

# Forests, Carbon, and the Struggle for Community Survival in Liberia

In the dense forest regions of Liberia, communities have long relied on the land and trees not just for survival, but for dignity, identity, and generational continuity. As global interest in carbon markets and forest conservation intensifies, Liberia, home to some of West Africa's most intact forest ecosystems, is being drawn into conversations about carbon trade agreements and forest concessions. Yet, for the rural communities living in and around these forests, such conversations are unfolding without them.

This publication brings together the voices of forest-dependent residents from Madina in Gbarpolu County and Peter Town in Margibi County, stories that reveal the deep concerns, fears, and hopes of everyday Liberians facing the threat of exclusion from the forests they call home. Through the perspectives of a traditional town chief, a mother and farmer, and a young high school graduate, we gain insight into how proposed carbon trade policies risk disrupting food systems, education, livelihoods, and social cohesion. These stories do not reject climate action or conservation. Instead, they call for a people-centered approach, one that respects rights, ensures community participation, and offers real alternatives before asking people to give up the very land that sustains them.

The forest, as these communities reveal, is not a commodity to be negotiated away behind closed doors, it is the beating heart of rural life. Their resistance is not just against carbon deals, but against a development model that excludes the very people whose lives are most intertwined with the land.

## Stories of Resistance to Carbon Trade from Rural Liberia

### Story 1: The Chief Who Farms

#### *Hon. Beyan Sirleaf's Stand Against the Carbon Deal*

**Location:** Madina, Gbarpolu County

**By ActionAid Liberia | Forest Justice Voices Series**



**“If they say they will give us money and then control our forest, it will be very difficult. I will not be living in peace.” – Hon. Beyan Sirleaf, Town Chief and Farmer**

Hon. Beyan Sirleaf, a 52-year-old Town Chief of Madina in Gbarpolu County, has lived his entire life as a farmer. The father of eight relies entirely on the land to feed, educate, and care for his family. From cultivating rice, cassava, and vegetables, to gathering forest herbs for medicine, the forest provides the foundation for his family's well-being. When he heard for the first time that the government was exploring a carbon trade policy involving his community's forest, he responded with deep concern and outright opposition. To him, giving up access to the forest, even for money, makes no sense.

*“How can I live in peace when I am told I cannot go into the forest, yet it is what I depend on every day?” he asked.*

Chief Sirleaf strongly believes that any proposed forest restriction must come with realistic and sustainable alternatives, such as empowering the community to farm swamplands, cultivate cocoa or oil palm, or receive direct training in sustainable farming practices. Without such alternatives, he fears not just for himself, but for the generations to come.

*“This agreement will not be fine for our children and their children. It will make life worse for them,” he warned. His message to policymakers is clear: “Meet with the people. Help us understand. Listen to us before taking any decision.” For Chief Sirleaf, the forest is not negotiable, it is life itself.*

## Story 2: The Forest is Our Mother

Jartu Johnson on Women's Forest Dependency

Location: Madina Town, Gbarpolu County

By ActionAid Liberia | Forest Justice Voices Series



**“The forest helps us. It gives us food; it gives us planks for our homes. If we leave it, what will we survive on?” – Jartu Johnson, Farmer and Mother of Four**

Jartu Johnson, a lifelong farmer and mother of four, has never known any other way of life than working the land. Alongside her husband, she grows rice, pepper, and cucumbers, crops that not only feed her family but also help her pay for her children's school fees. She did not go to school herself, so educating her children is her top priority. For her, the forest plays an essential role. It provides timber to build their homes and kitchens, food to eat and sell, and herbal remedies for their health. Losing access to it would be devastating.

Jartu fears the consequences of the proposed carbon agreement, especially if it bans tree-cutting or restricts community farming. “If we cannot cut trees, what will we use to build houses? Will we all sleep in kitchens?” she asked. She pointed out that there are very few business opportunities in the community, and the forest has long filled that economic gap. Still, Jartu is not closed to change. She suggests that if the government wants the community to leave the forest, it must provide viable alternatives such as poultry, cattle, or fish farming that can replace the income and nutrition the forest provides.

*“But if they are only coming with money and no solutions, it will affect us badly,”* she said.

For women like Jartu, the forest is not just a natural resource, it is a vital source of empowerment, economic independence, and dignity. It allows them to provide for their families, educate their children, and contribute to their communities. Without meaningful alternatives, losing access to the forest would mean losing their ability to lead, earn, and live with dignity.

## Story 3: Forest is My Inheritance

### Mohammed Kamara's Vision for Youth Survival

Location: Peter Town, Gibi District, Margibi County  
By ActionAid Liberia | Forest Justice Voices Series



**"My grandfather didn't leave me a building he left me this forest. That's what I depend on. That's all I have."** Mohammed Darius Kamara, Youth Farmer

Mohammed Darius Kamara is 33 years old, a high school graduate, and a father of two. He lives in Peter Town in Margibi County, where he makes a living through small-scale farming, cultivating cassava, corn, and pepper, and producing gari for the local market. Farming paid his school fees, and today it pays for his children's. But to Mohammed, farming is more than income, it is identity, legacy, and hope.

Mohammed fears what might happen if the government finalizes the carbon deal that restricts forest use. He is not just worried about income loss, but also about being left with nothing to pass on to his children.

*"What will I stand to benefit if I can't farm anymore? What will my children live on?"* he asked.

He emphasized that unlike wealthier families, forest-dwelling youth like him have no inherited property or business, only land and forest, passed down through generations. The carbon deal, in his eyes, risks cutting off his last remaining lifeline.

Unless the government provides strong, enforceable benefits and alternative livelihoods, Mohammed fears that such deals will bring hunger, unemployment, and loss of dignity to rural youth. He wants to see young people included in all negotiations about land and forest management.

*"The forest is my inheritance,"* he said. *"Taking it without replacing it is like stealing my future."*



The stories from Madina and Peter Town reflect a powerful truth: forest conservation efforts that ignore the voices of those who live closest to the land risk doing more harm than good. These communities are not against environmental protection, they understand better than anyone the value of the forest. What they demand is fairness, inclusion, and dignity. They want to be consulted before decisions are made. They want alternatives before access is restricted. And they want policies that prioritize their survival just as much as the survival of trees. Their message is clear;

***“Protecting Forests Must Also Protect People”***

In this critical moment, **ActionAid Liberia** plays a pivotal role in amplifying community voices, promoting climate justice, and advocating for rights-based approaches to natural resource governance. Through community-led engagements, public education, and advocacy, ActionAid Liberia continues to support forest-dwelling people, especially women and youth, to speak out, organize, and hold duty bearers accountable. Actionaid’s rootedness and application of its Human Rights Based Approach in the communities ensures that any climate finance or carbon trade policy is shaped not only by environmental goals but also by social justice, equity, and human rights. Forests cannot be protected in isolation from the people who live within them. ActionAid Liberia’s approach helps bridge that gap, ensuring that protecting the planet does not come at the cost of those who protect it every day.

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