

Helping poor farmers grow money in Sierra Leone



Summary

Food insecurity remains a key concern in Sierra Leone. In this project, we embed social science research in an ambitious agribusiness scheme aimed at upgrading smallholder cocoa production in a post-war environment. We propose to study an intervention consisting of: (i) increasing the productivity of smallholder cocoa farming (e.g. trainings, hybrid seedlings, disease control), (ii) improving the governance of the cocoa value chain (e.g. block farming's introduction of long-term contracts), and (iii) improved access to financial services. The study provides insight into the direct impacts, such as cocoa production and productivity (quality and quantity), livelihoods (food security, food crop production, income, vulnerability) as well as indirect impacts on production relations (labour, informal agrarian institutions, culture and social cohesion). The overall objective is to enhance our understanding of how processes of globalization, commercialization and agricultural intensification affect local food security, the distribution of rents along the supply chain, and informal institutions.

Midterm summary of progress

The Ebola outbreak in West-Africa forced all consortium partners to halt their activities. During the crisis we took time to assist the policy community in their effort to understand and control the outbreak. Members of our team served actively on advisory panels. We wrote a blog post and later full paper stressing the need for a community centred approach in combatting the disease and describing some of the social pathways of transmission (see <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0003567>).

In February 2016 the consortium partners restarted their activities. AMS BV has entered into partnerships with local communities for proposed locations. On these locations new cocoa plantations will be created. The first seedlings were planted in May. To properly assess the effect of these plantations, the research team has collected quantitative data on 1400 households, in 31 villages. By examining how the livelihoods of these people evolve over the project's life span we can assess the impact of the project. In this way we can contribute to new and more efficient modes of food production. The baseline survey results confirm the potential for cash crop farming in Sierra Leone. Current cocoa farms are small scale, and yields are low (92 kg/ha). Investors expect that yields up to 1000kg/ha are possible given market conditions and soil quality.