LAND DISPUTES IN LIBERIA: VIEWS FROM BELOW, 2008

Introduction
The protracted civil war that ravaged Liberia between 1989 and 2003 forced many Liberians to seek refuge in other countries. When the war eventually ended in 2003 and democratic rule was subsequently established in 2005, many of the refugees returned to Liberia, mostly facilitated by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

Unfortunately, immediately after the war, there was a mad rush for land. Frequent disputes over ownership were exacerbated by the loss of legal documents and a total breakdown of the legal system. Taking advantage of the high demand for land, some Liberians devised means of disposing of almost any available land that had no visible ownership or that was not under immediate supervision. Many returnees therefore encountered problems reclaiming or accessing their land, buildings and other assets that survived the war. In many cases those assets have been taken over by people who are not willing to relinquish their claims. These illegal occupants usually demand that the claimants provide valid documentation to support their claims of ownership, documentation which often no longer exists.

As a result, struggles for land and other assets have generated tensions and violent conflicts throughout the country, conflict that often takes on an ethnic dimension. This has resulted in the destruction of lives and property, and forced many residents to flee from some of the main towns. Thus, even though Liberia has stabilized remarkably since 2005, land disputes have emerged as a major threat to peace. The Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission warned of a strong likelihood of Liberia's return to violence if the land issue was not adequately addressed.

An Afrobarometer survey was conducted for the first time in Liberia in 2008. The findings enable us to assess popular opinions on land disputes and the likely consequences for peace and stability in Liberia. Specifically, we track the following:

1. What is the relative role of land disputes in generating violent conflicts in Liberia, and what is the spatial distribution of these conflicts?

2. How often and where do land disputes occur in Liberia?

3. What are the public's preferred approaches to resolving land distribution disputes?

Summary findings
In brief, we find that:

1. *A clear majority of Liberians (62 percent) rank land ownership and distribution as the most important cause of violent conflict between different ethnic groups in the country, confirming the fears of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.*

2. *Ethnic/tribal differences, which are closely associated with land disputes, are ranked a distant second as a major cause of violent conflicts (19 percent).*

3. *Nearly six in ten respondents (59 percent) say violent conflict over land ownership and distribution arises 'often' or 'always' in Liberia.*

4. *A plurality of Liberians favor a relatively free market in land, though a sizeable minority would prefer that government play a role in managing or subsidizing the sale and distribution of land.*

The Afrobarometer
The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, markets and economic conditions. The Afrobarometer started in 1999 and has now conducted four rounds of surveys, expanding from 12 countries in Round 1 (1999-2001) to 20 in Round 4 (2008-2009). Fieldwork for the first Afrobarometer survey in Liberia was undertaken between December 8 and 21, 2008 by Subah Belleh Associates under the supervision of the Liberia Democratic Institute. The survey is based on a randomly selected national probability sample of 1,200 respondents representing a cross-section of adult Liberians aged 18 years or older. A sample of this size yields a margin of error of approximately ± 3 percent at a 95 percent confidence level. The survey was conducted in all 15 counties, with each county and urban and rural areas sampled in proportion to their share of the national population. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by trained fieldworkers in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Causes of Land Disputes
As of December 2008, a clear majority of Liberians say land ownership and distribution is the leading cause of violent conflict in the country. More than six in ten respondents (62 percent) rank land ownership and distribution on top of the list of causes of violent conflict (Figure 1).

***Figure 1: Popular ranking of causes of violent conflict (percent ranking issue as first major cause)***
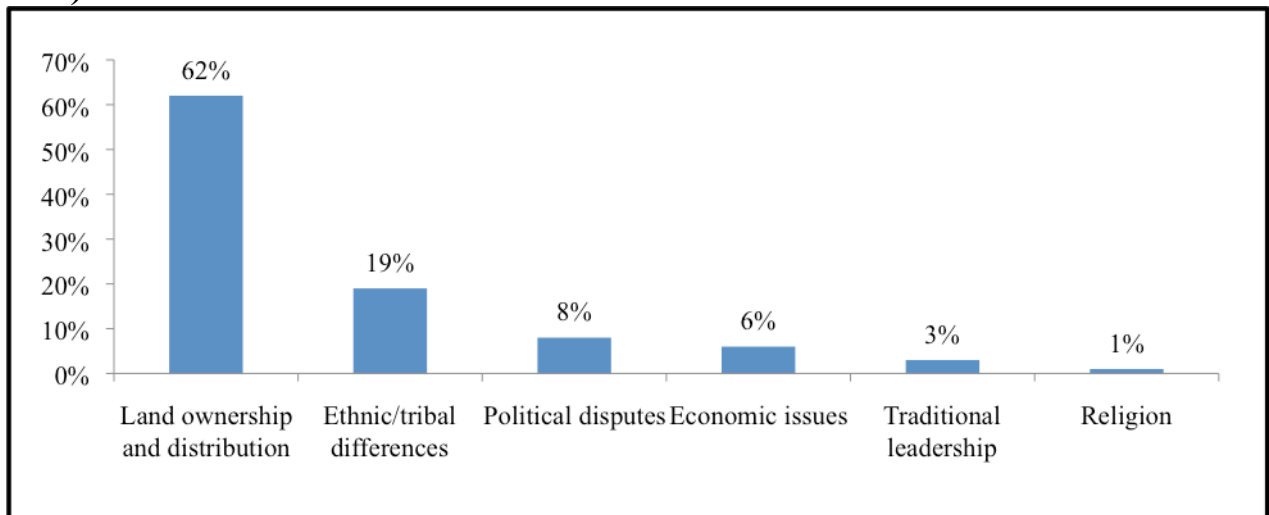
Question wording*: Over what sort of problems do violent conflicts most often arise between different groups in this country?*

Ethnic or tribal differences rank a distant second (19 percent). However, opinions on the causes of violent conflicts vary significantly across space. First, a slightly higher proportion of urban respondents (65 percent) attribute violent conflicts to land disputes

than rural respondents (60 percent). Secondly, and much more significantly, there are large variations across counties. Fully 92 percent of respondents in River Gee County identify land disputes as the primary cause of violent conflict, followed by Bomi, Grand Gedeh, Maryland, and Rivercess, all at above 70 percent (Figure 2). In contrast, in Bong, Grand Basa, Grand Cape Mount, Lofa and Sinoe counties, only about half of respondents say violent conflicts result primarily from land disputes. Larger minorities in these counties believe that ethnic/tribal differences are important. For instance in Grand Basa, three in ten respondents (30 percent) attribute violent conflicts to ethnic/tribal differences, while a little over half (51 percent) attribute them to land ownership.

Figure 2: Popular ranking of causes of violent conflict by county (% ranking issue as first major cause)
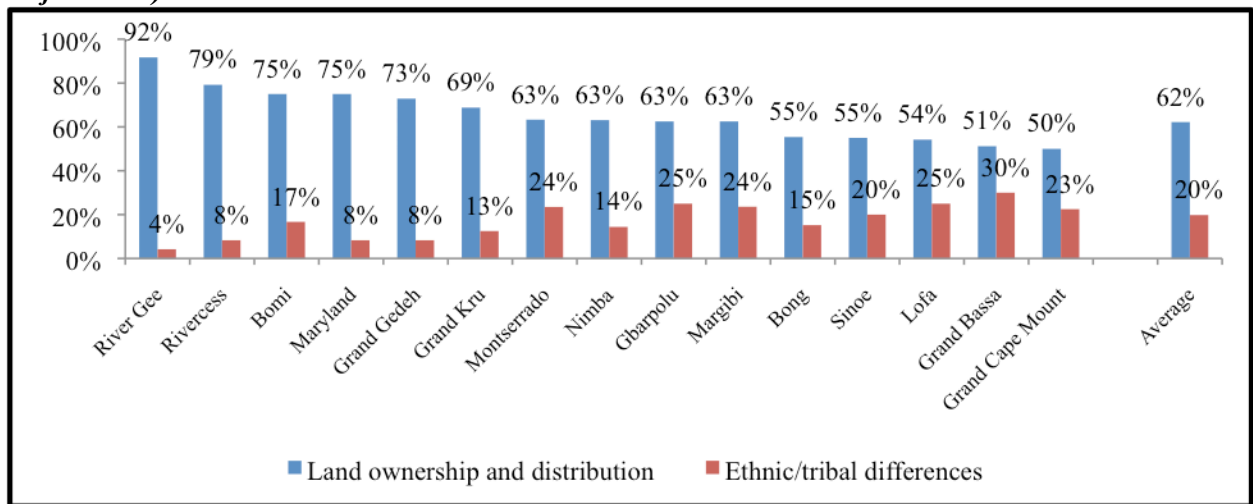
How often do land disputes arise?
Most Liberians say violent disputes over land occur very often. About six in ten respondents (59 percent) say land disputes occur 'all the time' or 'often' in the country, while another 29 percent believe these disputes arise 'sometimes' (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Reported frequency of occurrence of violent conflict
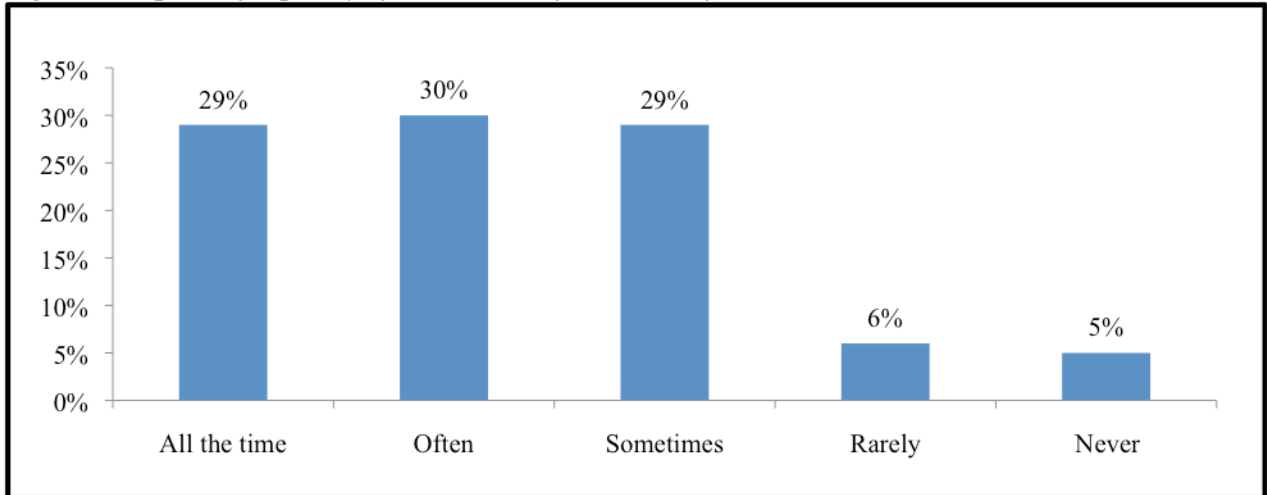
Question wording*: In your experience, how often do violent conflicts arise over land ownership and distribution in Liberia?*

Violent land disputes are reported to be more frequent in urban than rural areas. Whereas 36 percent of urban dwellers say violent conflict over land occurs all the time, and 34 percent say often, the respective figures in rural areas are just 24 and 26 percent (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Frequency of occurrence of violent conflict by location of respondent
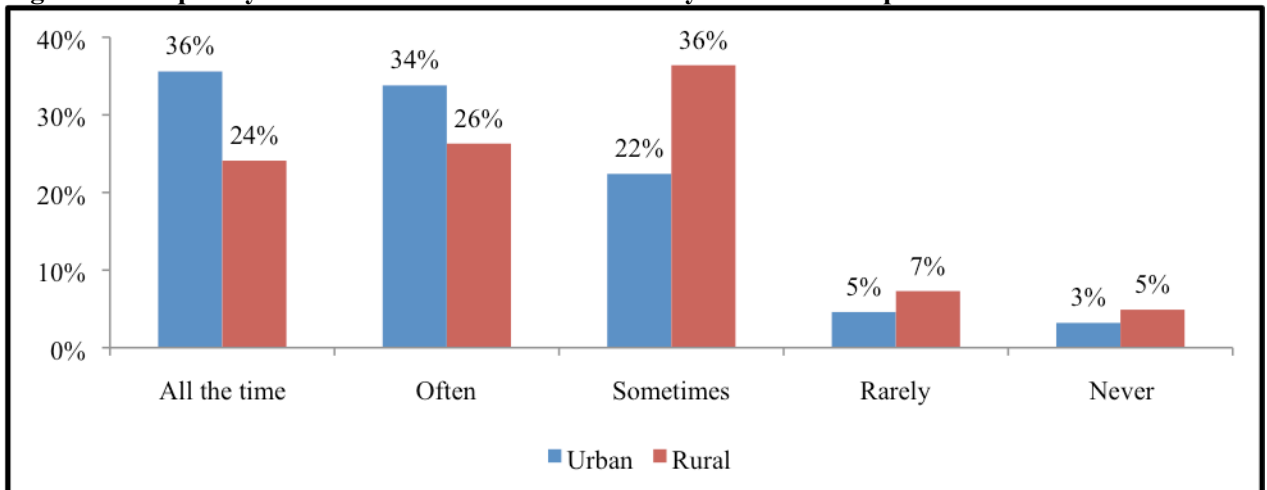
The frequency of land disputes is significantly higher in some counties compared to others. Large majorities of respondents in Margidi (85 percent), Montserrado (75 percent), Grand Kru (62 percent) and Grand Bassa (61 percent) counties say violent land disputes arise 'all the time' or 'often' (Figure 5). On the other hand, reported frequency of violent conflicts is relatively low in River Gee County (only 29 percent say often or all the time), even though nearly all respondents in this county (92 percent) attribute violent conflicts to land ownership (see Figure 2 above).

Figure 5: Frequency of occurrence of violent conflict by county
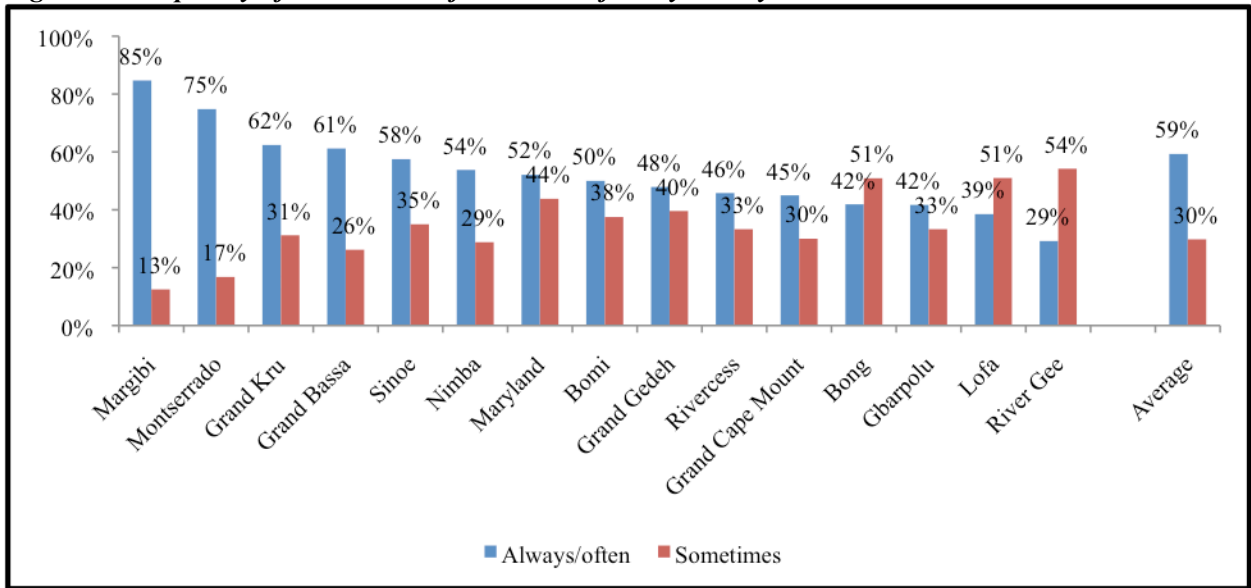
How best to deal with the land distribution problem?

Perhaps it is recognition of the potential threat that land distribution poses to the peace and stability of the country that led the Liberian Government to pass an Act recently establishing a Land Commission.[1] The Liberia Afrobarometer survey provides some data on popular views about how to address the land distribution question. We asked about the best means for allocating access to land. A majority of Liberians support land ownership by means of purchase at prices set either by owners of the land, the national government or local government. About half (46 percent) of Liberians support land ownership by means of purchase at prices set by bona fide owners of the land. However, a large minority says the national or local government should redistribute land to citizens at subsidized prices (36 percent) or for free (5 percent). Only a small minority of Liberians (12 percent) thinks that land ownership should be through inheritance only (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Percentage Distribution of Management of Land Distribution
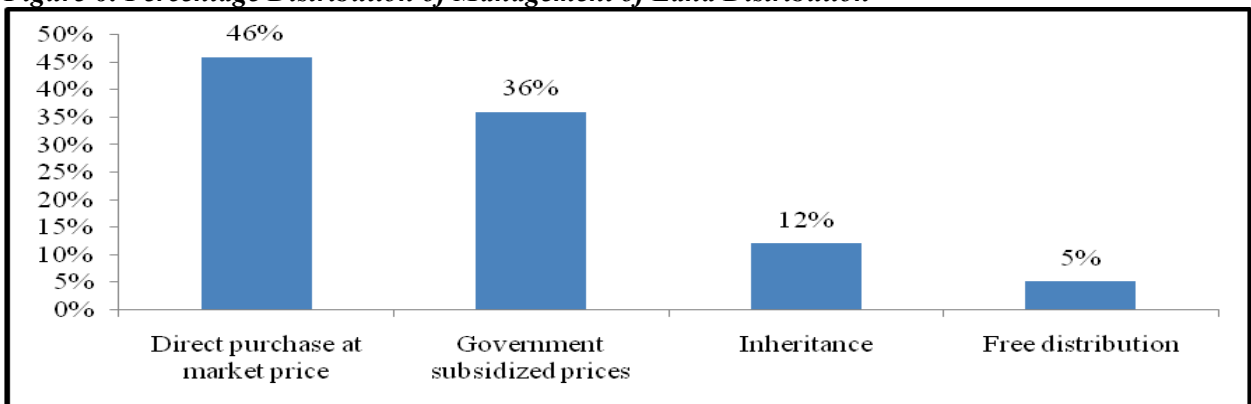
Question wording: In your opinion, what is the best way to manage land distribution in Liberia? (a) Through inheritance; (b) By means of purchase at any price set by the owners of land; (c) By means of purchase at affordable prices set by the national or local government; and (d) Through free distribution by national or local government.

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[1] The Land Commission Act aims to examine existing laws on the books and find lasting solutions to the crisis of land ownership and distribution in Liberia.

Conclusion:

Disputes over land are a major threat to peace and stability in Liberia. Many parts of Liberia continue to experience mounting ethnic tensions and violent conflicts as a result of intense struggle for land with the return of thousands of Liberian refugees. These tensions and conflicts are particularly prevalent in the urban areas.

A Land Commission Act has been enacted by the government to deal with land disputes. But some experts have argued that it will not be sufficient to fundamentally address the problem. An official of the European Commission in Liberia is reported to have suggested that "a platform needs to be created through which ordinary people are able to discuss issues of land." Afrobarometer findings suggest that whatever policy solutions the government comes up with to address the land question in the country must privilege market-based and state/government redistribution options over inheritance.