

DATA VS. GOLIATH

A conversation between Kerstin Canby and Silas Siakor

Sometimes the right weapon in the fight against injustice and corruption is just a spreadsheet full of timber exports. Here's a conversation (edited for length) between Kerstin Canby, Senior Director of our Forest Policy, Trade, and Finance (FPTF) Program, and Silas Siakor, Executive Director of Integrated Development and Learning and recipient of the 2006 Goldman Environmental Prize. To watch the entire interview, please scan the QR code.



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Kerstin Canby:

Few can say that they helped topple a warlord in the midst of an armed conflict using forestry data. You helped expose how Liberia's forests were being cut down and the revenues from those logs were funding the country's civil war in the 1990s and 2000s. And this work on conflict timber, it took courage, and it helped lead to the UN sanctions which stripped the armed groups of revenues that was helping to fund armed conflict. Can you tell us why is transparency and good data so critical when it comes to how forest lands are used and how their revenues are shared?



Silas Siakor:

The more accurate the information you have, the stronger your advocacy, the more informed your advocacy. And the more likely you are to inform and win over policymakers, duty bearers, [and] law enforcement officers to do the right thing—to advance the interests of communities in terms of their benefits, but also to advance the national interest because the state is able to capture the revenue that is due in terms of taxes for logging companies, and they are able to enforce the rules of the game.



Kerstin Canby:

In 2023, Forest Trends worked with you and the Government of Liberia to review many of the logging and mining concessions to see how well they complied with Liberia's own national laws and regulations. And what we found was serious gaps across the sectors, and that more than US \$20 million in land rental fees were still owed to communities, according to Liberia's own law. So how did data and documentation help move this conversation forward in a constructive way?

Silas Siakor:

This situation underscores the value of accurate information, because the information was clear, verifiable, [had a] very strong base, and the companies that were at the center of all this could not dispute the numbers. So the government recognizes that it has a legal obligation to collect and transfer the community share of the revenue, [and] the companies have accurate information about what exactly they owe these communities. The evidence is there, it is indisputable, and the obligations on both sides are very clear. That would not have been possible if the data wasn't available to the communities, if the data wasn't available to NGOs working on these issues, if the data wasn't available to civil servants, to policymakers to duty bearers. They would not be in very strong position to engage with the conversation in a meaningful way.

Kerstin Canby:

You helped Forest Trends design that report and the investigation. But we did more than

just provide data. Can you tell the audience why it was so important to see, in this independent investigation, not just a call for reform, but also offer practical steps forward, basically a roadmap of how to get there?

Silas Siakor:

The very first thing that happened was that during the national budget development process, there was a very focused conversation about how much of what the government owes these communities can be put into the budget, so that we are able to make some payments to the communities. It triggers immediate positive action on the part of the government to address the areas that are there. But more importantly, it also provides the communities a better

understanding of the economics of the sector, so they can see very clearly how much the companies are generating from the resources that are being extracted from their area,

how much of the value of that resource is actually being transferred to them for development, and how much of that revenue is being lost in between.

“The evidence is there, it is indisputable, and the obligations on both sides are very clear.”



And by doing that, the communities have a better understanding about what options they would like to pursue going into the future, whether they want to continue with business as usual relying solely on logging, or whether they want to explore other options of maximizing the economic benefits of the forest environment of the natural resources they have.

Kerstin Canby:

For the communities who've been waiting for years for these promised benefits, what would justice look like?

Silas Siakor:

Justice in the eye of the local communities, these forest-dependent communities, is kind of dressed in different forms. For these communities, they need the revenue to invest in local development priorities, whether in schools, in health, in education, in other welfare needs. On the other hand, they really would like for the extraction to happen, but to happen in the way that respects and protects their environment. Justice is a combination of the two.

Kerstin Canby:

You're working on a new initiative, the Payments for Stewardship Initiative, and it's offering a fresh idea—direct cash payments to communities that agree to keep their forests standing. What inspired this approach and why do you think a non-market approach like this is more likely to succeed in Liberia's current governance and economic context?

Silas Siakor:

We've been working to achieve result-based payment, to be in a place where Liberia can receive some economic returns on all the efforts it is making to protect the forest. If you can commit that you will not [engage in activities that drive deforestation], that triggers the first-year payment to the communities. And now they realize that compliance with those commitments will be the requirement they have to meet in order to trigger subsequent payments for subsequent years. And the beauty of this scheme is that it does not rely on sophisticated carbon accounting. It's physical. You can see whether a new farm has been created or not. You can see whether the trees are still there compared to what happened when the commitments were made. You can see that there is no logging. It makes it possible for communities themselves to monitor and enforce their own rules on the ground. It encourages compliance rather than external enforcement.

Kerstin Canby:

Well, you have definitely helped to take Liberia's forest from being a source of conflict finance to a source of hope with this new initiative. When you look five, ten years down the road, what kind of legacy do you hope this



work leaves, both for the world's forest, but also for the people who live and depend on them?

Silas Siakor:

Looking down the road five years from now, our vision is communities that are participating in this scheme have better livelihoods compared to those that are not participating, both in terms of sustainable use of the forest resources they have around them. Remember they need the timber themselves to reform their schools, to build benches for students, they need it to construct clinics to provide local healthcare. [But] they are going to take a more sustainable approach to using the resources around them. That's the vision that we have set for ourselves.

