

# **An Assessment of Youth Land Rights in Rural Liberia**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper summarizes the evidence from a literature review combined with primary research from two separate studies focused on youth land rights in Liberia. This literature review is the first published review of evidence on youth and land access in Liberia. The primary research includes 1) a qualitative assessment conducted as formative research to inform the design of the Land Rights and Sustainable Development (LRSD) project for Landesa and its partners' community level interventions and 2) a quantitative baseline survey of program beneficiaries as part of an impact evaluation of the LRSD project. We examine youth land rights through a gender lens with the aim of advocating for policy and informing interventions focused on increasing youth tenure security in Liberia. Issues around youth and land are increasingly being recognized as important in Sub-Saharan Africa. The evidence highlights that female and male youth in Liberia face significant but different barriers to long term access to land, as well as to participation in decisions related to land. Youth's land tenure insecurity impacts their ability and desire to practice agriculture, and as rural farmer populations age, the exclusion of youth could have negative implications for the transfer of knowledge and skills, as well as food security, youth employment, economic development, and security, all key issues for youth in post-conflict settings that are dominated by customary tenure regimes.

## Introduction

Broad-based land tenure security and equitable land governance are pressing issues in Liberia. Land and natural resources have always been, and remain, crucial to Liberia's economy (Namubiru-Mwaura, E.L., Knox, A., & Hughes, A., 2012; USAID FFP, 2016). Seventy percent of the active population is dependent on agriculture for their livelihood and over half of the country's inhabitants live in rural areas (CIA World Factbook, 2018). Many rural families lack access to farmland or suffer from high levels of land tenure insecurity. More than 60% of the population is under the age of 25 (UNDESA, 2017) and rural youth depend primarily on agriculture to support their livelihoods.

The viability of the youth demographic is crucial to Liberia's, social and political, economic future. The civil war arose from the systematic denial of land (and other economic assets) and exclusion from governance of the indigenous Liberians who constitute the majority of Liberia's population (TRC, 2009). After the conflict, the country made strides towards peace, stability, and economic growth. However, poverty, food insecurity, inadequate human capacity and infrastructure, high unemployment rate particularly among youth, and land tenure insecurity threaten further progress. The exclusion of youth from effectively accessing land to support themselves and their families could have negative implications for the transfer of knowledge and skills, as well as food security, youth employment, economic development, and security.

The recently passed Land Rights Act aims to address several inequities in land access and land governance, giving communities ownership rights and empowering them to make decisions on the lands that they have customarily accessed for decades. This recognition of land ownership rights breaks away from 171 years of government policy that defined all lands not privately deeded as "public" land, controlled by the government. Landesa worked with the Government of Liberia to provide technical input into the framing of the Land Rights Act. Through the Land Rights and Sustainable Development Program (LRSD) Landesa works with local CSO partners DEN-L and FCI to raise awareness around land rights for women and youth in order to foster sustainable development in rural communities. To be effective, the LSRD program pursued an approach to understanding the grassroots realities informed by strong foundational research as well as implementation of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plan.

This paper summarizes the evidence from a literature review combined with primary research from two separate studies, which focused on youth land rights in Liberia. This literature review is the first published review of evidence on youth and land access in Liberia. The primary research includes 1) a qualitative assessment conducted as formative research to inform the design of the Land Rights and Sustainable Development (LRSD) project for Landesa and its partners' community level interventions and 2) a quantitative baseline survey of program beneficiaries as part of an impact evaluation. All examine youth land rights through a gender lens with the aim of advocating for policy and informing interventions focused on increasing youth tenure security in Liberia.

The findings highlight that youth face significant but different barriers to long term access to land with female and “stranger” youth facing considerably more barriers to accessing land than male local youth. While the Land Rights Act has the potential to improve land access for youth and other marginalized groups, youth lack knowledge about land policies and traditional elders and elites still control land and resources in rural communities. Furthermore, Liberian youth are limited in their participation on land use decisions and the crops they grow, and have limited access to credit and extension services, with female youth being less able to participate in land use decisions than male youth. Youth's land tenure insecurity impacts their ability and desire to practice agriculture.

This paper is structured as follows: It starts with a brief background section detailing the history of land tenure in Liberia. This is followed by a literature review of youth and land rights in Liberia. We then present our findings from research followed by a discussion of the findings, recommendations for policy and a short conclusions section.

## **Background**

Land has always been crucial to Liberia's agrarian economy (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012; USAID FFP, 2016). Prior to the arrival of foreign settlers in Liberia, each ethnic 'clan' was typically organized into its own state. Among these clans, land was considered sacred and communal, belonging to the descendants of those who first cleared the land (ROL TRC Final Report, 2009). While land tenure systems varied, they shared common features. Each chieftaincy or clan would communally own its surrounding land, which was subdivided among extended families by chiefs or family heads. Land was not bought or sold, but rather individuals would access land either through inheritance or allocation by the local

authority or family head<sup>1</sup> (Dodd et al., 2018; Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012). Inheritance was patrilineal, and women accessed land through male family members (Dodd et al., 2018; Durand, 2014). Boundaries consisted of landmarks, and each village or family unit knew the parameters and did not undertake any formal documentation. Land disputes were resolved by the family heads or councils of elders and enforced by the king or chief (TRC, 2009).

In the early 1800s, the state of Liberia was founded in the coastal areas around Monrovia by freed slaves from the United States. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Government of Liberia (GoL) expanded into the interior, spurring conflicts with indigenous tribes, but eventually coming to rule the ‘hinterlands’; albeit indirectly via ad hoc, ambiguous partnerships with local chiefs or kings. Technically, the interior continued to be governed according to customary laws, while coastal counties followed a statutory system (TRC, 2009).

Land issues were a serious source of conflict in Liberia (Menkor, I., 2018; Vinck, P., Pham P.N., Kreutzer, T., 2011; TRC, 2009). Liberia’s civil wars (1989-2003) were partly due to land issues, including inequality of holdings and land grabs (TRC, 2009). Prior to adoption of the Land Rights Act in 2018, statutory laws only recognized rural communities’ ‘use and inhabitation’ rights to land, in effect making them ‘public land’ under the control of the GoL (DeWit and Stevens, 2014). More than half of Liberia’s 4.3 million people live on land held under customary tenure, according to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Community land was often subject to elite capture or concessions deals with foreign companies<sup>2</sup>. Experts estimate that 40-50% of Liberia is covered by long-term concessions, most of which are also the site of established rural communities (Ponsford, 2016; De Wit and Stevens, 2014). As recently as 2017, the most commonly cited conflict driver in all Liberian counties is land and property disputes (60%) (Mulbah, E. and Dennis, J.R., 2017).

The Land Rights Act (LRA) was adopted in September 2018, following years of negotiation. The LRA seeks to address Liberia’s land-related challenges and recognizes customary lands as belonging to traditional communities, with rights equally protected to those of private land. The

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<sup>1</sup> Most often, rights to farmland were ‘use’ rights, granted by the family head or chief for a few seasons; however, plots for a home/garden were sometimes granted as ownership rights, via inheritance.

<sup>2</sup> Concessions increase two hundred-fold under the “Open Door Policy,” (1944 – 1970). Following the second civil war (2003), the government again accelerated concessions (Thomson Reuters, 2016).

bundle of right associated with customary lands are different to those associated with private land. For example, private land can be sold at any time, but customary land cannot be sold for 50 years after the passing of the LRA. Private land is taxed, but this is not the case for customary land. Under the LRA, rural communities have the opportunity to self-identify<sup>3</sup> before obtaining a community title deed for their customary land. Communities are responsible for establishing Community Land Management and Development Committees (CLMDC), democratically elected bodies with equal representation of women, men, and youth that are responsible for governing community land.<sup>4</sup> Once a community has a title deed, they have the right to allocate or lease their lands.<sup>5</sup>

Within communities, the LRA also recognizes the rights of women, youth, and “strangers”<sup>6</sup> - groups that have been traditionally marginalized within rural communities - by stipulating that rights to customary land are based on community membership, which is defined by factors such as being born in the community, marrying into the community, or living in the community for seven years rather than on sex or lineage.<sup>7</sup> Until adoption of the 2013 Land Rights Policy, very little attention was paid at law or policy level to the participation of women and youth in customary land governance. While the LRA is well-formulated, there are challenges to implementation. In addition to lack of adequate financial support<sup>8</sup>, cultural practices must evolve so that women, youth and “strangers” share the same land use and ownership rights as other community members.

## Literature Review

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<sup>3</sup> Self-Identification is a process whereby communities that have historically resided in and managed land communally can identify their members and establish their customary land boundaries.

<sup>4</sup> See article 36 of the Land Rights Act of 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Read article 32 of the Land Rights Act of 2018.

<sup>6</sup> “Strangers” are residents who are not in the direct landowning lineages of communities in Liberia. Usually they have various degrees of land use rights but not ownership rights. Some of them, especially youth, are born in the communities, but because their parents are not in the landowning lineage they are often referred as strangers and have less secure land access and land rights.

<sup>7</sup> Community Member (meaning having equal land rights in the community) is defined as a Liberian citizen irrespective of age, gender, belief or religious backgrounds who was (i) born in the Community or (ii) parent(s) was born within a Community; or (iii) who has lived continuously within the Community for at least seven years; or (iv) a spouse of a Community Member, with whom they reside in the Community.

<sup>8</sup> Liberia is currently experiencing fiscal difficulties due to a struggling economy, partly because of the 2014 Ebola outbreak and the decline in prices of iron ores and rubber, its major export commodities.

The literature review focuses on youth access to land and the related obstacles they face in supporting their livelihoods. This is the first published literature review of evidence on youth and land access in Liberia, where youth (ages 15-35) constitute approximately 34% of the population (UNDESA, n.d.).<sup>9</sup> The wide youth age range accommodates a variety of social factors that define youth and adulthood in rural communities. Defining ‘adulthood’ is complicated: youth can transition to adulthood by age or by showing ‘mature’ character. A USAID/Landesia study of eleven clans in Liberia (Eleven Clan Study)<sup>10</sup> found that most residents are considered youth until married (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012). However, marriage prerequisites often include land or home ownership, a stable job, or a bride price, which many men never achieve. Female youth must wait until someone seeks to marry them (Sommers, 2012; Dodd et al., 2018). Research also suggests that informal ‘de facto unions’ are widespread in Liberia (Dodd et al., 2018; Dolo-Barbu, 2015; Sommers, 2012). Therefore, many rural youth may not be able to become married ‘adults’, leaving them on the edges of society (Sommers, 2005).

For youth, family inheritance or allocation by customary authorities are the most common means of accessing land for farming. The Eleven Clan Study found that in communities where land rights are vested in local authorities, the town or quarter chief would allocate newly-married youth land for seasonal cropping (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012). These rights are typically for one or two agricultural seasons, with limitations on what crops can be grown. In communities where land rights are held by families, inheritance is more common. In some areas, informal rental markets provide an alternative for youth (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012). However, leases are often short-term with high rental fees, and cash cropping is not allowed.

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<sup>9</sup> The Government of Liberia in its National Youth Policy defines Liberian youth as being between the ages of 15 and 35 (Brownlee et al., 2012), a definition also used by the African Youth Charter (2006) and the National Federation of Liberian Youth (Nasser 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Site selection was based on random selection within each of Liberia’s major Livelihood Zones (based on USAID’s Famine Early Warning Systems Network Zones). The final selection comprises the clan units: 1. LR 01: Upper Workor–Lofa; 2. LR 01: Doblí, Bong; 3. LR 02 Area 1: Mana–Grand Cape Mount; 4. LR 02 Area 2: Ylan–Nimba; 5. LR 03: Motor Road–Sinoe; 6. LR 04 Region 1: Little Kola–Grand Bassa; 7. LR 04 Region 2: Nitrian–Sinoe (also served as a case study for the Land Rights and Community Forestry Project supported by the FDA and USAID); 8. LR 06 Area 1: Tengia (Foya District)–Lofa; 9. LR 06 Area 2: Saykleken, River Gee; and 10. LR 08: Ding–Montserrado. For a map, see Annex Figure 3.

The extent to which Liberian youth face challenges in accessing land varies by area, though the scope of the problem is difficult to speculate given the lack of available evidence. Youth often face obstacles within customary systems that make it difficult for them to have agency over land or earn a livelihood in agriculture. The literature identifies several different obstacles that youth face to accessing land. These are described below:

### ***Legacies of the Civil War***

Many communities experienced inter-generational tensions after the war, which exacerbates land issues (Richards et al., 2005). In some cases, youth combatants returned home and found that others had claimed their land (Brownlee et al., 2012). Kaba, D., Teage, C., & Bloh, O. (2018) point out that during the civil war, many Liberians moved between and within communities, creating pockets of minority groups in the country. Ethnic minorities, particularly the youth within ethnic minorities, are disadvantaged in accessing customary land (Flomoku P., 2010). Whether disputes between post-war returnees are inter-generational, as well as the situation of ethnic minority youth could be topics for further research.

### ***Traditional Power Hierarchies***

Elite elders exert a variety of controls to maintain the age-based hierarchy. Increased post-war freedoms have been accompanied by a shift away from respect for elders (Tokpa and Yengbeh, 2012) as youth reject the old ways of subservience to their elders (Sommers, 2005), destabilizing traditional local authorities, however elders still largely exert control from which they benefit, including through reproductive control, lineage ranking, secret societies, and guarding of ancestral knowledge.

1) *Reproductive Control*: Chiefs and elders still build alliances with other clans through exchanging women and compensate each other at marriage by refundable dowries, with the effect that a woman leaving a marriage risks losing land, property and children if her family was unwilling or unable to refund her dowry. Reforms have been passed regarding female marriage rights but are rarely enforced (Dodd et al., 2018;

Richards et al., 2005).<sup>11</sup> Additionally, elite elders take all of the young women, leaving male youth without eligible brides. That means they can't marry or become adults.

2) *Lineage Ranking*: Elders of the landowning lineages control the chiefdom and 'own' the chiefdom's land by controlling its use. They trace their ancestry to early settlers, while the elders of lower-ranked lineages are normally descended from later settlers. The authority of lineage elders over younger members comes partly from mystical powers elders are believed to hold with ancestors. Landowning elite elders usually hold leadership positions in the secret society (discussed below). Youth gaining power is not merely a question of waiting to age; most old men also remain juniors of these elite elders (Murphy, 1980).

3) *Secret Societies*: Secret societies have historically been a paramount and pervasive feature of social life in many areas of rural Liberia. The limited evidence<sup>12</sup> indicates they play an important role and that most rural community members belong to them (Scarborough, 2017; Tokpa and Yengbeh, 2012). They are used to pass down cultural knowledge and build a sense of community and have also been used to assert the elders' political and economic control of the youth (Murphy, 1980). The men's Poro society meets secretly to make important land decisions, according to messages the elders receive from the 'sacred being' and their ancestors. Through bush school training, youth are taught to honor what is secret and obey the elders.<sup>13</sup> An important tool of the elders is the threat of physical punishment or even death from the mysterious powers of the secret societies.

4) *Ancestral Knowledge*: Murphy (1980) finds elders guard knowledge of the families who settled an area as an important tool of power. This knowledge is crucial in determining interests in property and settling feuds, which must be done according to the commitments and wishes of ancestors.

### ***Delayed Inheritance***

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<sup>11</sup> Although beyond the scope of this work, the LGSA study noted the prevalence of *de facto* unions in Liberia, or co-habitation without a formal marriage (customary or statutorily recognized). Women in such arrangements are thought to hold even fewer rights than those in formal marriages. The study also noted that the practice of polygamy persists in some communities.

<sup>12</sup> Community members are typically reluctant to discuss the societies with outsiders.

<sup>13</sup> In the last two decades, external pressure has been exerted for the Poro and Sande secret societies to end or amend their practices. Some news articles indicate that practices such as months-long, isolated bush schools for initiating youth into secret societies have been shortened and made less harsh, including an end to FGM.

In many clans, youth cannot inherit land or be allocated their own land to farm until they are considered ‘adults’. Instead, they must work for their families and communities until this time, especially for youth who do not born into families in the landowning lineage. Studies suggest that these practices are rooted in subsistence farming’s reliance on surplus youth labor, especially in the northwest of Liberia, and the gerontocratic nature of many rural communities (DeWit and Stevens, 2014; Utas, 2005; Richards et al., 2005). Longer life expectancies of elders and a youth population bulge has translated into delayed and and/or smaller land inheritances for youth. Delayed inheritance prevents youth from planting ‘life trees,’ which assert a permanent claim and can only be planted on inherited land (Scarborough, 2017). Smaller inheritances can mean parcels too small for youth to earn a living. Increasingly, external encroachment on traditionally-held lands has reduced the availability of land youth can receive, which is especially problematic in areas where valuable land is less plentiful.

### ***Low Participation in Land Governance and Decision Making***

Youth have some of their own institutions, but their influence on land governance is variable. Many youth participate in self-organized ‘kuus<sup>14</sup>’ that farm cooperatively and sell collective labor (Scarborough, 2017; Vinck et al., 2011). There are also national, regional and local youth organizations that advocate for land and resource rights on behalf of youth (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012; AllAfrica, 2016; Daffah, 2010; Independent National Commission on Human Rights, 2015). The Eleven Clan Study reported that in many clans, youth are well-respected and take part in land decision-making, the formulation of rules, and sometimes even in resolving disputes, though the level of involvement varied significantly (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012). However, in other clans, youth felt overlooked in decision-making about land issues, and another study found that youth were excluded from traditional governance structures (Bloh, 2017). Rural youth participation and control in local governance may have increased since the civil war. In areas that grant concessions, new governance structures have been established (Bloh, 2017) to negotiate with concessionaires. Even though some youth are represented (by requirement) on these governance structures, their participation may be weak (Bloh, 2017).

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<sup>14</sup> in Lofa and Bong County membership in farming groups/kuus is particularly high, at 35% and 40% respectively.

Female youth, in particular, are disempowered in terms of land governance, as the traditional view that land is the domain of men persists in rural Liberia. The Eleven Clan Study found that in some communities there are positions which have a strong influence over land that cannot be occupied by women. Dodd et al. (2018) found that even where women held positions of authority, their power was often curtailed by traditional gender roles. A national report on youth engagement (Brownlee et al., 2012) found that young women are often the least engaged in their communities, hesitant to engage in politics, and overlooked by policymakers.

### *Community dynamics*

Some studies found youth were dissatisfied less in terms of access to land and more in terms of their lack of agency over the land (e.g., not being able to plant life trees); youth also expressed frustration about their lack of power in community land management processes (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012; Brownlee et al., 2012; Bloh, 2017). As youth struggled to have their voices heard, it fueled a sense of exclusion and resentment (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012; Richards et al., 2005). In response, male youth were increasingly challenging customary governance institutions by rejecting traditional practices, decisions made by customary authorities, and directives to contribute to town labor. In turn, authorities would take punitive measures towards youth, further exacerbating relations (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012). Studies find that youth are increasingly showing interest in individual, documented land rights (Bloh, 2017; Knight et al., 2013; Richards, et al. 2005);

### *Unfair or Inaccessible Dispute Resolution Mechanisms*

There is little information available about youth participation in customary dispute resolution mechanisms; this could be an area for further study. The Eleven Clan Study found that youth did not typically hold significant positions of power in the process (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012). Dissatisfaction with the customary system appears to be particularly prevalent among youth. In many clans, local authorities are viewed as biased, especially by the youth, who question the legitimacy of these authorities (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012). In some areas, rural justice also operates as a thinly disguised system for controlling youth and their labor. In the Vai community, young men were fined for petty or trumped-up charges, sentenced to labor service for the plaintiff or even the Justice of the Peace (Richards, 2005).

## Methods

The methods outlined in this section are for two separate studies conducted in Liberia in 2018: 1) qualitative formative research on youth and land conducted in May-June 2018 in 16 communities in Bong and Lofa counties; and 2) quantitative baseline survey of beneficiaries of land rights awareness training conducted in November 2018 in seven communities in Bong, Lofa and Rivercess counties.

### *Formative Qualitative Research*

The objective of the formative qualitative research is to understand youth and land issues in rural Liberia in order to inform the design of Landesa's Land Rights for Sustainable Development (LRSD) Project, which includes a focus on improved land rights for youth<sup>15</sup>.

The research focused on four major thematic areas – 1) youth livelihood activities, 2) youth access to land, 3) land related disputes, and 4) youth land governance and community relationships. The research design and tools were prepared by Landesa staff in collaboration DEN-L, Landesa's Civil Society partner in Liberia. Sixteen communities in Lofa and Bong County were included in the study and were purposively selected to represent the variety of land issues, cultural values, ethnic dynamics, and land tenure systems in rural Liberia. In addition, communities with proximity to concession activities as well as communities near urban areas were included, in order to better understand these dynamics.

16 FGDs and 46 KIIs were conducted. The FGDs included community members with a focus on youth, while KIIs included youth, government officials, customary authorities, and other leaders. Each FGD included 9-12 community members; 70% of the participants were 'youth' (15-35 years old) and 44% were female. By occupation, 70% of FGD participants were farmers and 20% were teachers. FGD participants were recruited by asking elder and youth leaders to identify youth, using the community definition of youth (recall previous discussion on complexity of the definition of youth).

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<sup>15</sup> Contributing Landesa staff included Dr. Benjamin Linkow, an economist specializing in land, Tasha Heidenrich, a research analyst specializing in land, Dr. Tizai Mauto, a Landesa youth specialist, Justine Uvuza, a gender specialist, and Ailey Kaiser-Hughes, a land program specialist.

At least two KIIs were conducted in each community; 90% of KII respondents were ‘adults.’ By primary occupation, 60% were farmers (18% were civil servants and 15% were CSO leaders or social workers. CSOs and opinion leaders were selected to balance information in the assessment, as they have no direct link or interest in community lands. CSOs were selected according to DEN-L’s knowledge of the CSOs and stakeholders in the communities. The KIIs discussed the same domains but using broader, expert views, as well as a small number of questions tailored to their unique role in youth and land issues.

### ***Baseline Survey***

Landesa conducted the baseline survey with LRSD project beneficiaries, who were located in seven communities in Bong, Lofa, and Rivercess Counties. The survey was conducted in order to establish a baseline for the outcomes of Landesa’s LRSD program, specifically in terms of beneficiaries’ knowledge around and attitudes toward land rights, land laws and institutions, and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) in the communities targeted for land rights awareness interventions. The survey would also help Landesa and its local partners better understand the communities’ approach to community membership and land access and governance, paying particular attention to views and policies towards women and youth. The participants represented a broad spectrum of community members, ranging from traditional elders, leaders (including religious, women, and youth leaders), teachers, as well as a diverse spectrum of community members at large (including women and youth). Table 1, below, illustrates the age and gender of the participants/survey respondents in the seven program communities.

Table 1: Age and Gender of Baseline Respondents, Percentage in Program Communities

<b>Community</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Adult</b>	<b>Youth*</b>
<b>Lofa</b>	85	62%	38%	49%	51%
Pasama	36	47%	53%	42%	58%
Bardezu	24	29%	71%	79%	21%
Gbonyea	25	32%	68%	32%	68%

<b>Bong</b>	73	41%	59%	47%	53%
Gbarnga Siaquelleh	36	50%	50%	44%	56%
Shankpowai	37	67%	33%	50%	50%
<b>River Cess**</b>	50	30%	70%	82%	18%
Neezuin	25	32%	68%	80%	20%
Little Liberia	25	28%	72%	84%	16%
<b>Total</b>	208	43%	57%	57%	43%

\*'Youth' are considered those aged 15-34, which is based on the definition used by the Government of Liberia and the African Union. For a detailed discussion of the definition of youth, see Landesa's Literature Review on Youth and Land.

\*\* The high percentage of females in River Cess is due to the program's focus on women's rights in this region. The percentage of adults is also high, but the program is not focused on youth in River Cess.

## Analytical Framework

The analysis of the qualitative data is based on a Women's Land Rights framework (WLR Framework) created by Landesa and modified to fit the context of property rights of youth and women in rural Liberia. To use the framework effectively, the context of the land rights system is first defined. This is accomplished in the Background and Literature Review sections.

The WLR Framework<sup>16</sup> defines property rights as multi-dimensional: They should be *Effective, Inclusive* and *Gender Equitable*. Effectiveness is defined as the 1) the extent of the bundle of rights enjoyed by an individual or group are clearly defined and enforced in all its dimensions for all members of a community, including for those who would gain new right to land (**Completeness**); 2) the duration of the bundle of rights are clearly

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<sup>16</sup> This description of the framework is taken from Landesa's WLR Framework Guidance document created by Landesa's Research, Evaluation and Learning team.

defined and enforced (**Duration**); 3) the bundle of rights are clearly defined and enforced in the face of contestation (**Robustness**). In addition to these, 4) are all these aspects of rights **Inclusive** and **Gender Equitable**?

The framework takes into consideration the institutions through which rights granted by customary and statutory law are mediated. The institutions are:

- Statutory and customary land-related laws, policies, regulations, conventions and agreements that embody the rights determined and enforced by governments.
- Formal and informal institutions and actors who influence, decide, manage, or enforce land-related rights.
- Social norms that shape attitudes and beliefs on who should have land, for what purpose and through which means.
- Individuals and communities whose land-related rights are protected, strengthened, limited or negated by the system.

For this analysis, the framework is operationalized in the form of questions that seek to understand how rights are known, understood and experienced by youth and women as well as the perspective of other community members on youth's and women's rights. The main dimensions that are addressed in this analysis are Completeness, Robustness, Gender Equitable and Inclusive. The dimension of Duration was not as relevant to purposes of this study.

The quantitative survey data from the baseline evaluation was analyzed using straightforward descriptive findings and are integrated in discussion of the qualitative findings where relevant.

## **Presenting Findings using the WLR Framework**

*Is the extent of the bundle of rights clearly defined and enforced?*

1. *Do youth have knowledge of their bundle of rights (i.e have they been clearly defined for the youth)? Do youth have knowledge about who can gain new rights to land and under what circumstances? Is this the case of all youth?*

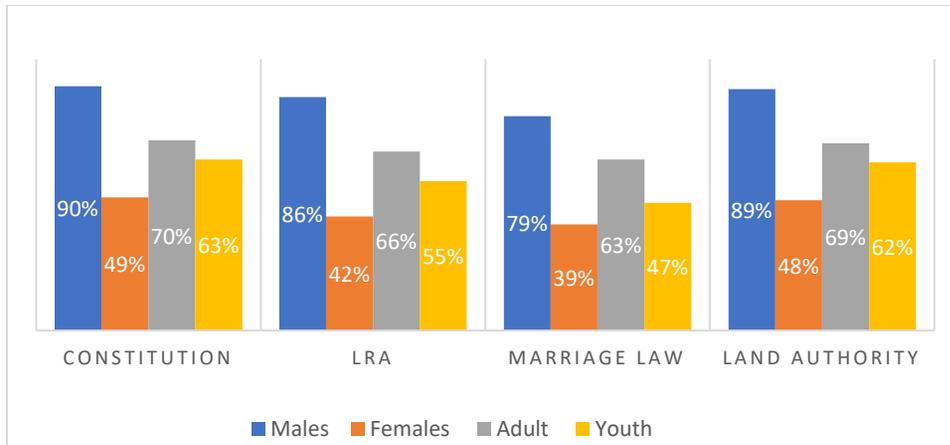
Findings from the qualitative research highlights that youth in both Bong and Lofa counties know little about their land rights granted through statutory laws, including the Land Rights Act and the Community Rights Law. In general, youth are more knowledgeable about customary norms and laws regarding land rights. These are generally understood by youth as:

- Males are the heads of households.
- Elder males and landlords (who are also male) have the most rights and privileges to land.
- Land matters are for males, not females.
- Elder males are the arbiters of land access and governance and need to be approached in the traditional way for land.
- Custom dictates that youth approach elders for land.
- Custom dictates that youth can only access land within the community if the youth's father is from the community.
- "Strangers" – those who were not born in the community or whose parents were not born in the community – have a hard time accessing land.

Some had heard about a few provisions of the Land Rights Act through radio programs. A few youth understood the difference between tribal certificates and deeds, and recognized that those with deeds had stronger rights than those with tribal certificates. Often, this understanding was the result of conflicts in which youth were involved that resulted from people with deeds encroaching on land that had tribal certificates.

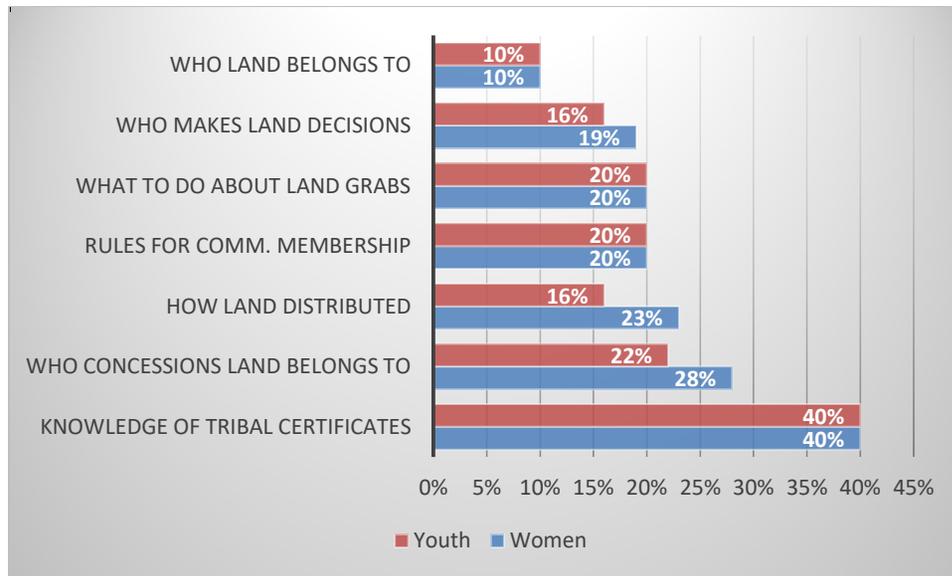
These findings were largely confirmed through the quantitative baseline survey. In the survey, respondents were asked if they had heard about the Land Rights Act, Marriage Law, the Constitution and the Land Authority. Responses indicate that only 55 percent of youth had even heard about the Land Rights Act, let alone understood any of its provisions. Almost twice as many males were aware of the laws, and more adults reported knowledge of the laws than youth, despite the higher education levels of youth. The chart below highlights respondents' awareness about land laws and institutions by gender and age.

Figure 1: Percent Aware of Land Laws/Institutions, by Gender/Age



Knowledge Gaps on land rights emerged between women and men: women often answered they didn't know in response to questions on land rights; youth also often lacked knowledge on land rights (many of these were female youth), as exhibited in the Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Youth and Women who "Don't Know" about....



Male respondents in the survey believed *youth* have more land rights than did female respondents; for example, over 90% of men agreed that ‘Youth who are community members have the right to make decisions about land...’ while only 58% of women agreed with this statement. Views on women and youth land rights did not vary much between youth and adults.

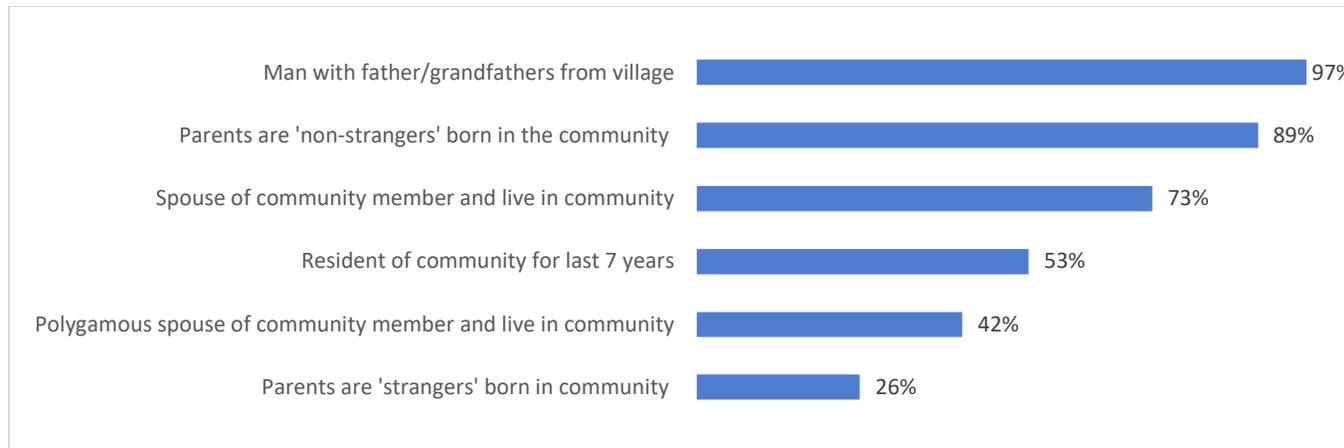
Interestingly, male participants thought that women had stronger land rights than did female participants: almost 90% of men agreed that ‘Every woman has the right to participate in making decisions about land...’ and that ‘Daughters can inherit family land,’ while just over half of women agreed with these statements. In fact, men reported more positive attitudes and beliefs about the rights women *should* have than women did. Interestingly, nearly all of the respondents who said their communities made land decisions collectively reported that women had the right to participate in making decisions about land in their community.

2. *Are youth able to enjoy the full extent of their bundle of rights? Are youth able to gain new rights to land if they meet the criteria for eligibility? Is this the case of all youth?*

Youth understand that community membership is the prerequisite to accessing community land for farming or house spots, as well as for participation in land governance bodies. Youth understanding of community membership reflected current customary understandings that privileged those whose parents, or at the minimum whose fathers, are from the community. This understanding is different from the provisions of the LRA, which states that all (Liberian citizens) who have lived in a community for seven years, regardless of whether they were born outside the community, are community members. This provision puts “strangers”, children of strangers, spouses from other communities, wives in de-facto unions (without dowry) and wives in polygamous marriages on equal footing with those who are traditionally considered community members.

The quantitative baseline survey results highlight the disconnect between the legal definition of community membership in the LRA and the current norms around who is considered a community member. If one’s parents were not considered official community members (i.e., the parents were ‘strangers’) only 26% of the respondents said one would then be considered a community member, even if he/she was born in the community. Furthermore, about half of respondents thought that only living in the community for over seven years would make one a community member. In terms of who makes the rules for community membership, 60% of respondents said they are made by the traditional authorities; only 18% said they are made by the community as a whole. Figure 3, below, illustrates the beliefs around the various criteria for community membership.

Figure 3: Beliefs around criteria for community membership



In the qualitative study, youth reported that all of those legally defined as community members under the LRA do not have equal access to land. Male youth from land holding families most frequently go through parents to access land for farming or house plots in the community. For example, youth in one community believe that the best way for them to access to land is to get elders to recite the land history, which would allow them to understand their rights through customary means.

Not all male youth, even if they are community members, come from landholding families. If youth have no option to access land through their families, they can gain access by approaching elders and paying a nominal fee in their community and in neighboring communities. In some cases, if youth are from families that do not own land, the elders do not give them rights to community land for farming. If male youth are children of parents in polygamous marriages, children from the official wife usually deny children from informal unions access to their father's land. "Stranger" youth who are not viewed as community members, may access land but they may have to pay to rent or buy land.

Youth do not enjoy the full spectrum of rights that adult males have. Youth typically cannot access land for long-term farming for commercial crops, such as cocoa or rubber, which would assert a permanent claim to the land. Even those who come from landholding families must wait to

inherit land to enjoy their full spectrum of rights. Male youth with older brothers, may not inherit rights to land unless they work with their brothers and they are in good standing with their brothers. For those youth who do not inherit family land, but are given access to land in the community for farming, these rights are also only seasonal or short term use for farming vegetables or grains. Unless they become “adults”, have money to buy land, or come from land-holding families, some youth may never have long-term rights to land. Stranger youth or youth whose fathers are considered strangers may never have long-term rights to community land.

In the quantitative survey, a high percentage of males (90%) reported that any resident, including women and youth, could plant life trees, while fewer women (approx. 65%) felt that any resident could plant life trees. Similarly, more than half of males and adults felt that individuals of any age or genders could ‘own’ land, but women and youth respondents were less sure of ownership rights, especially when it came to women and youth. This discrepancy between what men report and the actual practices on the ground are not possible to explain at this point and would need further research.

In many of the communities involved in the qualitative study, youth mentioned scarcity of land as one of the constraints they faced in accessing land for agriculture and house spots. In both counties, youth are concerned that limited access to land impacts their ability to farm and support themselves and their families. Because youth cannot access land for farming, many end up working as agricultural laborers. The reasons for land scarcity were diverse. Increasing population density has increased demand for fertile land and house spots and made it less available for youth. These were mentioned in Lawolazu and Fissibu in Lofa County and Garmueand and Baila in Bong County. When land is scarce, stranger youth are more at a disadvantage. For example, stranger youth in Baila reported that they paid high rents for a house plot due to land scarcity. Some youth mentioned that landlords sell-off land to outsiders therefore there is not enough land for the youth. In some cases, most of the available land is taken for life trees, leaving little land for youth to cultivate vegetables.

Youth from households who do not have land face a different set of issues with land access. Some youth mentioned that they are denied access to land even if land was used by parents. They are told that land was not their parents in the first place, even if the parents had planted cash crops. Youth who rely on landlords for access to land face tenure insecurity because land can be arbitrarily taken back with terms of the agreement not

honored. They also deal with situations when they are not given land in time to plant or are given land that is not fertile. Sometimes, they are limited in how they can use the land. For example some youth mentioned that they are not allowed to fish on the land.

3. *Are women able to enjoy the full extent of their bundle of rights? Do women have knowledge about who can gain new rights to land and under what circumstances? Is this the case for all women?*

*“Men have the right to land; women get permission from men because they (men) are the head and leaders of the family”*

*“Land business is a traditional thing so women cannot own land here. Besides, they do not even have the strength to fight or defend the land when there is conflict”*

In Bong and Lofa counties, female youth are even more disadvantaged than male youth in access to land for agriculture or house spots. Young single women are not treated as full members of the community because they will marry into another family and landholding families fear that control of their community land will pass into the hands of “outsiders”. In landholding families, land is inherited mainly by male children. Women are usually not considered for inheritance.

Women’s rights to land are derivative of men’s rights. Marital status determines women’s access to land. Single women gain access to land through their fathers, brothers, uncles and other male relatives. In one FGD, single female youth explained that they are rarely able to access land directly, and need to “beg” their brothers, fathers, uncles for land. Married women gain rights through their husbands, widows gain rights through their husband’s male relatives. Widows do not automatically rights to their husband’s land, rather their husband’s brothers or other male relatives control the land.

In the survey, similar to the findings in the literature and the qualitative research, most respondents said women typically go through a husband or male relative to access farmland (only 25% said a woman could get land without such permission, and only 37% said female youth could independently access community farmland). De-facto unions (marriage without dowry) appear to further disadvantage women’s land access and use over more formal arrangements: while over 80% of respondents said women in customary and statutory marriages have the same rights to use

customary land as their husbands, only 60% said women in de facto unions have the same rights. Respondents felt youth had rights to community land, but it seemed marriage may be a pre-requisite: while few respondents felt ‘land was only for adults,’ (15%), only 47% of respondents said unmarried youth are co-owners of community land, while nearly 60% said married youth are co-owners.

**House Spots:** Although community farmland is typically thought of as collectively owned, plots designated for homes (‘house spots’) seemed to be considered individually owned: nearly all respondents (from both genders and age groups) said that community members were able to claim a house spot ‘forever,’ even women and youth - but women needed the permission and aid of their father or husband to claim a spot. However, almost all respondents said that women could inherit a plot, pass it on to their children, and that a widowed woman can stay on the spot. In terms of youth, nearly 70% said youth (male and female) can inherit family land, but in contrast, only 37% said that female youth can *independently* own land.

Even when women do access land, their marital status determines the extent of the bundle of rights they can enjoy. Single and female youth rights to land for farming are usually only for short-term access. For example, in Lofa County, Sucrumu village, single women from land holding families are able to access farming land easier than married women. These short term rights are usually terminated when women get married. Long term access for married women is mostly through male relatives. When women community members marry “strangers”, they may get short term rights to land within the community, but their children may be recognized for long term rights. The situation of women in de-facto (marriage without dowry) and polygamous marriages is not clear from this research.

In the survey, almost all participants responded that if a woman had ‘non-stranger’ parents who were born in the community, she was also considered a community member. On the other hand, only 72% said being married to a community member made one a community member. Considering women often relocate from their natal area to their husband’s community, this may indicate that women are not considered ‘members’ of the communities they live in after marriage. Women in polygamous unions appeared to be further disadvantaged: only 42% of respondents said a woman in a polygamous union (even to a community member husband) would be considered a member. Interestingly, in these more ambiguous

cases of community membership (e.g., stranger parents, polygamous unions), women and youth respondents were *even less* certain that one would qualify for membership than adults and men were.

There are a few exceptions when women are able to access land on their own, either because they get land from fathers, or they have the money to rent or buy land on their own. When female youth buy land, their rights are recognized as long term. For example, in Baila Village in Bong County, one woman who is a nurse bought her own land and has planted life trees such as rubber. In Kpaai, some families allow their girls to own land, but some do not, the context under which this happens is unclear from the research. When women gain rights by renting land, access is usually clearly defined as short-term. Access for house spots are given as long term once they have managed to access them, and women need to approach traditional elders through male relatives for house spots.

Most youth in the FGDs highlight that traditional norms do not allow women to be involved in land matters. Youth believe that it is hard to change customary norms that limit women's access to land. In some cases, even if women are given access to farmland, their rights are not respected and others encroach on their lands. This was mentioned in an FGD in Yeala village in Lofa County. Furthermore, young women are sometimes not able to use the land they are given because they lack access to labor and other inputs. When the land they use is in the bush or far from the village settlements, women cannot go to the boundaries of the land (the bush) on their own because of fear of violence

***Are the bundle of rights are clearly enforced in the face of contestation (robustness)?***

4. *Do youth have knowledge of their rights in the face of contestation or changed circumstances? Is this the case of all youth? Are youth able to enforce their rights in the face of contestation or changed circumstances? Is this the case of all youth?*

Contestation and conflict over land in Bong and Lofa Counties are characterized by 1) Encroachment of boundaries between landowners and between communities, often exacerbated by lack of fertile land, unclear boundaries which can inadvertently lead to encroachment as youth clear land in the bush for agriculture. Encroachment also happens through the use of fake tribal certificates. People complain that tribal certificates do

no protect their land from encroachment and that only deeds would work, but most people do not have deeds. In FGDs, many youth talked about the difficulty and expense of getting deeds. Land has to be surveyed, but the cost of surveying the land is prohibitive for them and they end up relying on their tribal certificates. Only those with deeded land can sell land. People complain also that those with deeds encroach on land with tribal certificates; 2) Intra-family disputes over land including having too many claimants for family or tribal land and contestation between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” children for rights to their father’s land. 3) Disputes caused by people selling the same land to 2 or more buyers; 4) Disputes caused when people who have only short term access to land to plant vegetables, plant life trees to make a claim on the land. In some cases people plant life trees on land thereby claiming land for private use that is set aside for communal use.

Land conflicts are sometimes tied to ethnic identity. For example, In Yeala town there are conflicts between the Lorma people of Guinea and the Lorma people of Lofa County and in Foequelleh Village, there were ethnic conflicts between the Kepelleh and Mandingo, which were settled.

Land contestation and conflicts have consequences for youth’s access to land. The fear of violence in case of boundary disputes cause some youth to pull out rather than fight for their rights. In Shainkowi and Baila in Bong County for example, youth mentioned that conflict between neighboring towns or villages led to the loss of lives. Furthermore, youth say that they are the most affected by land conflicts because they do not gain rights to land being contested. In some cases youth from families or communities who are in conflict cannot work together, limiting their options to work with other youth to use land.

Youth report that disputes in their communities involving tribal certificates are settled by elders and those involving deeds are generally settled in the courts. The most common way to solve land conflicts is to involve the elders who recite the history of the land and sort out rights based on the history. In some cases youth are also involved in settling community land disputes. This was mentioned in Kpaai, Garmue, Zebay in Lofa County and Shainkowi community in Bong County. There is a hierarchy of traditional elders that are involved in settling conflicts. First the local community elders and landlords are asked to arbitrate. If that is not fruitful, town and quarter chiefs are approached. Other institutions have also played a role in settling land conflicts. For example, in Foequelleh, the Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC) was involved in settling land conflicts.

As far as knowledge of their rights when it comes to conflict, youth are generally aware that they can approach elders or the courts to solve conflicts. In all communities, youth are largely in favor of settling disputes out of court, through the elders or local traditional authorities. This is because going to courts is expensive and takes many years to resolve. Most youth trust the traditional authorities and some youth feel that elders are open to their concerns and listen to them. However some think that elders are biased and some think that those families with more money get disputes settled in their favor. While it is not clear which youth feel that they do not have access, some youth say that they do not have a voice with elders.

Many youth think that the best way to avoid land conflicts is by surveying and demarcation of land boundaries. For example in Baila and Gbarngasiaquelleh communities in Bong County, youth said that land was surveyed a while ago after which conflicts came to an end. They also think that fathers and elders need to show youth the land boundaries, to help prevent encroachment and disputes. While in some communities youth and elders have good relationships, most youth say that elders do not understand youth's needs and that they need to build relationships between youth and elders and that elders need to be sensitized to the problems of youth and their need for land. They think that the government and NGOs should to bring youth and elders together to train them and have dialogs so youth can access land within the community. They expressed the need to be more involved in land matters in order to increase their access to land. To better equip them to claim their rights youth have expressed a desire to understand the provisions of the LRA and want NGOs or the government to be involved.

*5. Are women able to enforce their rights in the face of contestation or changed circumstances? Is this the case of all women?*

Female youth are generally not involved in settling land conflicts. Youth explain since men are mostly involved in clearing the bush, it is the men that encounter conflicts. However, in some communities, elderly women leaders are allowed to help in dispute resolution. This was mentioned in Kpaigya Village in Lofa County. Some youth mentioned the need to organize themselves so that youth men and women can be trained in conflict resolution.

***Does the land rights system give all the ability to participate in decisions about the land (Inclusive & Gender Equitable)?***

***6. Are youth able to participate in land decisions at the household and community level? Is this the case of all youth?***

Most youth expressed a desire to be involved more fully in land governance decisions. Most said that only families that have land are involved in governance decisions and those that do not have land are excluded from governance decisions

Many youth think that elders fear that they will lose control of the land if they include youth in community governance. Furthermore, they say that elders think that young people are not considered serious enough to be involved in governance, In most cases, some select youth (usually youth leaders, or land-owing youth) are allowed to be part of land governance. It is the elders' decision on whether youth are involved in land matters. Youth cannot do this unless they are invited to do so. Even if youth are involved, their voices do not carry as much weight. Elders also have final say on land governance decisions. Elders sometimes appoint young people to take over land decision-making because they are aging.

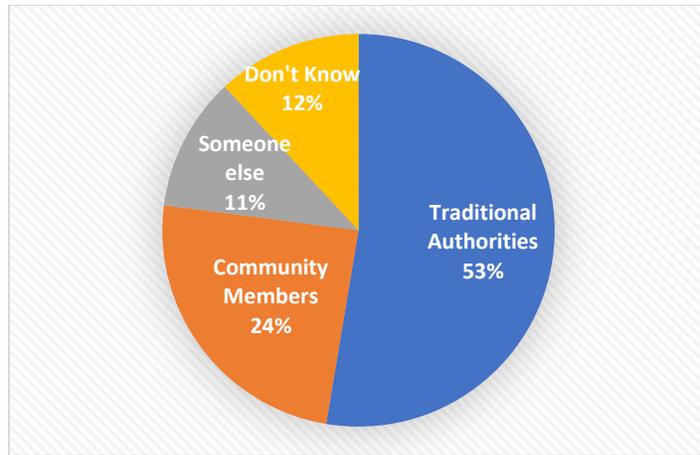
***7. Are women able to participate in land decisions at the household and community level? Is this the case of all women?***

Women are not expected to be involved in land matters according to traditional norms. Women's voices are represented either through their male relatives or the chairladies. However in the FGDs, many youth acknowledged that women should be empowered to participate in decision making about land governance.

When youth are involved in land governance, it is usually male youth that participate, very rarely are female youth involved. There are some exceptions. For example, in Baila community in Bong County, youth mentioned that young women and young men do participate in land governance, but women are expected to act in a deferential way when they speak. Women are involved in some cases. For example, in a town hall meeting for the construction of the community clinic, women were involved in one community.

In the survey, about a quarter said the members of the community made land governance decisions collectively, and the majority reported that the collective meeting/voting was inclusive of all community members. Only 6% said the family/clan made big land decisions, and none of the respondents said a statutory land management body made such decisions.

**Graph 5: Who makes decisions about land in community?<sup>17</sup>**



When asked what they can do about grabs of community land, the overwhelming majority of male respondents reported they could sue individuals (90%) and companies (83%), and half even said they could sue the government; for females, the percentages were much lower. However, nearly across the board, 66% of respondents said the land that big companies are currently using for concessions belongs to the communities.

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<sup>17</sup> These responses are for a question asked about “big decisions” regarding land over 50 acres; responses were nearly identical on a question about land under 50 acres.

## Discussion

The discussion that follows first considers upon how land tenure insecurity can impact youth's livelihood options drawing on our literature review as well as our primary research. We then make policy and program recommendations on how to improve access to land for youth.

### *Land tenure insecurity and youth livelihoods*

Limited access to land impacts youths' ability to practice land-based livelihoods. Agricultural employment is informal and vulnerable to downturns, so most youth complement it with other activities, such as mining and plantation employment, transportation services, government work, and small businesses. Most depend heavily on forest products for consumption and sale (Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012). One study found that most youth migrate due to the inequalities in accessibility to land for farming (Williams and Ocha, 2015). However, with nearly one-third of youth unemployed (2008 census), urban economic opportunities are also limited. Many of the most marginalized youth are not suited to work other than in the agrarian sector (Richards 2005). The lack of non-agrarian employment opportunities for youth, many of whom have had some forms of military experience from the war, is a source of social instability. Some engage in quasi-professional violence and illegal mining (Blattman & Annan, 2011). In Monrovia, some female youth are engaged in prostitution (Richardson & Hannay, 2014).

Among the qualitative study participants in Bong and Lofa counties, agriculture was the primary income activity for youth, including commercial cash crop farming (e.g. palm, rubber) as well as vegetable farming ('gardening'). In Lofa, youth often worked in kuus and were occasionally hired as daily contract workers. Youth's agricultural work was divided along gender lines in both counties, with men doing more of the physically-demanding tasks such as clearing brush. Men also seemed to control the more profitable cash crop farming while women pursued gardening. In Lofa, some women complained that they were unable to farm alone. Besides farming, it was frequently mentioned that male youth are involved in driving motorcycles for hire, especially in Lofa, and youth sometimes had small informal businesses; in Bong, women are involved in petty trading.

Rural youth in Bong and Lofa Counties have few livelihood options and wish to deepen their engagement in agriculture to better support themselves and their families. For youth who wish to farm, a lack of long-term access to land is a pressing challenge that makes agriculture an unviable livelihood option; this is the most commonly cited challenge that youth face in agriculture. Landesa's qualitative research found that female and "stranger" youth face significant challenges accessing family and community land. Youth – and female youth, in particular – are often unaware of their legal rights to land, including the Land Rights Act (LRA). Unsurprisingly, youth in both Bong and Lofa Counties were more knowledgeable about the exclusionary, male- and elder-dominated customary norms and laws regarding land rights. These customary land rights practices revolve around adult males as the arbiters of land access and governance with limited opportunities for independent youth access to land.

Gender is an important factor that influences land rights and land-based livelihood opportunities for rural youth. In Bong and Lofa counties, young women's access to land for farming and housing is even more constricted. As in many parts of the sub-Saharan Africa, Liberian women's rights to land are mostly derivative of men's rights. Single women gain access to land through their fathers, brothers, uncles and other male relatives while married women gain rights through their husbands, and widows gain rights through their husband's male relatives. In both counties, land for farming is mostly available to married male youth, although in rare cases women youth have been able to access land directly from their parents or buy land if they have money. The exclusion of young women land governance systems in deeply traditional communities in parts of Lofa County could be a significant challenge for programs seeking to advance gender-equitable land rights for youth in these communities.

The primary avenue for youth access to land in both counties is through their parents and traditional leaders, but accessing land from parents or community elders mostly benefits male youth whose parents are considered part of the community and not strangers. This is consistent with global lessons from IFAD-supported programs noting inheritance as the main means by which rural youth access land in the developing world (IFAD, 2014). Youth who can access land from their parents or traditional leaders often do so for short-term farming such as vegetables and grains while access to land for long term farming where youth grow commercial crops such as cocoa or life trees is mostly not possible. For young women, stranger youth, unmarried youth, and female youth in polygamous marriages, even short-term access to farming land may not be possible. In some cases, youth who can access land from traditional leaders or landlords often face arbitrary evictions and restrictions on the types of crops they can grow and thus limiting their land tenure security and potential for stable, long-term land-based livelihoods. Additionally, single female youth are

rarely able to independently access land without the assistance of their brothers, fathers or uncles. Single women who are given access to land, are usually not allowed long term use and their land rights are often violated and less respected. Growing land scarcity in some Bong and Lofa communities coupled with a limited understanding of youth land rights by the elders compound land access challenges for poor youth who are unable to rent or buy farming land.

Intra-family and community land disputes may have an important bearing on rural youth access to land in Liberia. Growing land scarcity and boundary disputes in some Lofa and Bong communities could further alienate youth from the land governance systems. Both intra-family and community boundary disputes have a negative bearing on youth access to land in both counties. Because youth often lack intimate knowledge about their land rights, community boundaries and the land governance systems, they are generally excluded from land dispute resolution processes including Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). Unresolved boundary and intra-family disputes could make it even harder for youth in both counties to access land. Yet opportunities for community elders and youth to discuss and resolve land disputes are rare in both counties and this suggests that intergenerational tensions over land could increase in future. Increased land disputes and intergenerational tensions over land access could force some youth to abandon agriculture altogether.

Most youth in our study communities are eager to participate in land governance systems working in collaboration with community elders. However, the firm grip of elderly males on land related decision making processes and the fear of losing control of the land and power to the youth limit the scope for effective youth engagement in community land governance systems in Bong and Lofa counties. Without engaging youth farmers and youth-led groups in land policy making and practices, it is difficult for customary and statutory authorities to fully understand and address the specific needs of youth with respect to land. The Land Rights Act presents a unique opportunity for communities, youth and their representative organizations and government to advance gender-equitable youth land rights. In our quest for effective and gender-equitable youth land rights, it is important to note that closing the gap between statutory provisions and discriminatory customary practices is a daunting but not an insurmountable task. Many of the qualitative study participants felt it would be helpful to facilitate the elders allowing youth to access and control land.

While land access and use rights were impediments to earning a living in agriculture for youth, in the qualitative research “lack of support” also emerged as a challenge to youth’s pursuit of agricultural livelihoods or, specifically, lack of inputs. In Bong and Lofa counties, poor transportation to markets, low crop prices, and poor weather also were challenges. The most oft-cited suggestion for improving youth participation in agriculture was to support access to agricultural inputs, along with agricultural training and supporting kuus.

The extent to which effective, inclusive, and gender-equitable land rights could foster sustainable youth engagement in agriculture in Liberia is debatable and beyond the scope of this paper. However, preliminary views from Liberian youth and community leaders suggest that a holistic approach that prioritizes youth access to land along with access to relevant farming skills, financing, markets and inputs is promising. What is clear from our assessment is that for rural Liberian youth to engage in agriculture, access to land is a fundamental requirement. There is a widespread perception that Liberian youth are not interested in pursuing agriculture as they do not perceive that it offers a viable livelihood (Macaulay, 2016; Making Cents, 2016; Scarborough, 2017; USAID, 2016). Youth feel the returns of farming are too delayed, as compared to daily work such as gold mining or commercial bike riding (Scarborough, 2017); In at least one study, female youth consistently mentioned the risks of being beaten or raped (Scarborough, 2017) as an obstacle to working in agriculture (especially in tasks where they are mobile and/or unprotected, such as fetching water, working in a field alone, etc).

### **Policy and Programming Options**

Liberia will need to provide secure land rights at scale to its population, particularly those who rely on land-based livelihoods. Our research in Bong, Lofa, and Rivercess counties provide useful policy and programming insights for promoting effective and gender-equitable youth land rights in rural Liberia. Landesa’s ongoing LRSD interventions with CSO partners DEN-L and FCI are crafted to address some of the youth land access and governance challenges identified thorough our research, however, these are still at a relatively small scale, currently working directly in only 7 communities. To ensure impact at scale, policy and programming options could include:

- Supporting land rights education and awareness-raising to enable rural Liberian youth to better understand and defend their land rights as provided for in local and national land rights frameworks. In both counties, community sensitization on the importance of youth land rights for sustainable rural youth livelihoods would be beneficial. The sensitization should especially target customary leaders, landlords, elders and local government officials including town and quarter chiefs.
- Promoting adult-youth dialogue on land matters in order to improve opportunities for youth to access land. This could be done by strengthening existing community platforms for youth-adult dialogue where they already exist as in Yeala in Lofa county, and developing and supporting new youth-adult land rights dialogue forums where these do not exist as in Kpayea in Lofa County. These dialogue forums could enhance youth engagement in broader community land governance systems and boost opportunities for youth access to land.
- Targeted youth-oriented advocacy to promote gender equitable access to land for the most disadvantaged groups of youth including youth strangers, young women and youth in polygamous marriages.
- Developing and promoting youth sensitive land rental market policies to better protect the land rights of youth from unscrupulous landlords and traditional leaders especially in Bong County where there is an informal, unregulated land rental market.
- Training youth leaders in land dispute resolution mechanisms including Alternative Land Dispute Resolution to build the capacity of youth farmers to recognize and defend their land rights when they are infringed upon by customary and statutory authorities.
- Promoting land rights documentation within the framework of the Land Rights Act to address insecure and unclear land rights that disproportionately affect young men and young women's access to land and land-based livelihoods.
- Building the capacity of grassroots-oriented rural youth organizations by educating them about land rights and linking them up with customary and statutory authorities that mediate rural youth access to land and opportunities for land-based livelihoods.
- In Bong and Lofa county communities where there is increasing land scarcity especially close to major urban centers, identification and promotion of small, land-intensive farming activities that target landless unemployed youth could help improve youth access to land and income generating opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

Our paper documented rural youth livelihood opportunities and land access and governance constraints for diverse groups of young men and young women using evidence from select communities in Bong, Lofa and Rivercess counties of Liberia. The paper has highlighted that rural youth in the two counties engage in a wide of range of livelihood activities of which agriculture is one of them. For youth who want to engage in farming, it emerged that secure and long-term access to land is a major challenge especially for young women and youth who are considered strangers in the community. In all 3 counties, the land access challenges faced by youth are compounded by the existence of a customary land rights system dominated by adult males who often exercise a firm grip on land-related decision making and land access opportunities. While most youth have a good understanding of the exclusionary customary land rights system, they do not seem to have a full understanding of their own land rights within the system and there are limited opportunities for youth to defend their land rights in non-confrontational ways. We noted how the lack of youth-adult forums to discuss land issues along with few opportunities for youth to participate in community land governance further constrain opportunities for youth access to land. In some communities, the continued exclusion of young men and young women in community land governance systems increases intergenerational tensions over land and further limit opportunities for youth to engage in farming as a sustainable livelihood option.

Policy and programming options must address the individual and community level barriers that impede rural youth access to land and land-based livelihoods in the two counties and other parts of Liberia. To address individual-level youth barriers, land rights education and awareness raising is critical. To improve youth access to land in deeply traditional settings such as Lofa County where land is communally owned, community sensitization targeting traditional leaders and landlords is fundamental. Youth land rights programs should be designed with particular attention given to gender, identity and age dimensions that determine youth access to land in the two counties. The success of these programs will largely depend on the extent to which they can help bridge the gap between statutory provisions and customary norms and practices that continue to discriminate against young men and young women in most parts of rural Liberia.

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