



August 5, 2013

(Monrovia, Liberia) – In recent weeks, the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) has been the subject of a campaign of misinformation in the press and through public statements made by Mr. Walter Wisner, Vice Chairman of the Land Commission. Today, we wish to respond directly to this campaign of misinformation and to clarify some key points related to our advocacy and purpose as an organization.

Speaking before a gathering of community members in Grand Cape Mount County, Mr. Wisner made a number of serious accusations, calling a recent fact sheet published by SDI and Friends of the Earth “lies,” and attempting to tarnish our credibility and reputation. We strongly refute his comments and express our concern at the implications of a senior civil servant attempting to cause harm to the reputation of a Liberian civil society organization without providing any evidence of wrongdoing.

We have since received a letter from the Land Commission expressing “regret” at Mr. Wisner’s comments and an assurance that they do not represent the position of the Commission itself. While we are disappointed by the episode, we reiterate our commitment to maintaining a good professional relationship with the Land Commission on the important work of reforming Liberia’s land law. SDI is presently engaged with the Land Commission with the intention of bringing this matter to a satisfactory close.

We believe that Mr. Wisner’s comments, as well as the series of newspaper articles that featured critical statements about SDI from members of Zodua Clan, are directly related to our advocacy and public statements regarding the Sime Darby concession. SDI has been critical of Sime Darby’s early behavior in Liberia, as well as the concession agreement it holds with the government. That agreement enables Sime Darby and the government to resettle entire communities, and to exclude or expel them from the Concession Area if necessary for company operations.

Section 4.3 of the Agreement states: “Investor may by Notice to the Government request that certain settlements be relocated if Investor can demonstrate to the Government’s satisfaction that such existing settlement and its inhabitants would impede investor’s development of the Concession Area and would interfere with Investor activities.”

Historically, Liberia has held the troubling contradiction of huge natural resource wealth alongside low states of development in rural areas. Even recently, agricultural concession companies have been accused of poor labor conditions, environmental destruction, and acquiring land from the government without first consulting its traditional owners. Fortunately, since the end of the war in Liberia, civil society organizations such as SDI have become empowered to speak out against lawlessness and bad planning in the natural resource sector. Such public advocacy is a crucial way of ensuring that the country’s natural resources are used wisely and that both foreign investors and government officials respect the rights of Liberian citizens.

We remain firm in our belief that a contract amendment is necessary to legally guarantee that all communities in the Concession Area will have the ability to control decision-making about their future and to negotiate fair and just benefits for land they surrender to Sime Darby. Our advocacy is long-term and is not based on the views of a small number of individuals from one area, but rather from the experiences and perspectives of community members throughout the Concession Area – many of which we have documented in film and other media.

SDI was founded in 2002 by Liberians who were committed to ensuring that future governments would act as responsible custodians of the country's natural resources. During the war, some of our staff were involved in gathering evidence of illegal logging activities. Since then, we have assisted numerous forest communities in their negotiations with logging companies, helped to get the Community Rights Law (CRL) passed, partnered with the Land Commission to seek formal deeds for communities in River Cess, and were one of the first organizations to break the story of improper practices related to the issuing of Private Use Permits (PUPs). In the course of that work, we are confident that we have always maintained a high level of integrity and professionalism.

We are proud to be a part of Liberia's growing and active civil society sector, and we anticipate that further attacks against advocates for reform will be inevitable in the country's maturing democracy, where powerful interests will have to adapt to close scrutiny of government and investor conduct.

We are also aware that those whose personal, financial, and other interests are dependent on public confusion over these issues are threatened by our work, and will go to extreme lengths to fight back. No attempts to silence SDI or to influence our work will be successful – we will use the law to defend ourselves whenever necessary; therefore those who would make baseless and misleading accusations should be warned.

We believe that economic development will only occur in a sustainable and fair way if Liberians are willing to challenge policies that do not maximize the value of our natural wealth or which may raise the risk of social tension in our country.

SDI remains committed to our efforts to ensure that the rights of rural communities are legally secured and that the country's natural resource management policies are conducted responsibly and with a clear vision for a better future for all of us.

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