



PRESS RELEASE

Freetown, 9th September 2021

Namati Sierra Leone and the Institute for Legal Research and Advocacy for Justice (ILRAJ) are concerned about the continued lack of transparency and compliance with national laws by the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) following a visit by the Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR) and the Minister of Lands, Housing and Country Planning (MLHCP) to Black Johnson village in the Western Area on Monday, 6th September 2021.

We note that without providing information on the project, the Ministers announced to a spontaneously gathered crowd comprising village leaders, residents, landowners, and civil society organisation representatives that the fish harbour project at Black Johnson was moving forward. As non-governmental organisations working on the rule of law, public policy research, land rights and environmental justice, we are deeply disappointed that without an Environmental, Social and Health Impact Assessment having been completed in line with the Environmental Protection Agency Act 2008, the GoSL has drawn conclusions about the project and its potential impacts, while publicly stating those unsupported conclusions as facts. 'For a project of this nature, which involves important natural ecosystems, livelihoods, and the country's tourism potential, it is imperative that decisions by both government and the people must be made on an informed basis,' said Sonkita Conteh, Director of Namati Sierra Leone.

Furthermore, four months after the GoSL's intention to establish the fish harbour came to light, the MFMR and MLHCP have ignored their obligations under the Rights to Access Information Act (RAIA) 2013 by failing to provide the information we requested in May 2021 on the proposed project. The requested information includes any technical and environmental studies done to assess the suitability of Black Johnson as the location for a fish harbour, the terms of the Chinese government's \$55 million grant, and the government's proposed means of land acquisition. According to Basita Michael, governing officer of ILRAJ, '[t]he failure of the relevant government entities to respond to these information requests or proactively disclose information on the project not only contravenes the RAIA, but also creates unnecessary suspicion around a project vaguely promised by one Minister to create "a solid foundation for the development of Sierra Leone."

ILRAJ and Namati were also disturbed by the erroneous nature of statements made during the Ministers' visit to Black Johnson this week, including a declaration by the Minister of Lands that the establishment of a fish harbour at Black Johnson is now law after having been passed by Parliament. To our knowledge, no law has been passed by Parliament to establish a fish harbour specifically at Black Johnson. We call on the Minister to immediately publicly clarify his misleading statement and provide accurate information on what was presented to Parliament regarding establishing a fish harbour and any action taken by Parliament on the said document. In the same vein, we also welcome the Minister's invitation to debate openly on television or radio about the proposed fish harbour project.

Sadly, to date, there has been no consultation by the GoSL with stakeholders, which range from all Black Johnson landowners to community members to the Sierra Leone public. This week's visit to Black Johnson by the Ministers did not change that. The government representatives' unwillingness to give stakeholders an opportunity to dialogue or ask questions was met with the vocal disapproval of stakeholders present. Expressing the frustration of a large number of landowners, Kojo Mammah, the Secretary-General of the Black Johnson Land Owners Organisation, lamented that '[t]his has been happening all along. The [government officials] were not planning to engage us as landowners during this visit nor encourage our participation in the meeting. It makes us doubt the sincerity of the entire process.' Such lack of constructive engagement runs contrary to the spirit of consultation needed for ensuring free, prior and informed consent of affected communities for development projects.

Therefore, Namati and ILRAJ, together with a cross-section of landowners and residents of Black Johnson, call on all relevant government entities to do the following:

- Without further delay, the MFMR and MLHCP should respond to Namati and ILRAJ's requests for information under the RAIA and provide the public with information on the proposed project, including technical studies, the Chinese government's grant supporting the project, and the government's proposed means of land acquisition.
- The MFMR, Ministry of Environment (MOE), and the Environmental Protection Agency should ensure that an independent and thorough Environmental, Social and Health Impact Assessment and public disclosure process is carried out before any further action on the part of the GoSL to acquire land for the establishment of a fish harbour.
- The MFMR, MLHCP, MOE, and Ministry of Tourism should adopt a new approach to consultation that provides all categories of stakeholders with opportunities to obtain information, ask questions, and provide input on the proposed project for the establishment of the fish harbour at Black Johnson.

-END-

For media enquiries, please contact Daniel Sesay, Senior Programme Officer, Namati Sierra Leone. Tel: +232 76 926090; Email: sierraleone@namati.org