

The challenge of participatory mapping for agricultural investment mapping: *Compromise and lessons learned for shared benefits in a project in Sierra Leone*

Author: Katie Minderhoud, Learning advisor for Solidaridad Europe. Originally drafted in October 2018.

Edited and prepared for on-line publication by LEGEND by Amaelle Seigneret (IIED) and Julian Quan (NRI University of Greenwich), January 2020.

Editor's foreword:

This document, presents a learning story from the LEGEND Challenge Fund that supported partnership projects by civil society and private sector business to test approaches through which private business can potentially contribute to more secure land rights and better land governance in agricultural investment sites and supply chains. It explains the challenges involved in a participatory mapping exercise conducted jointly by a company Natural Habitats Sierra Leone Ltd (NHSL) a member of the Netherlands based Natural Habitats Group (NHG), and the NGO Solidaridad.

This was a critical part of a process led by Solidaridad to facilitate agreement between the company and local communities to resolve problems, grievances and conflicts involved in the development of an oil palm plantation which required a reduction in size of an excessively large concession. This was originally created without community consultations and obtained by a previous company, before it was acquired by NHSL. This had led to complex and serious problems, grievances and conflicts involving the company and local community land users and the landowning families, in turn leading NHSL to seek assistance from Solidaridad in a project proposal responding to a LEGEND call for proposals in 2016.

The views expressed in this document reflect those of the author and those of Solidaridad and other stakeholders in the process at the time of writing; as such they do not necessarily reflect the views of the companies involved, or those of the LEGEND programme and of DFID.

Introduction

As part of the process building towards the new lease arrangement with land owning families for a reduced size concession, a key requirement was to conduct a participatory mapping exercise through which the land held by NHSL in the process of establishing the plantation, the land areas which land holding families were willing to release and the legitimate land rights and interests in them could be clearly identified.

Participatory mapping in which community representatives lead or take active part in mapping the various land uses in their communities is interesting for both the company and the local communities themselves, but for very different reasons. For NHSL, the purpose was to confirm which plots of land could be leased to ensure they were not in use or of importance to community members, to avoid causing disputes with other claimants while identifying where to develop their commercial operations. Another aim was also to comply with the NHSL internal land use policy and with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)

Principles and Criteria as a requirement for NHSL produce to receive RSPO certification. For community members, the value of participatory mapping was to clarify claims, rights and land use patterns on community land to make informed decisions in agreeing formally to releasing land to be leased by the company, while ensuring their own needs for land for food and cash crop production and for access to other natural resources could still be met.

These sometimes competing interests call for some caution in the mapping exercise to avoid biasing the process in favour of the company to the detriment of communities, particularly when the company plays a prominent role in conducting the mapping, as it did in this case. This learning story thus discusses the risks in undertaking a participatory mapping exercise led by a company, as opposed to a participatory mapping exercise requested and undertaken by land holding communities as a means to empower and enable them to develop their own land use plans independently. It also explains NHSL's perspectives and how the company responded to recommendations of Solidaridad and Namati, the key LEGEND partners in this challenge fund project and the mapping process.

In the process of planning and executing this participatory mapping, Solidaridad identified key factors likely to affect the quality and ultimate purpose of the exercise, each of which is discussed below. These were:

- 1) The scope and timeline
- 2) Team composition
- 3) Sensitization and training
- 4) The formation of village land use committees

1) Scope and timeline

The scope of the mapping was initially limited to the plots identified for lease. However, Solidaridad stressed that it is critical to look at the broader area of land to understand the availability and balance between family land, community land and land available for food production in relation to the land planned for leasing. The exercise thus aimed to identify and demarcate boundaries and buffer zones, to map out areas for crop farming, for housing, for daily subsistence activities, and of ecological value.

There was significant time pressure to conduct the participatory mapping exercise as quickly as possible so that NHSL could proceed with further planting of oil palm before the planting season ended. Although NHSL experienced delays in proceeding with planting, the priority was to conduct sensitization on the purpose of the mapping and to move forward with it. In practice this meant that NHSL had to adjust its initial expectations that the plantation could be developed rapidly, to make sure there was enough time for essential preliminary activities, including a more in depth process of mapping to better prepare for the onset of planting and to ensure that it could be done in ways that suited the local communities. In the end, NHSL's seasonal window for planting was lost, but the timing of the mapping process continued to be tight to allow sufficient time for sensitization of the communities on the exact purpose of the mapping exercise, with enough days to ensure it was properly conducted in each community.

2) Team composition

Solidaridad and Namati both stressed the importance of having a neutral facilitator and not having NHSL take the lead, because of company interests in retaining land already acquired and in further land acquisition. The rationale behind this was that the company should not influence the dynamics of participatory mapping. Following consultations with villagers in the areas to be covered, Solidaridad organized training for NHSL staff to enable them to be involved in a joint mapping process, and formed a group of village representatives, designated the Village Participatory Mapping (VPM) Team. The idea was thus to involve all stakeholders.

Nevertheless because NHSL had the skills and equipment for spatial data processing and map production and was focused on confirming the land areas available to them as quickly as possible, the company insisted on taking the lead in the mapping process. As a result NHSL developed the guidance document for the training, based on RSPO guidance and taking into account comments from Solidaridad. Natural Habitats went on to take the lead in managing the mapping process on the ground but team members from both Solidaridad and Namati were present for each mapping activity.

3) Sensitization and training

Community consultations were led by Solidaridad. The purpose and approach of the mapping was explained in each community to gain their consent and participation in the process. A first meeting was held, bringing together all stakeholders to describe the aims and steps of the mapping exercise, and to decide on the timeline. The VPM Team received additional training from Solidaridad on the conduct of participatory mapping. The aim of these activities was to ensure that all stakeholders had the knowledge to make informed decisions, and were able to play an active role in the process.

However, given the original aims and the approach that was devised, in practice the exercise did not allow for a fully participatory process to identify and map the full variety of land uses, and values and functions of the land for the communities. Although the company was willing in principle to respect the communities' needs to retain land for food production, the opportunity to document the diversity of community land use needs and perspectives was missed. The focus of the mapping was purely on using GPS technologies to delineate the plots that land owning families were willing to release to the company.

4) Formation of village land use committees

In line with the National Land Policy, village land use committees (VLCs) were established, with representatives of diverse groups to act as focal points for all matters related to land rights mapping and land use planning in each village community. They defended the various interests of community members through took and active role to enable the identification of areas of land that could be feasibly released to the company while ensuring that the rights of land holding families and the range of land use needs were protected.

Based on the expertise and experience elsewhere of Namati, these village land use committees are of positive value. The advice of both Namati and Solidaridad was that they should take the lead in the

mapping process and devise a plan which would allow for capacity building of the VLCs. They advised that the process should be "...gradual and organic, to achieve the needed objective and put the rancour between MILA and MAKLOUA [rival community land owner organisations that agreed and opposed the leasing out of land to the company] to sleep, we need to use this opportunity to merge the two by ensuring that the VLC & CLC [Chiefdom Land Committee] are inclusive - looking beyond only those who have leased land to NH." However in this case the mapping process led by NHSL was rushed and proceeded without the full preparation required to realise these potential benefits.

Lessons learned

The initial stages of the mapping exercise as supervised by NHSL were not comprehensive enough and only consisted of delineating individual plots with GPS technology. This was not sufficient to adequately assess land use and occupation patterns in depth. As a result Solidaridad and Namati led exercises to do this further down the line were led by to ensure that communities' interests in the land were properly represented and defended alongside those of NHSL operations in subsequent discussions to confirm and agree formally the land areas to be leased and reach understanding between the company and the different village and community stakeholder groups. In this context, the mapping exercise to delineate land available and unavailable for release to the company did serve one of its key original objectives. NHSL was present throughout the initial participatory mapping process, and engaged in dialogue with Solidaridad and Namati, who provided valuable suggestions, critiques and feedback. Over time continuing work alongside the civil society and community organisations served to "correct" what was a rather rigid approach to mapping, and NHSL came to understand better that participatory mapping involves a wide range of activities that go beyond mere delineation of plots of land identified as available and unavailable to them.