much more timber is coming from supposedly community-managed forests than the large concession areas, but as [reported](#) in 2018 “this community forestry permitting system is being hijacked by rapacious logging companies and a complicit Forestry Development Authority”. The concern that illegal acts continue to be perpetrated by top officials of government persist, with local communities having inconsequential inputs into what is happening to their forest resources. The decisions to award logging contracts to ‘investors’ are made in what many in Liberia describe as ‘dark rooms’ or ‘zoe bushes’. The only inputs by local people are when they are uprooted from their settlements to give way for a concessionaire to carry out his investment in extracting the natural resources and leaving the areas depleted.

The EU NSA project was the latest of many initiatives in Liberia to support more inclusive and deliberative multi-stakeholder decision-making. Project partners recognised from the outset that forest communities have had limited voices, and sought to change this through a number of parallel actions. At the start, it was recognized that people would not be able to advocate or talk about issues that they have limited or no idea of. Forest communities, in whose name a benefit-sharing agreement with a logging company had been signed, for example, could not demand these benefits if they had not been given details of agreements or did not fully understand them. In other instances, a lack of understanding about community-level governance structures for forest management led to conflict between different factions within a community, or with local political or business vested interests. So a programme of awareness raising about the ‘rules’ – the legislative and similar frameworks and guidance – was designed.

Linking forest community members to national media, including radio and print journalism, was the second component in the project. Giving people a voice in national and local media empowers them in taking control over their own forests. This would allow a direct sharing of experiences and perspectives between communities across the country, leading to joint learning and a better understanding of rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders in the forest sector. And, doing this in the public domain of broadcasting would enhance transparency and invite responsible government agencies to take note and act accordingly.

It was hoped that these two components would be mutually reinforcing. For example, nurturing the committees who represent communities, in an understanding of their role and of their accountability to the wider community, should give them the confidence to



Forest Hour host making in studio.
Photo by: Dioda Wreh, LFMW

speak out. At the same time, supporting the media to empower citizens to lead advocacy and raise red flags on non-compliance and rights issues would lead to a deeper understanding of rights and responsibilities.

The project set out to work with a range of partner and beneficiary groups. In the main, the partners were national-level CSOs, including the Civil Society-led Independent Forest Monitoring (CS-IFM) team, and the National Union of Community Forestry Development Committees (NUCFDC) and National Union of Community Forest Management Bodies (NUCFMB), both of which are umbrella groups that represent community interests in local forest management (CFDCs for forest concessions, and CFMBs for community forestry, respectively), and independent journalists.

The ultimate project beneficiaries were forest community members. Four CFDC and five CFMBs were identified to concentrate support on, alongside three women's groups and two youth groups – to encourage wider community engagement than only through these forest community committees. Alongside both these groups, training was planned for media practitioners to accurately monitor and report on forest related issues.

Other stakeholders identified at the outset were local and national county officials, state institutions such as the FDA, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Liberia Revenue Authority, and the Liberia Timber Association representing the logging industry. Each had a potentially pivotal role but within each institution it was expected there would be a mix of allies, opponents and waverers. In particular, those who had been conducting commercial operations in forests as personal or 'secret' projects, to the detriment of the people and country, were considered opponents. It was expected that these included some officials in the FDA, lawmakers and other top government officials, who would want to resist change as it would cost them the income and manipulation there were accustomed to. Similarly, companies with illegal operations or those failing to comply with their obligations to local communities would also make the list of opponents. Given the history of the sector, project personnel knew that they would be confronting some entrenched and powerful forces, and also that many years of similar initiatives had had limited impact in the face of this.

The experience of implementation

In the early stages of the project, about 60 community members, 18 media practitioners and 10 civil society actors, including representatives of women's and youth groups, received training in independent forest monitoring, advocacy and engagement. But it was the training for media practitioners in June 2019 that was a

turning point, when participants agreed at the end of the workshop to form a WhatsApp group in order to stay in touch. From this, the idea of a formal group of investigative journalists, Liberia Forest Media Watch, came about.

LFMW makes an important contribution to information dissemination and advocacy in the country's forest sector. Bringing together some 15 media practitioners who focus their attention on probing and reporting, the group has highlighted issues of conflicts and investigated reports of corruption that have provoked the government and stakeholder actions towards improved forest management. LFMW reports that it had over 20 stories published in different print and web-based media in 2020.

In contrast to many CSOs who are driven by a clear agenda, journalists pride themselves on seeking both sides of any story, and this reputation can make it easier for them to access officials. A good example of this, from soon after the formation of LFMW, is *Strengthening community forestry: what challenges FDA?*, published in [September 2019](#). This quotes the FDA head of community forestry, saying that she "dispelled rumours of bribery at the Authority noting she envisions an independent community forestry sector where logging companies will avoid dishing out money among local dwellers; something which causes confusion leading to chaos". The article goes on to give an authoritative summary of the three tiers of forest community governance: the community assembly, the executive committee, and the community forest management body.

A recent story published by LFMW relates the [allegation](#) in July 2020 that two representatives from these groups in Nimba County took over US\$200,000 from the community forestry pot for themselves. The money was intended for social infrastructure projects in 22 communities, demonstrating just how much money a forest community could potentially be able to invest.

Shortly before the journalism training, in April 2019, the project invested in a one-hour slot on one of the country's best-known radio stations, [OK FM](#). The weekly Forest Hour was set up as primarily a phone-in programme, but with a different key speaker – often community members themselves – interviewed in each episode. The show has also included CSO representatives with good knowledge of the sector, particularly in its early days. In April 2020, it also [featured](#) the FDA Deputy Managing Director for Operations.

Cursory monitoring of Facebook followers suggests the programme has the potential to reach up to 500,000 listeners, and reaches all corners of the country and beyond through the internet. More locally, it is regularly



Community forest monitors discuss the implementation of a Community Forest Management Agreement.
Photo by: Moses R. Quollin, LFMW

related to community radio stations in Liberia's rural areas, enabling local people to listen in the localities being discussed.

Among dozens of topics, Forest Hour has discussed illegal logging, poor labour practices compliance with legislation, forest management contracts, non-compliance by logging companies, environmental pollution, community forest management agreements, reviews of forest laws and regulations, corruption and revenue collection, more often than not putting pressure on government agencies to take action. An estimated 84 episodes have been held, highlighting many national forest issues, and indeed, the Nimba scandal mentioned above was also aired on [9 July 2020](#).

In this way, Forest Hour is contributing to information dissemination and awareness on the country's forest laws and policies. It is shedding light on forest concessions like never before, while at the same time serving as a platform for the exchange of ideas about effectively managing the country's forest and resources. These demands for accountability and transparency are particular to the sector and among forest communities. Bonathan G. Walaka, a facilitator of the National Union of Community Forest Management Bodies testifies that many people have learnt a lot from listening to Forest Hour: "The hidden facts surrounding forest contracts and how the people should benefit are now uncovered. It is an eye-opener. Now we are able to monitor forest operations, point out wrongs and advocate for change. This advocacy has even helped to reverse decisions and put to checks on government officials' reported meddling in leadership of forest communities".

In Sewacajua in Sinoe County, for example, according to research by the project, the community forest management body started receiving more than US\$ 100,000 for their land rental and cubic metre fees.

However, ordinary community members never saw this money, and in April 2019 there was a 12-count resolution including "allegation[s] of misrepresentation and mismanagement of entrusted funds" by the five-person management body. The following month, Sewacajua Community was [successful](#) in changing the entire community forest management body, and the new leadership is said to be doing well.

Forest Hour is often used to put matters like these on the table. Sam Kwennah, working for the Liberian NGO Save My Future and a member of the management team in the NGO Coalition of Liberia, commented for this story: "Issues are discussed there openly. People call from across the country and ask questions that are answered. This is putting pressure on government, concession companies and others stakeholders to play by the rule".

Over time, the Forest Hour and LFMW initiatives have worked increasingly closely together. Although the radio presenter from Forest Hour at the time attended the journalism training, they were conceived as separate innovations. However, in early 2020, LFMW took over from VOSIEDA as the coordinator of Forest Hour and this has increased the synergies between the two. Forest Hour – by tapping into a network of investigative journalists – benefits from a greater knowledge of forest issues, and the stories the members of LFMW are uncovering enjoy wider dissemination. More recently, LFMW has joined a group of CSOs leading on forest monitoring, engagement and advocacy, furthering its ability to raise the profile of critical issues affecting people and forests.

What makes these demands unique is that they are not brewing instability like violent protests that often lead to loss of lives and properties. This means that violence is the last option in calling stakeholders' attention to compliance from companies. These dialogues and radio

discussions on Forest Hour have, in contrast, promoted the peaceful settlement of disagreements and forest related conflicts, as it has helped improved awareness and education on complicated matters, said Mr. Kwannah. These two initiatives have also contributed to a greater sense of ownership by forest communities to take charge of the management of their forest resources, such as demanding compliance with social obligations, evoking stop orders on non-compliant logging companies, and changing their community forest management bodies.

Too often in the past, reporting on forest governance matters was done only when international organizations released reports, or when the UN renewed sanctions on Liberian timber. Today, local and national media practitioners are reporting on these issues because they have been trained to do so, and motivated by the popular interest in their stories.

The closer interaction between journalists – radio and print – and NGOs, has highlighted the importance of their different but complementary approaches. Whereas journalists work to tighter deadlines and briefer more accessible stories, NGO investigations are more thorough and deliberate. At the same time, journalists have the duty to report a story from different, perhaps opposing perspectives. They often have a greater degree of access to different protagonists, whereas NGOs can find it more difficult to obtain the views from some detractors. NGOs are also committed to supporting capacity building and seeking solutions, perhaps limiting their engagement to only a few communities in order to do so, whereas journalists generally have short-term engagements of this nature.

Sustainability

The sustainability of these changes depends on three things: the long term impact of the achievements to date (i.e. if no further progress was made); the sustainability of the associations formed; and the irreversibility of the any improvements. These are discussed in turn. By creating awareness, explaining rights, and providing education on major issues, this work has led to communities knowing better that the forest is theirs, and that they have a bigger stake in its management. Of course, not every problem has been solved, but these media initiatives have pointed to the challenges the sector faces, for example the issue of politically connected community forest management body members living in Monrovia and not really representing community interests. Lasting benefits include that communities now see the need to keep their community forest management body accountable, that people in Monrovia know more about problems in their communities, and that stakeholders see value in working together.

Forest Hour is hosted by an independent radio station which will always have to consider the popularity of its programmes when deciding what to air. Those running the show have seen the potential contribution it can make to people's lives and livelihoods, and this provides an impetus to maintain it. The journalists in LFMW have similarly seen that their stories are appreciated and acted on. However, the group is relatively new, has low organisational capacity, and is not yet fully registered as an NGO. It will also need to increase the number of active members if it is to be sustainable. At present, both initiatives rely on the continuity of funding, but their popularity should make attracting financial support easier. They also need to monitor and document their activities and impacts better, in order to make applications for continued funding more convincing.

When elite groups operate in secret, it is difficult to demand information from them, and other groups may not be aware of their right to this information. As a consequence, bad decisions, in the interests of a minority that exploit the majority, will continue to be made. To prevent this, community rights to information, decision-making power and equitable benefits from their forests, need to be actively sustained. A lowering of the ability of Liberian NGOs to remain effective and therefore to attract funds, and donor fatigue in supporting actions that do not show results, is the biggest threat to avoiding a reversal to the previous era of natural resource exploitation in the country.

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Photo cover: Discussions with a local community following a National Forest Forum. Photo by: Moses R. Quollin, LFMW

