



Forest Issues

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An analysis of media coverage June 2021 to May 2022

BRIEFING | DECEMBER 2022

Introduction

Media coverage of forest issues in Liberia has been tracked since January 2021, and collated in an online, publicly accessible [database](#), using Airtable technology.¹ All media reports found online, and all episodes of Forest Hour are included.

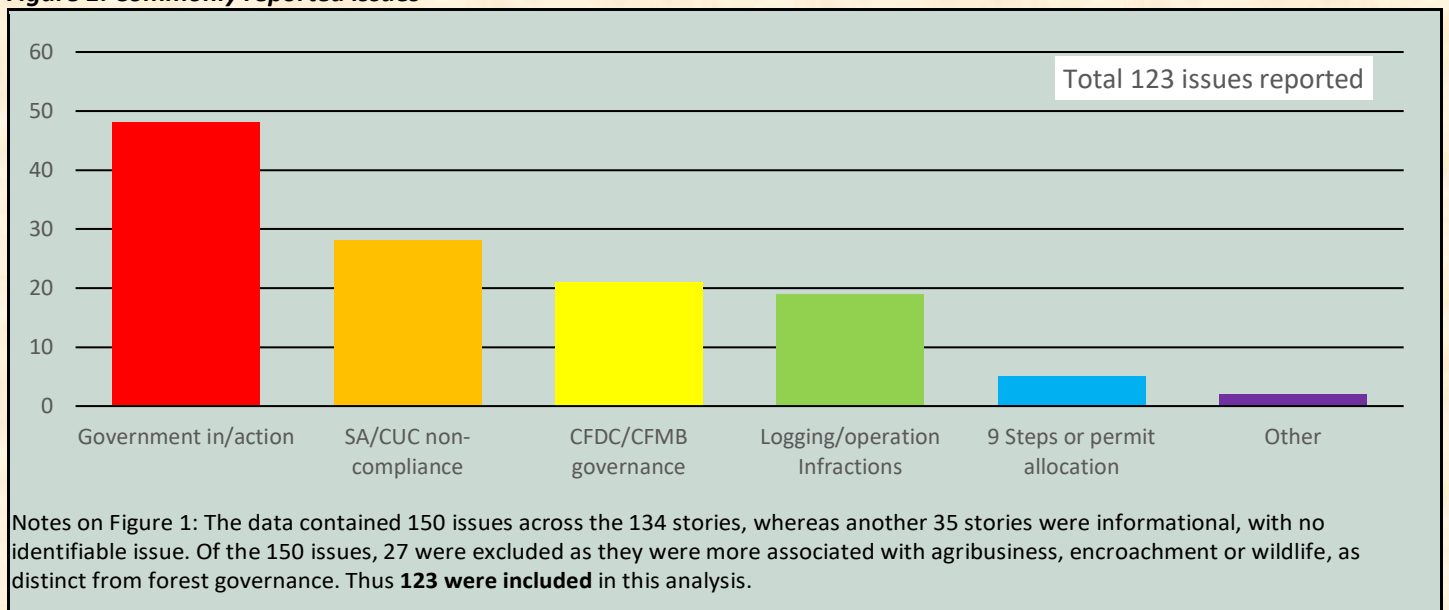
This brief summarizes 134 items captured in a one year period, June 2021 to May 2022. Under project “Strengthening the Capacity of Civil Society for the implementation of the VPA” the CSO group sought to make use of an official complaints mechanism as a way to monitor common issues in the forest sector and to track how the authorities responded to issues when they were raised. It became clear, however, that although the

Independent Auditor of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) had created a complaints mechanism this was never implemented.²

This database therefore provides an alternative way to systematize issues that have been presented to the public. The database catalogues all illegalities searchable by company, location and issue, so offers an opportunity to improve monitoring and review progress or lack thereof in forest governance as well as preparing the ground for submitting complaints, when – as required by the VPA – a complaints mechanism is established.

The 134 issues have been analyzed in three ways: (i) the most common issues; (ii) the companies most often involved; and (iii) the counties where most issues arise.

Figure 1: Commonly reported issues



This assessment was conducted under the project “Strengthening the Capacity of Civil Society for the implementation of the VPA”, coordinated by Fern and implemented by the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI), Foundation for Community Initiatives (FCI), Civil Society-Independent Forest Monitors (CS-IFM), National Union of Community Forestry Development Committees (NUCFDC), National Union of Community Forest Management Bodies (NUCFMB), and Liberia Forest Media Watch (LFMW). It was conducted with the financial support of the European Union. The opinions expressed are the sole responsibility of the authors and cannot be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.



Analysis of issues

Figure 1 shows 123 identifiable issues were reported. Of these, the most common issue is ‘government in/action’, which refers to cases of action, or a failure to act, by government officials or agencies. Common topics include the huge government arrears in the share of land rental due to communities, the failure to remain neutral when mediating local disputes, and the involvement of officials and politicians in the logging industry. Authorities were implicated in 48 reported issues, or nearly 40 percent of all issues.

The second most common issue was company’s failures to comply with Social Agreements or Commercial Use Contracts (including their predecessors, Third Party Agreements etc.). 28 media reports highlighted this as the issue, about 23 percent of all the reports. Most of these reports illustrate the efforts communities have to go to – and their limited success – in their efforts to persuade logging companies to fulfil their social obligations, including land rental, cubic meter fees and contribution to community infrastructure. Increasingly, the abandonment of one community in favor of moving to a new logging permit area has become an important issue.

Governance issues within the community (21 issues, or 17 percent), and infractions in logging operations (19 issues, or 15 percent) are ranked third and fourth. The former refers to disputes or other issues within a Community Forestry Development Committee (CFDC) or Community Forest Management Board (CFMB) and may occur when two disparate communities have been persuaded to manage a single forest or where two logging companies compete for a permit by using community factions as proxies. The latter refer to where a logging company fails

to comply with the law, regulations or procedures regarding forest operations – whether or not this has any direct consequences for local communities.

Relatively few media stories (5, or 4 percent of the total) covered issues in the allocation of forest management permits (whether in concession areas or in for community forest management). This may because very few new permits were awarded during the period.

Amongst the ‘other’ category, there was only one dispute between companies reported. This could be because companies may prefer not to use the media to air their grievances with each other, and/or because, as mentioned above, they use community proxies.

Analysis of Companies

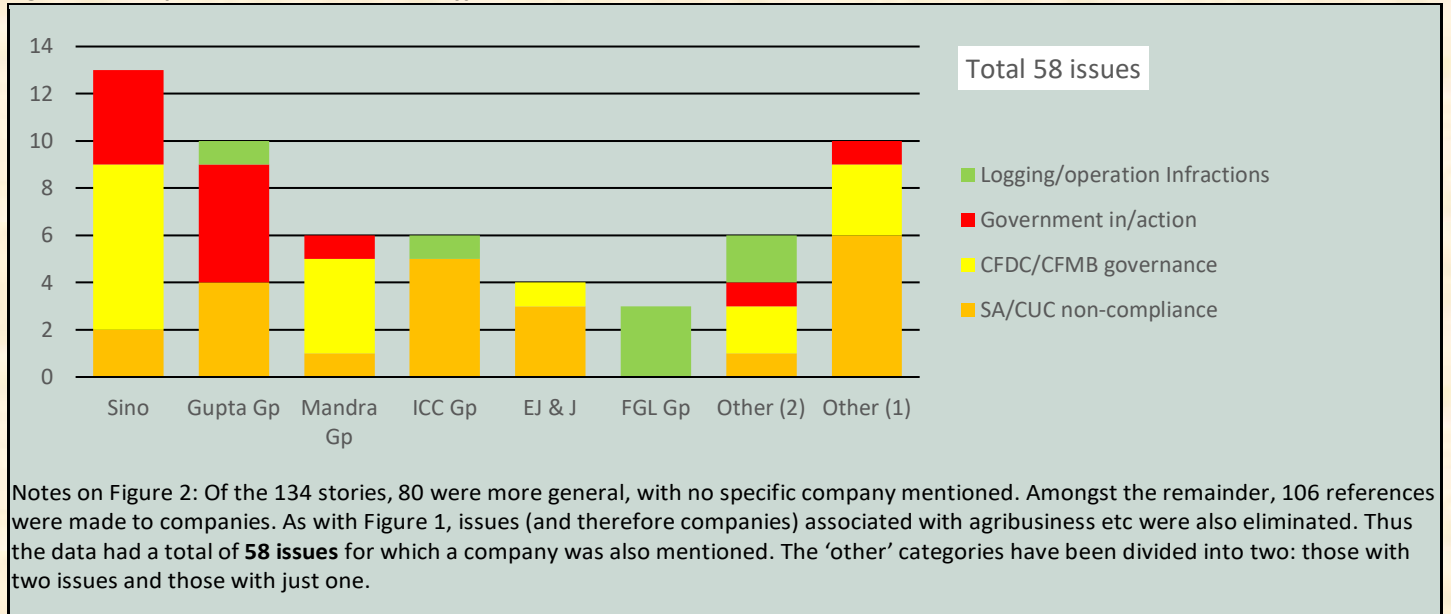
The analysis of those companies most often mentioned in media reports is provided in Figure 2, which also indicates the type of issues in each case. Sino Forest Liberia Corporation (Sino) features the most times – in nearly a quarter of all issues – due to the longstanding challenges in Tartweh-Drapoh community forest. These are frequently represented on Forest Hour and are also well documented in “Decoding 10-Year of Tartweh-Drapoh Forest Conflict – The Deception, Actors and Victims”.³

Further analysis is complicated by the fact that companies change frequently: in some cases they subcontract to others, making it complicated to identify which is responsible for a particular issue; in others they abandon the permit and are replaced; and in the most complex cases more than one company is revealed to be controlled by the same owners, effectively making is a single entity. To enable a more meaningful analysis, therefore, some companies have been grouped as indicated in Table 1

Table 1: Company groups used in the analysis

Group name	Group members	Information source
Gupta Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sing Africa Plantation Liberia (SAPLI) • Indo Africa Plantation Limited • Starwood Incorporated 	https://thenewdawnliberia.com/liberia-how-fda-allows-a-foreign-family-to-hoard-forests-and-hurts-communities/
Mandra Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandra • West Africa Forest Dev. Inc. (WAFDI) 	https://newspublictrust.com/tensions-brewing-in-tarsue-community-forest/
ICC Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Consultant Capital (ICC) • Africa Wood and Lumber (AWL) 	https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/after-failing-locals-in-large-concessions-italian-tycoon-lets-community-forests-down/
FGL Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom Group Liberia (FGL) • Renaissance Group Incorporated (RGI) • Tarpeh Timber Company (TTC) 	https://loggingoff.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/IFM2021-LoggingOutsideTSCA2PolicyBrief9.pdf

Figure 2: Companies associated with different issues



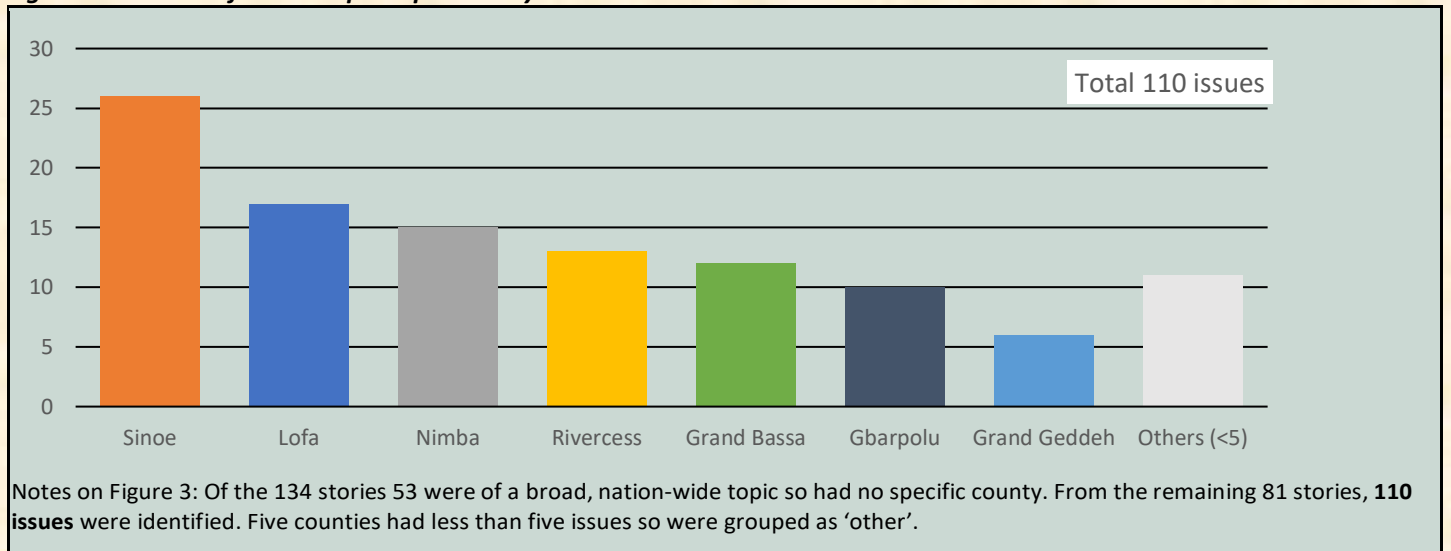
Next, ranked equal third, are the Mandra and ICC groups. They are each involved in 6 issues, or about 10 percent of the total. In the case of Mandra/WAFDI, governance issues within the CFMB receive most coverage, whereas in the ICC/AWC group, non-compliance with social obligations is the predominant issue.

Ranked fourth and fifth are EJ & J, and the FGL/RGI/TTC group, respectively. In the case of EJ & J, non-compliance with the third party agreement (precursor to a CUC) in Ziadue & Teekpeh is the main cause. The latter case refers to the TSC A2 case and represents the largest case of outright illegal logging amongst all the issues documented.

Analysis by County

The distribution of reported forest issues across counties was also analyzed and is represented in Figure 3. This does not appear to reflect the number of forest permits or community groups in each county, as Sinoe, the county with the highest number for issues has only eight: one FMC CFDC and seven CFMAs. The county with the lowest number of issues, Grand Geddeh, has a relatively high number of forest permits / community groups: three FMC CFDCs and six CFMAs. This perhaps suggests that monitoring, compliance and enforcement should be concentrated in counties with a higher of issues rather than a high number of forest permits.

Figure 2: Number of media reports per county



Tarpeh-Drapoh CFMA, which dominated the analysis by company, is also the main cause for the high number of issues in Sinoe. In Lofa and Nimba, however, there is no direct relationship with any particular company. In Lofa, non-compliance with social obligations and government in/action are the main reasons behind the 17 cases. In Nimba, many cases are linked to agribusiness, encroachment and/or wildlife issues (which were removed from the analyses by issue and by company), but non-compliance with social obligations and government in/action are the main reasons behind those that remain.

Conclusion

The forest issues database provides a useful summary of the issues affecting the sector and has now existed for almost two years. The [database](#) is supervised by Liberia Forest Media Watch and is available for viewing (and copying) by anyone with the link. Software is being developed within the database in order to automatically generate online analysis and graphs as presented in this report. Liberia Media Forest Watch would encourage other civil society organizations in Liberia to receive training and then to contribute to the database contents.

This analysis shows that media coverage of the forest sector is significant, averaging two to three stories per week (134 in one year), and these stories often detail

multiple issues at the same location (150 issues across the 134 stories). This suggests the sector is facing serious and ongoing governance issues.

Cases of action, or a failure to act, by government officials or agencies, and non-compliance with social obligations represent half of all issues. This points directly to those with the largest responsibility for remedying the situation: the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) and other government agencies on the one hand, and the companies with a duty to fulfil their social obligations, including land rental, cubic meter fees and contributions to community infrastructure. Those that suffer most from the failure to resolve issues are of course the women and men who live closest to the forests and who are most dependent on them for day to day life.

The absence of an accessible, formal complaints mechanism denies people a channel for bringing issues to the attention of those with the power or authority to help resolve them. It also means there is no public register of issues or complaints, and therefore no independent or transparent means to monitor that they are being responded to. In addition, many issues appear to be systemic, to do with generalized failures by the FDA, logging companies and others, so require most systemic solutions beyond resolving individual complaints.

References

- ¹ The database can be viewed here: <https://airtable.com/shrXqxLlcY05v0jpP/tblIcb9jSYaTIPVz6/viw44cXW6vnrnF0b>. A group of Liberia CSOs, led by Liberia Forest Media Watch, have the ability to upload and edit items. The database uses the free version of Airtable, more details of which can be found here: <https://www.airtable.com/product>.
- ² The VPA provides for two complaints mechanisms. First, the verification body must have “a publicly accessible complaints management system”

- (Annex VI, Criteria for evaluation of the legality assurance system, clause 3.1). Second, the Independent Auditor must have “a mechanism for transparently handling complaints or grievances” (Annex V, Functions of the independent audit, clause 7(c)).
- ³ Published by Liberia Forest Media Watch and available here: <https://loggingoff.info/library/decoding-ten-years-of-the-tartweb-drapoh-forest-conflict-the-deception-actors-and-victims/>.