

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 embedded social science research in agribusiness schemes aimed at changing smallholder production. The overall objective was 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, part of the research was directed to examining how local institutions and behaviour were key to understanding both the spread of the disease and its elimination. The 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

Based on multi-disciplinary field research in the domain of rural development, local governance, and nature conservation, this project shows how institutions are key to understanding structural transformation of poor agrarian economies.

The project highlights how foreign investments, requiring labour, can destabilize local labour mobilization and land-management arrangements. Specifically, for a large-scale sugarcane plantation, a sharp increase in deforestation was documented. For local farm households, large reductions in agricultural output and incomes are seen as a result of loss of access to land and labour. Company labourers benefit, and as a result community inequality increases, further destabilizing complex and sometimes hidden inter-household modes of social security.

In addition, the project shows how development aid, aimed to boost livelihoods, can have unintended consequences. It is documented how easily local enthusiasm for large-scale foreign land investment can be turned into frustration and opposition when they, for example, do not take enough time and effort to distribute land rents fairly.

A core insight during the Ebola outbreak pertains the importance of local responses to the crisis. It is shown how local leaders and behaviour were core contributors in helping end the disease. In addition, where international efforts to stop the disease incorporated local institutions in response efforts, they were markedly more successful.

Outcomes achieved

One direct practical outcome achieved was through contributions during the Ebola crisis. The research consortium's work showed early on that a contagious disease can be fought more successfully if the population has confidence in the healthcare system and leaders. These insights helped change the containment strategies the government was implementing, towards local, small scale Ebola centres that were more trusted and effective in containing the disease.

The project collaborated closely with a nature conservation NGO around a large National Park. A major collective outcome was achieved when the Gola Rainforest National Park received international status as an accredited REDD+ project, allowing the park to sell carbon credits at the voluntary carbon market allowing an income stream of about EUR 1m per year. As such the park is less dependent on donor funding.

Messages to

A) Actors from private sector:

Land investments in Sierra Leone are complicated since finding suitable land and arranging contracts is challenging. Therefore, 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 requires special 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

Synthesis book

- "[Institutions and agrarian development: a new approach to West Africa, Palgrave](#)", by Bulte, Richards, Voors, *Part of the Palgrave Studies in Agricultural Economics and Food Policy book series (AEFP)* (2018)

Academic papers on land use change

- "[Unconditional Transfers and Tropical Forest Conservation. Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Sierra Leone](#)", by Wilebore et al., *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* (2018)
- "[Local Economy effects of Large-Scale Agricultural Investments](#)", by Hofman et al., *Working paper, presented at various conferences* (2020)

Ebola

- "[Ebola: how a people's science helped end an epidemic](#)", by Richards, *Zed Books*, London, book ISBN: 978-1-78360-858-4, (2016)
- "[Responding to the Ebola virus disease outbreak in DR Congo: when will we learn from Sierra Leone?](#)", by the Ebola Response Team, *The Lancet* (2019)
- "[Traditional Leaders and the 2014-2015 Ebola Epidemic](#)", by Van der Windt and Voors, *Journal of Politics* (forthcoming).

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 Economies Conference Oxford (2018), Biodiversity and Economics for Conservation Conference (2019)

Co-creation

The interactive regular workshops with programme stakeholders were useful in generating buy-in, adapting research design and enhancing research uptake. For researchers from Wageningen University to work together closely with Theobroma and Agroproduce Management Services Ltd. (AMS) allowed the research team to have a firsthand look at how business operates in difficult environments such as in Sierra Leone. It also helped to formulate research questions and identify constraints. In the process the project engaged many other stakeholders who were not originally in the consortium. For example, 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 the understanding on the necessary conditions for interventions to be successful.

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

Future research and activities

The consortium aims to deepen the understanding of within-village processes that affect investments in land. Specifically, gender and access to land were assessed. 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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