



# LAND TO THE YOUTH:

CLEARING A PATH FOR YOUTH LAND RIGHTS IN LIBERIA TO GROW LIVELIHOODS AND TRANSFORM THE RURAL ECONOMY

In few countries is Africa's youth bulge as pronounced as in Liberia, where more than 70 percent of the population is under the age of 35. High rates of unemployment among Liberia's youth have pushed many young workers into informal employment, including as farm and manual laborers, where their potential earnings are limited. Considering the widespread informal employment in agriculture, creating opportunities for productive work on the farm is vital for rural youth livelihoods in Liberia.

The opportunity is there. Agriculture is foundational to Liberia's economy, with about 43 percent of employed Liberians working in agriculture. But the path to a productive

## By the Numbers

Over 70% of the population of Liberia is under the age of 35, and about half of Liberian youth live in rural areas.

career in agriculture remains closed for many young Liberians because they lack land rights – one of the most important elements for realizing a land-based livelihood. Traditional power hierarchies, low youth participation in land governance, and intergenerational tensions all hinder youth from owning land. Discriminatory social norms and practices further hinder female youth, who are less likely than their male counterparts to have access to land.

*“Agriculture is important for community development – agriculture is important for peace.” –Emmanuel Urey, Liberia Country Director, Landesa*



Foundation for Community Initiatives



### **Liberia Land Rights Act**

In 2018, Liberia passed a landmark piece of land reform legislation. The Liberia Land Rights Law (LRL) established legally guaranteed land rights for all Liberians, for the first time in the country's history. Under the previous land tenure system, as much as 80 percent of Liberians lived without legally recognized rights to land. The LRL included legal protections for women's land rights, including safeguards for the rights of spouses to own land in their marital communities. It has been hailed as one of the most progressive pieces of land legislation on the African continent.

The LRL holds immense potential for the economic development of Liberia and for the promotion of land-based livelihoods for all Liberians. There are however some obstacles to its implementation.

For youth, cultural practices preclude many from enjoying rights to land; some are referred to as "strangers" within their communities and are excluded from land management discussions. Traditional notions of land as a "male" domain have meant that many communities exclude female youth from owning land or from participating in land manage-

### **Obstacles to youth land rights:**

- Unemployment and poverty
- Traditional power hierarchies
- Delayed inheritance
- Low participation in land governance and decision-making
- Intergenerational tensions over access to land and natural resources

ment and governance bodies. In customary settings in Liberia, land is often managed collectively by village elders and chiefs, who closely guard access to land.

Land is a primary driver of conflict in Liberia, with land and property at the center of nearly 60 percent of all disputes, according to a 2017 survey by the Liberian Ministry of Internal Affairs. The remoteness of rural Liberia also poses a challenge, as many land cases are in places where access to dispute resolution resources, judicial services, and support from civil society organizations are limited. More broadly, inadequate financial and human capacity have constrained implementation efforts around the LRL.

***"There are a whole lot of interconnected issues that marginalize youth from accessing land."** -Dorothy Toomann, Gender Specialist, DEN-L*



## Clearing a path for youth land rights in Liberia

Despite the promise of the LRL, Liberia's youth face obstacles to accessing and owning land. The Land Rights for Sustainable Development Project (LRSD) seeks to remove these hindrances through promoting sustainable and equitable land access and rights for all Liberians.

A partnership between Landesa, the Liberia Land Authority, and Liberian civil society organizations Development Education Network-Liberia (DEN-L) and Foundation for Community Initiatives (FCI), the LRSD aims to:

- Support development of equitable and gender-responsive land laws and policies;
- Strengthen government and civil society capacity to implement land rights reforms;
- Raise national and community-level land rights awareness; and
- Build evidence for the effectiveness of land rights reforms through research, monitoring, and evaluation.

To help Liberia's youth enjoy the benefits of the country's new land law, DEN-L and FCI took several steps to build awareness and engage youth in land issues, working in 14 communities in three counties.

### FCI: Building enthusiasm for youth land rights

To help disprove the misconception that youth aren't interested in owning and cultivating land, FCI set out to build awareness about

## By the Numbers

In sub-Saharan Africa, around **1 in 3 adults** is the sole owner of a plot of land, while this is true of fewer than **1 in 10 young people**.

To keep up with demographic trends and a growing demand for jobs, the African continent needs to create about **12 million new jobs** annually but is currently producing about **4 million new jobs** per year.

Liberia's new land law among local youth. Youth responded enthusiastically to these trainings, showing increasing interest in advocating for their own rights to land in the communities where they live. Youth have organized into land discussion groups to better advocate for their rights in their communities.

To help promote the land rights of female youth, FCI activated male allies as youth champions. These male champions were trained in the importance of land rights for their female peers, and brought that understanding into land management discussions in their communities, where young women are less likely to have access. By championing women's land rights, these male youth helped remove obstacles for young women to own and access land.

*"Initially, land was just a space to farm. But after training now it's wealth, it's authority, it's inheritance." -Amos Yealu, Project Assistant, FCI*

## **DEN-L: Lifting youth voices in land discussions**

Working at the village level, DEN-L focused on securing a place at the table for youth to participate in land management discussions and related community groups.

Recognizing that landlords and village elders frequently controlled access to land and viewed youth as agitators in land and property disputes, DEN-L's project team aimed to raise awareness of the importance of youth land rights to help win over skeptical village leaders. To harmonize the needs of all stakeholders, organizers engaged both the young and elder community members in designing and implementing land rights programming, helping to cement peaceful co-existence among youth and elders. These efforts increased the number of young people participating in community discussions regarding land, and in the

number of youth leading community-based groups.

DEN-L's programming also helped improve outcomes for young women. By providing sensitization and training to communities about the importance of young women enjoying equal access to land, DEN-L's project team observed more young women being given use of family land than in the past.

The project also helped facilitate land dispute resolution by training a small team of community-based mediators to resolve conflicts over land and other community issues.

One important takeaway from DEN-L's project was the importance of adopting a holistic and long-term strategy to empower youth, noting that behavior change takes time. That said, with the appropriate investment, young Liberians have the capacity and potential to transform their communities.

***“The youth are key agents of change. To help them contribute meaningfully to society, the work we do must influence them positively and make them active agents of change — not just for their communities, but beyond.”** –Dorothy Toomann, DEN-L*

## **About Landesa**

Landesa is an international non-governmental organization that fights rural poverty and provides opportunity and security for women and men through the power of land rights. Insecure land rights are a leading factor in extreme poverty, food insecurity, gender inequality, conflict, environmental destruction, and sluggish economic growth.

## **About the Land Rights for Sustainable Development (LRSD) Project**

Funded by King Philanthropies, the Land Rights for Sustainable Development is a multi-year project that supports land policy and land law reforms, strengthens government and civil society capacities, creates public and legal awareness around land laws and build evidence through collaborative research.

