

## **Abstract**

Sierra Leone has recently emerged from a long period of political instability and civil war, and is ranked among the world's poorest countries. Thousands of displaced people are in the process of returning to their villages to rebuild their mainly farming-based livelihoods, and many are growing food crops for the first time in a decade. With pressure on food production increasing in rural areas, the inland valley swamps have been identified by the government as a vital resource for sustaining rural livelihoods and achieving food security through the production of rice and other commodities. However, previous government policies directed at enhanced wetland production have largely failed to achieve their goals, and have been criticised for neglecting the institutional challenges of development. Drawing on recent fieldwork carried out in two rural communities in the Eastern Province, this paper considers how institutional arrangements function in Sierra Leone's swamp wetlands, and explores how stresses associated with a post-conflict environment are shaping land-use decisions and mediating access to resources in new ways. The findings of the enquiry have implications for Sierra Leone's recently adopted commitment to decentralisation, a move that has, in theory, seen the state strengthen its position at the local level, and will allegedly create new spaces for increased interaction between state agencies, traditional leaders and communities. Two institutional challenges are examined – access to land and access to labour – that must be addressed if decentralised reforms to resource management are to be effective for wetland rice production. The analysis concludes by considering one recent initiative at the forefront of efforts to decentralise the Ministry of Agriculture, the 'Agricultural Business Unit' (ABU) initiative, to elucidate some of the challenges faced in post-conflict wetland rehabilitation.

**Keywords:** Wetland food production, post-conflict, Sierra Leone, resource management

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