

# Now that the Sierra Leone Land Policy 2015 has been officially launched – An open letter to President Koroma

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Dear Mr. President,

Last Thursday I was at State House to witness the low-key start of a potentially profound revolution in the land sector. For decades, our people and the environment have borne the scourge of a broken land tenure system. Many attempting to buy land to build a future for their families have lost their life savings to unrepentant swindlers who have taken advantage of our fragmented land administration system. Over the years, the hills surrounding Freetown have been slowly divested of their precious flora and fauna by merciless land grabbers aided by certain selfish or dishonest public officials. With our landscape stripped or left bare, our city is left more vulnerable than ever before to adverse climatic changes.

In rural areas, increased competition over land for mining and plantation agriculture has combined with unpredictable weather patterns and outward population movements to threaten the existence of whole villages. The rural landscape is changing fast. Ties that used to bind are coming undone, leadership that once protected villages now exploits them, and the unchecked excesses of big businesses undercuts people's belief in the rule of law. Many rural dwellers feel disconnected from the centre, forgotten entirely except when there is some valuable resource for the taking.

I could regale you with many stories of challenges, frustrations and despair, as well as a few of hope, victories, and hard-won solutions. At Namati, we have kept careful records of our experiences in providing communities access to legal and paralegal services as they interact with investors. A few of these cases stand out:

- Once, a paramount chief decided that a landowning family should no longer receive their share of the rent paid by an agriculture company because the last surviving male relative had died. Women, he claimed, had no right to land;
- Or consider the case of the agriculture company that leased 1015 acres of land from a community for 25 years for the total sum of Le 600,000 (\$150) per annum. The community wanted a bridge across the Rokel River in place of a normal rent and the company agreed to build one. The company also agreed to plant two trees for every tree cut down as compensation. The lease agreement, however, did not bind the company to any of these promises. Eight years later the company has not built the bridge or planted the trees but it has been harvesting its crops. Last year it did not pay rent. The company claims it is not bound by the promises it made—only by what contractually exists in the agreement;

- Then there is the village that desperately desires to be relocated because extensive mining has destroyed its farmlands, rivers, and ground water sources. The inhabitants do not see any future for the community if they continue to stay, but the mining company is reluctant to resettle the 600-plus individuals who live on the lands it has so badly damaged. The village relies on tank water supplied by the company and a few boreholes;
- But lastly, before we lose hope, we should consider the case of the responsible agriculture company—the one that pays \$12.50 per hectare as rent, and still allows the community to farm the unused portion of the land it has leased. The company helped organise the landowners into associations, has provided school materials for pupils, and started a university scholarship scheme. Recently, at the request of several communities, it built “barrays,” or meeting places, for these villages as part of its commitment to corporate social responsibility. In the lease agreement, the company agreed to pay 5% of its net profit annually into a community development fund for development projects.

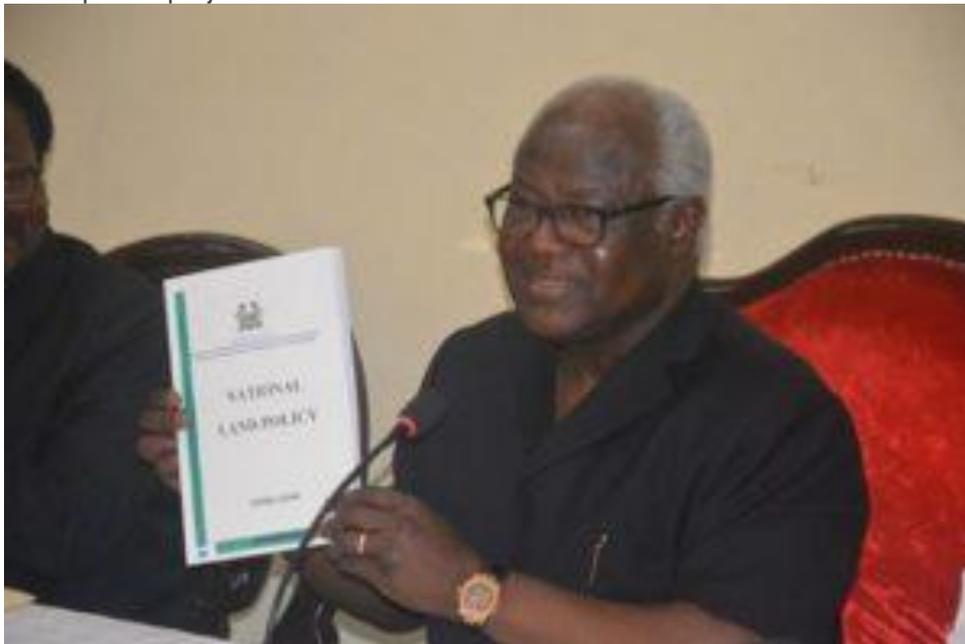


Photo Source: cocorioko.net

We have seen the way that Sierra Leone’s vast natural resource base presents many threats, but also brings many opportunities. We have to determine how to manage these resources for both the good of the people and the environment. The National Land Policy 2015, which you have now officially launched, provides a framework to minimise and eventually eliminate those threats and amplify those opportunities.

The policy lays out transformative provisions that, among other important achievements (i) guarantees women equal rights to and control over land (ii) enables communities negotiating with investors to have access to independent legal and paralegal services (iii) situates stewardship of

natural resources at the community level (iv) secures the tenure rights of individuals, families and communities through a system of mapping and title registration. The policy also contextualizes international standards and best practices such as the Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the context of National Food Security.

Mr. President, there is no guarantee that your successor (whoever she or he may be) would exhibit the same passion and commitment to land reform that we have seen over the last 5 years. It is important that until the last day of your presidency you continue to use your office to ensure that the ground-breaking provisions in the National Land Policy improve the lives of ordinary Sierra Leoneans. For this to happen, there must be some serious financial commitment to land policy implementation. New laws need to be enacted, new governance structures set up, and new land administration systems deployed. Across the country, people need to know about these laws, structures, and systems to be able to use them effectively in practice.

While development and civil society partners continue to support the reform process, we remain discouraged by government's lukewarm financial commitment to this crucial enterprise. Budget allocations in 2016 and 2017 for land policy implementation have been minuscule compared to what is needed to bring this transformative policy to life. Sierra Leone's goal of reaching middle income status by 2035 can never be achieved without addressing the current challenges of land use and administration through robust land reform implementation. If our hearts are truly set on this dream, then we need to commit our treasures to achieving it. We are asking the government to contribute at least 20% of the cost of reform implementation.

In closing, I would argue, Mr. President that in years to come the biggest achievement of your government may not be the roads constructed, the power grids installed or the water pipes laid. How well you lead this land revolution may be your defining moment in history.

Please accept the assurance of my highest consideration.

Yours Sincerely,  
Sonkita Conteh  
Director, Namati Sierra Leone