Imagine one morning you wake up and discover that your house has been sold to a foreign company without your knowledge or consent. Not only that, but the land around your house and town – land that you’d farmed and hunted on since you were a child – was also gone, sold by the government without discussing it with you or your neighbors. You’re told that you’ll get light compensation, although it won’t be nearly enough to sustain you financially and isn’t close to what the land is worth. When you try to protest, the response is quick and firm: you don’t really have a say, the decision’s been made.

This is essentially the situation that residents of District #4 in Grand Bassa County, a wooded area about three hours drive from Monrovia, found themselves in in 2013.

In April, investigators from the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) first heard concerning reports out of District #4. Equatorial Palm Oil, a British oil palm company that owned a plantation in Grand Bassa, had plans to expand into the untouched eastern portion of the district, where over a dozen towns are located. The plantation had been developed in the 1960s by EPO’s predecessor, partially by forcibly evicting communities based in the area. Some of those forced from their homes migrated a few miles east, where they founded new towns or joined others.

EPO bought the plantation in the late 2000s, with a financial strategy that called for expansion, setting them on
a collision course with communities on its eastern edge.

Confusing and contradictory laws in Liberia grant a wide berth for the government to claim it holds the title to the vast majority of the country's land. EPO's expansion had been negotiated with officials in Monrovia in 2010, when it signed its agreement with the government.

Legal or no, when the agreement was signed, thousands of people living on the land that EPO coveted for its plantation, who rely on the land for food, medicinal herbs, and cultural practices, weren't asked whether they agreed to the plan or not. At the very least, this oversight was a violation of the international oil palm industry's public support for the right to 'Free, Prior, and Informed Consent.'

To understand the EPO saga, it's necessary to understand the position the Liberian government was in at the end of the country's civil war.

Infrastructure had been decimated by the war. Electricity was nearly non-existent for most people, roads were impassable, and the government had been elected on a promise to hand out a 'peace dividend' - namely, development. The strategy for accomplishing this was based largely on converting the country's timber, land, and mineral reserves into cash, and doing so as quickly as possible.

Contracts - called "concession agreements" -- were signed with foreign investors from across the world, including EPO. In most cases, they included nearly no input by the communities who would be most directly affected by the projects. Predictably, these concessions have been -- and still are -- plagued by conflicts between communities, the government, and investors over who has the right to make decisions over and benefit from Liberian resources.

When SDI made its first field visit to District #4, its researchers were told by community members in the area that EPO had started to discuss the expansion with them. In a good faith gesture, a relatively small cash payment had been made to local leaders to distribute in the area, intended as compensation for the decades-old evictions. Most of the people who SDI staff members spoke to said that while they appreciated the gesture, they were hesitant to agree to any new land being converted by EPO.

Throughout the late spring and summer, the discussions continued between EPO, local government officials, and communities in District #4. A major point of disagreement emerged which involved EPO’s desire to carry out a survey of the land they intended to expand onto. While there were differing opinions inside the district of whether to give any new land away, the general consensus was that the company should focus on tearing down unproductive trees inside the old plantation and refrain from cutting any new survey lines that might be seen as a claim on new land.

Finally in September, a crisis erupted. The SDI researchers who had carried out the fact-finding mission in April received frantic phone calls from residents of the district: EPO had failed to make headway in its negotiations with communities, and had decided to go ahead with the survey anyway. When locals confronted the firm that had been contracted to carry out the survey and told them to stop, police forces were called into the area. Groups of riot-gear clad officers from the Liberia National Police were deployed inside the EPO plantation, and had allegedly threatened community members not to interfere with the company’s work.

SDI staff convened an emergency meeting, and early the next morning a team set out to gather evidence and interview eyewitnesses.

At the plantation’s gates, a serious and very tense situation had developed. A large crowd of residents was milling around near the entrance, where a unit of police officers had been stationed and which was preventing movement into the plantation, despite it being the primary route to towns on the other side. Residents of the towns were furious, accusing EPO and government officials of colluding in shutting them out of their rightful claim to decision-making over their land.

SDI staff members interviewed a number of the community members in the area:

REPORT FROM 3RD SEPTEMBER, 2013 TAKEN AT 5.8173679204525, -9.9372839927673
joegban-clan-community-youth-angry-at-epos-forced-land-survey
Members of Joghban Clan talk about their anger over the resurvey of their land by Equatorial Palm Oil in September 2013, at the onset of the crisis between District 4 residents and EPO.

The SDI team interviews a few residents of Joghban Clan. Tension built up between locals and EPO over a proposed survey of a piece of land that the community people have not agreed to give to the company.

Transcript of video interview with Bassie, a District 4 youth leader (first embedded video):

I'm a farmer. The police are hired by EPO to come and watch over them because they're saying the citizens of District 4 want to harm them.

If you work for EPO you can work for three months and they will pay you for one month!

We haven't agreed to do the survey but they want to force it!

The police came with armed units to surround our villages and search our communities. EPO brought them.

The first time we had a meeting with them we said we don't agree for you to survey our 435,000 acres. You have to stay where the palm already is.

Now they want to force us and take District 4's land. We're appealing to the government to help us, we don't want to resort to violence. We've been calling our Representatives and Senators.

I don't want EPO on my land. Most people don't agree with the company.

In a meeting we agreed for them to cut their survey line inside their already existing plantation, and they said yes. But yesterday on the air they said they have rights to more of our land.

We saw them cutting a survey line on our land, and we told the police commander to remove the surveyors.

The EPO security chief called on the police to protect the surveyors.

They didn't tell anything to us about what was happening, they just started surveying. If they keep it up without our consent, we won't be violent, but we will call on the government to help us. If they don't, we'll stop it on our own.

Download full report here (https://investigations.sdiliberia.org/download/?id=2831)

When SDI staff tried to enter the plantation to visit communities on its far edge, LNP officers and EPO security officials refused to allow them passage. Recognizing the situation was too delicate for them to press, the team returned to Monrovia to discuss the day's events. On the ride home, staff members heard radio interviews with local officials, who blamed communities for escalating the conflict and subtly insinuated that NGOs like SDI had incited them to resist the company’s plans.

REPORT FROM 3RD SEPTEMBER, 2013 TAKEN AT 5.813269249695, -9.9455237388611

sdi-team-gets-stopped-by-epo-security

The SDI team gets stopped by the Equatorial Palm Oil security upon entry into the plantation to monitor the issue about EPO conducting a land survey. The affected community in that concession were in opposition to the conduction of that survey.

SDI Team was stopped at the main gate of the EPO's plantation because there was a demonstration going inside the plantation. The team thought it wise to use the back entrance to investigate exactly what was happening. But again they were stopped from entering.

Download full report here (https://investigations.sdiliberia.org/download/?id=2829)
Back in Monrovia, SDI staff started to examine the documents that laid out EPO’s expansion plan and spoke to community leaders about what had happened in District #4. A few days later, another call came: a large group of community members had set out on a peaceful march from their towns to the regional capital of Buchanan – two hours away by vehicle – to lodge a complaint over EPO’s actions with the county leadership.

Along the way, a unit of the Liberia National Police’s elite Police Support Unit (PSU), riding alongside EPO security officers, accosted the group, beating a number of them and arresting 17 men. A situation that was already explosive had suddenly turned violent, and members of Jogbahn clan were fearful of what might happen next. SDI staff members rushed to Buchanan to determine the status of the prisoners and interview witnesses to the attack.

In Buchanan, SDI staff learned that the 17 detained residents of District #4 had been released, after the county attorney ruled that there had been no justifiable reason for their arrest. A large group of residents from towns in the area had gathered in a courtyard in Buchanan to mull over the day’s events and to plan their next move. SDI campaigners asked for permission to speak to them.

In a speech to the group, senior campaigner Silas Siakor introduced himself and explained what SDI could do to help de-escalate the situation and bring pressure to bear on the company and government. Siakor implored the community not to retaliate, and argued that the Liberian courts were unlikely to expeditiously and fairly address the conflict. He proposed an alternate strategy - make a formal complaint to the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), an international industry body set up to monitor the conduct of oil palm producers.

The mood in the courtyard was somber. EPO's actions revealed that the pretense of negotiations had essentially been discarded by the company. Expansion of the plantation would destroy livelihoods and change the substance of Jogbahn community's lives. Moreover, the government had clearly demonstrated that in a battle of competing interests, they would side with EPO. Was it really a good idea to trust this NGO at such a vital moment, with so much at stake?

REPORT FROM 1ST MARCH, 2014 TAKEN AT 5.8583529816584, -9.750988483429

Roland Harris, a forest monitor with SDI, shows local production of palm oil in the EPO concession. It is a “factory” (manually made by the community) for squeezing the palm oil out of palm nuts. They use the oil to sell and to sustain their families and themselves. Ladies do hard labor. Most ladies are local sellers – encouraged to cut palm and then extract it.

They stay there for months, squeezing the palm. Roland says that if they can’t work by selling palm, they will likely turn to the streets.

Harris asks a man how palm oil is produced. He asks the man why there are so many ladies doing hard labour. The man replies: “We are all struggling for money….Before you can get the money, you have to struggle.”

Harris asks if he knows they are operating on an EPO concession. Did they consult them? The man says that the land belongs to the citizens. The man states that the EPO security is “embarrassing” them - meaning giving them a hard time.

EPO burned one of the community’s buildings down, according to interviewees.

VIDEO 142627:

Harris speaks to two men from "Factory Do Good". One of the men says he is cultivating palm for his children and himself. He has been there for more than 2 months. The man says the work isn’t bad, but some people came to the area and asked them to leave. They then burnt down some of their buildings. They damaged everything the had and things they had bought. They gave them a limited time. At the time that they came, the community’s palm was sitting on the ground, so they couldn’t leave it, so they
damaged everything they could.

Harris speaks to a former business woman, who has been there since 2011. She is doing it to support her 4 girls in school.

Download full report [here](https://investigations.sdiliberia.org/download/?id=4090)

SDI staff members returned once again to Monrovia. A few days later, another call came. Eleven towns in District #4 had discussed SDI's offer of assistance, and decided to accept. The people from these towns were closely related through kin and community, calling themselves the ‘Jogbahn Clan.’ They came back to SDI with a request: begin the process of submitting the RSPO complaint, and work with us to keep EPO from stealing our land.