

JOINT PRESS STATEMENT
By The
Civil Society Working Group on Land Rights Reform
And the
Multi Actor Platform on Land Governance and Responsible Agricultural
Investment in Liberia (MAP Liberia Land Platform)

Members of the Fourth Estate
Distinguished Members of the two coalitions mentioned above
Land Rights Stakeholders Present
Ladies and Gentlemen

We welcome you to this our very first press conference on the state of our land sector since the election and inauguration of the His Excellency Ambassador Joseph N. Boikai, President of the Republic of Liberia, the 55th National Legislature. We congratulate the new Government officials and as well as the Her Honor the Chief Justice and Members of the Honorable Supreme Court of Liberia.

We are here primarily to represent the Land Sector in which we have worked closely with communities to achieve the reform in the land sector, which culminated in the passage of the landmark Land Rights Law of 2018.

As we made all be aware, Liberia's land history is one of dispossession and marginalization, where land was owned by a small class of people (private land) and the state (public land), leaving millions of Liberians without tenure security. This situation contributed significantly to poverty, rural neglect, and the country's 14-year civil war. Indeed, studies have shown that poor land management and tenure insecurity remain major drivers of conflict in the country! But there is hope for change!

Since the enactment of the Land Rights Act in 2018, the Government of Liberia, in partnership with civil society and with support from national and international organizations, has made significant progress towards securing land rights for communities. The following milestones have been achieved:

- Development of regulations to support the implementation of the Law;
- Formulation of implementation guidelines to ensure adherence to the law;
- Over 200 communities have taken an active role in registering their land rights, signifying a growing awareness and ownership of their land and resources;
- 20 communities have received land titles from the government as provided for by the Land Rights Act, granting them legal instruments and protection to engage in commercial activities.

Challenges: Clearly, effective land administration and tenure security are critical to the success of the ARREST agenda. However, the land sector faces numerous obstacles that impede progress and hinder opportunities. The sector, including its institutions, has become stagnant; communities have not been able to get their deeds thereby preventing them for engaging in productive ventures for use of their land. Since 2018, fewer than 22 communities have received land titles, leaving individuals and communities vulnerable to exploitation and land grabs; this has resulted in conflicts and hindered economic growth. Moreover, the duration and cost of formalizing customary lands have become a source of frustration among communities, CSOs and even among our international development partners. To have barely 20 communities receiving titles to their land since 2018, over 5 years since the passage of the Land Rights Act, is to say in effect we have granted 4 or 5 communities per year, with the high cost and the tedious bureaucratic process this has required.

You will agree, Fellow citizens, ladies and gentlemen, that Land is of utmost importance for all Liberians. Land is directly linked to the promotion of agricultural production, food security, and attracting both foreign and domestic investment. Farmland and land-based resources, such as forests, are also gaining increased attention for their role in mitigating global climate change through carbon trading and conservation initiatives. Land can be a contributing factor to promoting national peace, development and security. It requires the political will commitment and dedication of all stakeholders to push the progressive land agenda in Liberia.

We and the all other land rights stakeholders in general are seriously concerned that since the inception of this new Government there has been no public or policy pronouncements made by any official of this government expressing support for the Land Rights Act of Liberia, which law seeks to address the needs of Liberians in all categories of land ownership; and especially protects the land rights of women, youth and other marginalized communities. This is a cause of concern among not only us Liberians but among our international partners as well. Although we are convinced that this is only an oversight and that, our Government, in the spirit of continuity, will support the law, which the previous government has passed into law to benefit all Liberians. What is even more hopeful is that we have a good number of legislators from the 54th Legislature who were actively involved in the dialogue leading to the passage of the land rights law of Liberia.

Additionally, we wish to draw your attention to the recent nomination of Mr. Joe Williams as Vice Chairman at the LLA by H.E. Ambassador Joseph Nyuma Boakai, President of the Republic of Liberia. While we hold nothing against the qualification of the individual concerned, we will like to state for the records that the appointment violates Part III section 16.2 of the Act establishing the Liberia Land Authority. According to this section, “Commissioners shall be appointed on a none partisan basis and shall be selected for their integrity, impartiality and their selection shall reflect regional and gender consideration with the provision that no two commissioners shall come from the same county”. On the contrary to this section, and the fact that the present Commissioner for Land Policy and Planning of the LLA, Cllr. Kula Jackson, is a native of Bong, the nomination of another citizen of Bong County is perhaps a mistake and for which the President has been ill-advised to nominate another son of Bong County as Vice Chair for the LLA.

The civil society would like to point out this contradiction in the appointment of the Vice Chair, so that His Excellency the President can take appropriate action, not to be seen as violating the Act of the LLA.

We like to state for the record also that the Liberia Land Authority is not a political institution but a technical institution that is set up to address the gross injustices that Liberians have suffered from over the years expressed in unequal land protection and insecure land tenure for most Liberians resident in rural communities of the country, The LLA is set up to oversee the implementation of a people's land law that should address the historical injustices of the past.

In efforts to address some of the challenges mentioned above, we are planning a second national land conference involving all stakeholders to review the implementation, identify challenges and opportunities and pave the way to address the myriad of challenges affecting the sector. We hope that the Government will support this conference and be fully involved.

Distinguished citizens, Ladies and Gentlemen, members of the fourth estate, we thank you for coming to this press statement and are now willing to answer your questions.

I thank you very much.

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