

News

Glimpses of Transparency in Community Forest Management

By William Q. Harmon - June 12, 2020

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— as Sawacajua delivers unprecedented first quarterly report

Weak governance is often blamed for poor development outcomes, such as poverty and unsustainable levels of natural resource depletion. In the context of forests, a lack of transparency and accountability is often associated with problems such as illegal logging and corruption.

Similarly, a lack of open and inclusive decision-making, coupled with shady deals by local authorities and other influential citizens, often contributes to the marginalization and impoverishment of forest-dependent communities. And Liberia, like many other countries, has been a victim of this "perennial curse."

However, efforts are being made to change this status quo as many crave more transparency and accountability in the governance of the forest sector, especially at the community level.

Gladly, there appears to be a little light in the sector that is beclouded with vested interests of government officials and others who continue to manipulate the sector at the detriment of the communities.

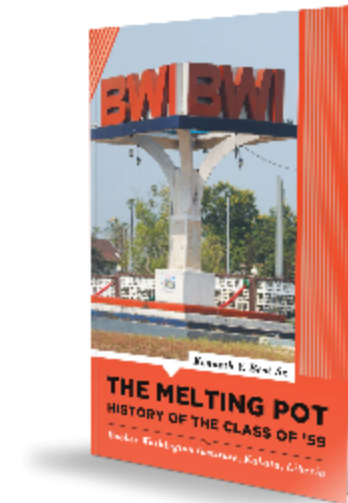
But Sawacajua Community Forest Management Body (CFMB), located in the heart of the dense forest of Sinoe County, is now positioning itself to change this entrenched corrupt culture.

With a new effective and robust leadership, the CFMB in Sawacajua is doing all it can to ensure that monies made from the forest do not end up in the pockets of individuals, but benefit the ordinary people who are the owners of the natural resources.

In an unprecedented move and as a way of ensuring transparency in the management of the community forest, the new leadership of Sawacajua Community forest, headed by Oliver C. Clarke, a few weeks ago presented its first quarterly report to the people. The report, which is in line with community by-law and constitution and community rights law, detailed how much was collected from logging companies and how it was utilized.

Clarke's leadership commenced in September 2019, following the removal of the past leadership on allegations of mismanagement and misrepresentation of the community and entrusted properties. The old leadership was also accused of failing to report to the community, as enshrined in the Community Rights Law of 2009.

The new leadership revealed in its report few weeks ago that it received US\$48,600 from Mandra, the logging company operating the forest, with a total of \$11,500.00 USD still outstanding.



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Following receipt of the money, the leadership noted that a resolution to construct a headquarter for the CFMB in Gbalawein was signed and the amount of \$30,000 USD has been paid to a contractor hired by the past leadership to implement the project.

The CFMB, in its breakdown expenditure chart, noted that the amount of \$ 13,000.00 USD has been disbursed for the completion of the Judu Town Clinic.

The leadership of Sawacajua Community Forest Management Body being inducted in office in September, 2019

It was reported that each of the 24-member Community Assembly (CA), the highest decision-making body of the community forest governance structure, received US\$100 in allowance, while US\$1,000 was disbursed to the 5 members CFMB as compensation.

Two motorcycles were purchased for the operations of CFMB at the cost of US\$2, 000.00. One of the bikes is said to be assigned to the Chief Officer and the other to the CA President.

A compensation of US\$500 was disbursed to members of the traditional council for their role played during the advocacy period; at the same time, US\$500 was provided for the Concern Citizens to cover up expenses made during the advocacy period to remove the former CFMB.

According to the report, US\$1,500 was allocated in an effort to pursue a pending legal case against two members of the former leadership for refusing to turn over pertinent documents belonging to the community and illegal withdrawal of funds from the community's account.

After 2 years of agitation, the new leadership informed the community that it has succeeded in working with Mandra to recruit a community member as Public Relations Officer (PRO).

"The company has completed the long-awaited Judu Town Bridge project, which connects various towns and villages in Sawacajua. The company has started building the road leading to Wedjah," the report indicated, also highlighting delay by Mandra to complete several feeder road projects.

Among other things, the report said, Mandra has abandoned block 06 and 09 in their concession area. The two abandoned blocks contained over 500 species of logs. The community feared that they stand to lose if logs in the abandoned blocks are not harvested.

It is no secret that the major role tropical forests play in biodiversity and climate change led to a search for effective ways to slow down deforestation –one of which is the creation of the Community forest management (CFM).

This structure is also an example of the broader concept of community-based natural resources management (CBNRM). The concept is also a part of decentralization policy intended to promote more effective stewardship of the resources by involving the local communities in the management of the resources, and a more locally-driven development with residents tapping most of the derived benefits.

But corruption, a status quo perpetuated by greedy local officials and other influential people, has made these dreams elusive over the years.

But for Clarke and his team, this is what they have come to change. "This is what the new CFMB leadership in Sawacajua wants to change. We want to be more accountable to our people and ensure that their resources benefit them," the CFMB's Chief Officer Clarke told the Daily Observer via telephone.

Clark said he and his team came on board on the basis of integrity, trust, accountability, and transparency and as such, "We thought we need to build trust and confidence

in our leadership.”

“I don’t see this as doing things differently because this is the reason for which our people elected us and we must live up to that,” Clark said, adding that the people were overwhelmed and happy about the quarterly report.

Sawacajua’s CFMB head, Oliver C. Clarke

However, the courage by forest communities to advocate for their rights and practice open governance is triggered by the series of training/coaching conducted by the European Union Non-State Actors (EU-NSA) project in independent forest monitoring, advocacy, engagement and lobbying since its inception in 2016, an official of EU-NSA said.

This training, he noted, was meant to enhance the function of forest community structures to be able to engage companies and forest stakeholders on issues that matter to them most.

“As the project enters its final year of implementation, project beneficiaries, particularly the people of Sawacajua, has begun doing things differently to support the Volunteer Partnership Agreement (VPA) and REDD + plus process,” he added.

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William Q. Harmon

1 COMMENT



Jonathan W Yiah, SDI Liberia June 12, 2020 At 2:29 pm

Very welcoming, initiating compliance with the community forestry legal regime by the new leadership at Sewakajua in Sinoe. This should be highly commended. However, ascribing all the glory of this outcome to an individual project seems an unintended effort to downplay previous capacity support the community has received through other donors including DFID and FAO. Through these previous interventions Sewakajua has been the primary subject of legality issues emanating from community forest management tabled at the EU-Liberia Joint Implementation Committee (JIC). As a result a committee was created to ensure legal compliance in the integration of “timber sourced from commercially oriented Community Forest Management Agreements (CFMAs)” into the timber legality assurance system under Liberia’s Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the EU. My contribution here is to point out that this particular outcome is not isolated but a result of collective interventions to improve community forestry in Liberia more broadly.

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