

Factsheet final findings Global Challenges Programme Call 1



Helping poor farmers grow money in Sierra Leone

Summary

Food insecurity remains a key concern in post-war Sierra Leone. This project embeds social science research in agribusiness schemes aimed at changing smallholder production. The overall objective is to enhance the understanding of how development aid and processes of globalization and commercialization affect local food security, the distribution of rents and informal institutions. To do so, the project proposes a new theoretical framework and applies its insights to recent changes in local economies in Sierra Leone, including donor driven conservation projects and large scale commercial investments in agriculture. As a result of the Ebola outbreak during the project period, we also researched how local institutions and behaviour were key to understanding both the spread of the disease and its elimination. Our overall finding is that local communities must be offered significant control over decision making, whether private-sector for-profit initiatives or government health regulations to control deadly diseases.

Final Research Findings

We argue that that development strategies have thus far failed in Western Africa because the many challenges afflicting the area have yet to be explored and understood from the perspective of stake-holders in local institutions. With a particular focus on Sierra Leone we propose a new institutional theory, test deductions against evidence, and propose a reset for rural development policy. Based on years of multidisciplinary field research in the domain of rural development, local governance, and nature conservation, we show how institutions are key to understanding structural transformation of poor agrarian economies.

A core strand of our empirical work focusses on land use changes away from smallholder food production to cash crops and land consolidation. Core constraints for farmers to themselves switch to profitable cash crops, such as cocoa, are lack of access to labour and cash for inputs (fertilizer, tools) and crop diseases.

To understand the recent surge of foreign investments on local economies, we show how such investments, requiring abundant labour, can destabilise local labour mobilization and land-management arrangements. Specifically, for a large-scale sugarcane plantation, we document a sharp increase in deforestation. For local farm households we see large reductions in agricultural output and incomes as a result of loss of access to land and labour. At the same time, company labourers benefit, but as a result community inequality increases, further destabilising complex and sometimes hidden inter-household modes of social security.

In addition, we show how development aid aimed to boost livelihoods, can have unintended consequences. For example, as aid relaxes binding constraints in agriculture, deforestation increases due to increases in land use clearance for farming. We have also documented how easily local enthusiasm for large-scale foreign land investment can be turned to frustration and opposition, when they, for example do not take enough time and effort to distribute land rents fairly. Honest intentions are not enough; these intentions have to be widely seen, locally, to be fair in their effects.

During the research period, Sierra Leone saw the outbreak of Ebola which engulfed the country during 2014-2015. We refocussed part of the project to draw out lessons about the crisis. A core insight pertains the importance of local responses to the crisis. We show how local leaders and changed behaviour by their people was a core contributor in helping to end the disease. In addition, where international efforts to stop the disease incorporated local institutions in response efforts, they were markedly more successful.

Synthesizing these results teaches us an important lesson. Interventions, whether by foreign investors, NGOs or policy makers, need to be done with careful regard to local institutions, and this requires acquisition of new data and deployment of local expertise. Our work shows overall and across sectors – government and business - that interventions which fail to pay attention to how local institutions work are compromised. The challenge is to find new and smart ways to incorporate these institutions, otherwise success will remain limited.

Messages to

A) Actors from private sector:

Land investments in Sierra Leone are complicated. Finding suitable land and arranging contracts is challenging and potential investors should take adequate time and invest in learning for this process to be successful.

B) Civil society and practitioners' organizations:

Incorporating local institutions is essential for development programming and success of all kinds of interventions; changing gender relations of production require especial attention.

C) Policy makers:

Labour is a core constraint in Sierra Leone local economies because there is very limited understanding of how local land-holding institutions actually work. The biggest gap in knowledge concerns women's embedded rights in land, and how to motivate support from women's rights holders, or how properly to compensate for loss of rights.

Knowledge products

- Land use change outputs
 - a. [A Policy Brief](#) was given to stakeholders (Ministry of Agriculture, agricultural NGOs, private sector partners) in October 2016 that work on cocoa in Sierra Leone and summarizes the research findings so far.
 - b. This [Cocoa Presentation](#) was given at the National Cocoa/Coffee conference in Kenema, Sierra Leone in October 2016. It brought together stakeholders from the sectors but mostly from the government, NGOs and the private sector.
- Academic papers on land use change
 - a. Wilebore et al (2018) Unconditional Transfers and Tropical Forest Conservation. Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Sierra Leone, American Journal of Agricultural Economics, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajae/aay105>
 - b. Hofman et al, Local Economy effects of Large-Scale Agricultural Investments, working paper, presented at various conferences
 - c. Conservation impacts of REDD+: Evidence from Sierra Leone, working paper, presented at various conferences
- Synthesis book
 - a. Bulte, Richards, Voors (2018) Institutions and agrarian development: a new approach to West Africa, 2018, Palgrave, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98500-8>
- Book on Ebola
 - a. Richards (2016) Ebola: how a people's science helped end an epidemic, Zed Books, London, 2016, book ISBN: 978-1-78360-858-4
- Academic papers on Ebola
 - a. Richards et al (forthcoming) Trust, and distrust, of Ebola Treatment Centers: A case-study from Sierra Leone, PLoS ONE,
 - b. Van der Windt and Voors (forthcoming) Traditional Leaders and the 2014-2015 Ebola Epidemic, Journal of Politics
 - c. Ebola Response Team (2019) Responding to the Ebola virus disease outbreak in DR Congo: when will we learn from Sierra Leone? The Lancet 2019 DOI: 10.1016/s0140-6736(19)31211-5
 - d. Richards A matter of grave concern? Charles Jedrej's work on Mende sodalities, and the Ebola crisis. Critical African Studies, 2016| journal-article DOI: 10.1080/21681392.2016.1099021
 - e. Richards et al (2014) Social Pathways for Ebola Virus Disease in Rural Sierra Leone, and Some Implications for Containment, Plos NTD, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0003567>

Knowledge networks

- The project team regularly attended meetings of the cocoa working group in Sierra Leone. This brought together the private sector, government and NGOs that work on cocoa.
- Presentation at LANDac conference (2017), WUR Economics Seminar series (2017), World Bank Land and Poverty Conference Washington (2017), Center for the Study of African

Co-creation

The interactive regular workshops with programme stakeholders were useful in generating buy-in, adapting research design and enhance research uptake. Working together closely with Theobroma and AMS BV allowed us to have a firsthand look at how business operates in difficult environments such as in Sierra Leone. It also helped us formulate research questions and identify constraints. In the process we have engaged many other stakeholders who were not originally in the consortium. For example, we worked with a local NGO, to evaluate how their programme aimed at conserving the Gola Rainforest National Park, influenced surrounding communities and conservation outcomes. This has deepened our understanding on the necessary conditions for interventions to be successful.

The interdisciplinary nature of our research was crucial for coming to these insights. Using a diagnostic approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods was fruitful. Qualitative work is also enabling us to identify mechanisms and pathways, deepening the understanding of our findings from quantitative work.

Future research and activities

We aim to deepen our understanding of within-village processes that affect investments in land. Specifically, we assess gender and access to land. Furthermore, the project team will work with partners along the value to disseminate research findings.

Consortium Partners

- [Wageningen UR – Development Economics Group \(NL\)](#)
- [Njala University \(Sierra Leone\)](#)
- [Theobroma International BV \(NL\)](#)
- Agroproduce Management Services Ltd. (AMS) (Sierra Leone)

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Project website

[F&BKP Research Project page](#)