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New agricultural frontiers in post-conflict Sierra Leone? Exploring institutional challenges for wetland management in the Eastern Province

roy.maconachie@manchester.ac.uk

Roy Maconachie[1]

[1] **Institute for Development Policy and Management (IDPM), School of Environment and Development, Humanities Bridgeford Street, University of Manchester**

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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

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

Although the potential for wetland rice production in Sierra Leone's inland valley swamps has been appreciated and encouraged by colonial and post-colonial governments for well over 100 years (Lamin et al. 1999), the success of such initiatives has a very chequered history. Previous government policies directed at wetland utilisation in Sierra Leone have been largely technocratic, and have tended to neglect the wider institutional challenges of development. Over the last forty years especially, there have been various attempts to establish a number of 'package-driven' interventions to develop wetlands for rice and vegetable growing, the majority of which have met with resounding failure. Of particular note, during the 1970s, the World Bank funded a number of Integrated Agricultural Development Projects (IADPs) in the country, with swamp development as a major objective. The Eastern Area IADP was the first such project, focussing on the perceived potential of inland valley swamps in the Eastern Province. Other initiatives followed, but overall success was limited, due in large part to a lack of knowledge of indigenous production systems and institutions among developers (Airey et al. 1979; Richards, 1985), as well as substantial expenses associated with input delivery. With severe disruption due to civil war throughout the 1990s, little research or wetland development has been carried out by the government or donors since these initial projects were undertaken.

In the present post-war period, however, both concerns for food security and the quest to enhance wetland rice production have once again returned to centre stage. Sierra Leone's economy and quality of life deteriorated rapidly during the protracted conflict of the 1990s, when many rural people were forced to flee from their homes due to attacks by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Widespread forced out-migration left much of the countryside abandoned, so that many farms were completely deserted for prolonged periods of time. More than 500,000 farm families were displaced by the insurgency, and agricultural production was so severely dislocated that by 2001, only 20 percent of the annual rice requirement (the staple food) was produced domestically (EIU, 2002). Since 2001, some 543,000 displaced persons have returned to their mainly rural home areas to begin the process of rebuilding their livelihoods, which are heavily orientated around agriculture (UN, 2004): although official statistics remain notoriously poor, an estimated 75 percent of the population continues to rely on subsistence farming as their primary livelihood activity (GoSL, 2004a). It was the rural poor who suffered most from the war (Richards, 1996), and a concerted effort is urgently needed to strengthen community cohesion and institutions, in order to rehabilitate rural livelihoods and restore food production systems. Food security remains a major concern throughout the country, and much of the rural population, despite efforts to restore their livelihoods, remains vulnerable and dependent on food aid.

Recent discussions with government policymakers in the capital, Freetown, suggest that there is once again a sense of urgency to increase the productivity of the inland valley swamps, in the hope of reducing rice deficiencies and alleviating poverty. In his inauguration speech in July 2002, President Kabbah (2002) vowed that his government would focus on achieving food security and agricultural sustainability within a decentralised system, which would rebuild institutions and improve governance. By October 2002, the framework for a major five-year agricultural sector rehabilitation project had been prepared for the government by the African Development Bank (ADB) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The preparation report for the project prioritised the rehabilitation of wetlands as the key to achieving food security, with the aim of rehabilitating 15,000 hectares (ha) of wetland swamps in the most affected and major producing districts (FAO/ADB, 2002). As food security pressures have continued to mount in the post-conflict period, wetlands have increasingly appeared to become 'new agricultural frontiers', endowed with rich, seasonally inundated soils that are

important farming resources. The Ministry of Agriculture has further stressed the potential for the development of enhanced wetland rice production – particularly in the inland valley swamps, which cover some 600,000 ha and are widely scattered throughout the country – as a key government policy (GoSL, 2004a).

Previous government interventions, such as the IADPs during the 1970s, embraced a vision of making the country self-sufficient in rice production through the introduction of large-scale wetland schemes that featured input-intensive foreign technology, but the technology proposed often proved impractical or uneconomic for small farmers. Many policies to promote swamp development have misunderstood the rationale of African farming practices (Richards, 1985), and run contrary to the objectives of small farmers. Detailed research has demonstrated how small producers selectively adopt new technology to sustain subsistence production through 'stepwise' innovation that emphasises an incremental approach and incorporates indigenous knowledge and strategies, showing how many of the agricultural input 'packages' offered to small farmers have been highly inappropriate to their needs (Dries, 1991; Knickel, 1992; Weatherhead, 1984). Other studies have documented how government-sponsored wetland irrigation schemes have introduced major institutional, social and technical changes to local farming systems, as traditional tenure systems have often been ignored (Brautigam, 1992). In short, there is significant evidence to suggest that in the past, many local people reacted unfavourably to government policies directed towards wetland improvement, particularly in cases where they failed to understand the dynamics of farming systems, or did not allow for the adaptation of traditional cultivation methods and practices.

Although the ADB has not yet started disbursing funds for the government's proposed agricultural sector rehabilitation project, project activities are expected to start in 2007. The project aims to support wetland farmers with the incremental costs of rehabilitation by providing the credit necessary to purchase seeds, inputs, tools and other materials. Indeed, at the most basic level, it is true that these agricultural inputs are urgently needed to help farmers in rehabilitation activities, such as clearing over-grown bushes, levelling wetland sites, re-excavating drains, and building bunds to improve water control. However, as has been noted, the history of input package approaches to wetland agriculture in Sierra Leone is marked with discouraging and well-documented failures. All too often, as Scoones et al. (2005: 2) remark, 'the argument for technical inputs is derived from generic "expert assumptions", rather than a detailed analysis of farm-level constraints, in particular livelihood settings'.

In exploring the role that enhanced inland valley swamp rice production could play in government food security strategies, this paper investigates the relationship between institutional arrangements that mediate wetland access and utilisation on the one hand, and new post-conflict livelihood challenges that rural communities face on the other. Building on previous detailed work that explores West African rice farming systems (Johnny et al. 1981; Richards, 1985, 1986), it examines the social, political and economic dynamics of wetland cultivation in the present post-war period, and engages with a broader literature on land relations and resource competition in sub-Saharan Africa, concerned with how social relationships shape access to resources (e.g. see Berry, 1989, 1993; Peters, 2004). While some observers have argued that institutional relations and practices around land and landed resources are flexible, negotiable and 'socially embedded' (Berry, 2002; Odgaard, 2003), others have pointed out that these relations are also 'embedded in unequal social relationships' (Peters, 2004: 304). Although there is little disputing that many individuals are able to negotiate and obtain access to farming resources in creative and often ingenious ways, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that in the Sierra Leonean context, high levels of poverty, coupled with intensifying social differentiation in the countryside, are making wetland farming increasing challenging for the majority of farmers.

The paper draws on recent field-based research undertaken in two rural communities in the Eastern Province – Kayima (Kono District) and Panguma (Kenema District) – both of which suffered badly during the war, and are currently in the process of rebuilding wetland management institutions and regimes (see Figure 1). The analysis identifies some important considerations which the government and donors must take on board if an effective agricultural sector rehabilitation project or visions of decentralised development are to materialise. Above all, in the case of Sierra Leone, it is the institutional processes that regulate the social relations of production that appear to determine whether or not a farmer is able to successfully negotiate access to wetland resources, and mobilise the labour required to transform them. Neither agricultural production and investment nor the constraints that farmers face in their endeavours to rehabilitate wetlands can be understood outside these social and institutional relations.

Figure 1: Study sites in Sierra Leone
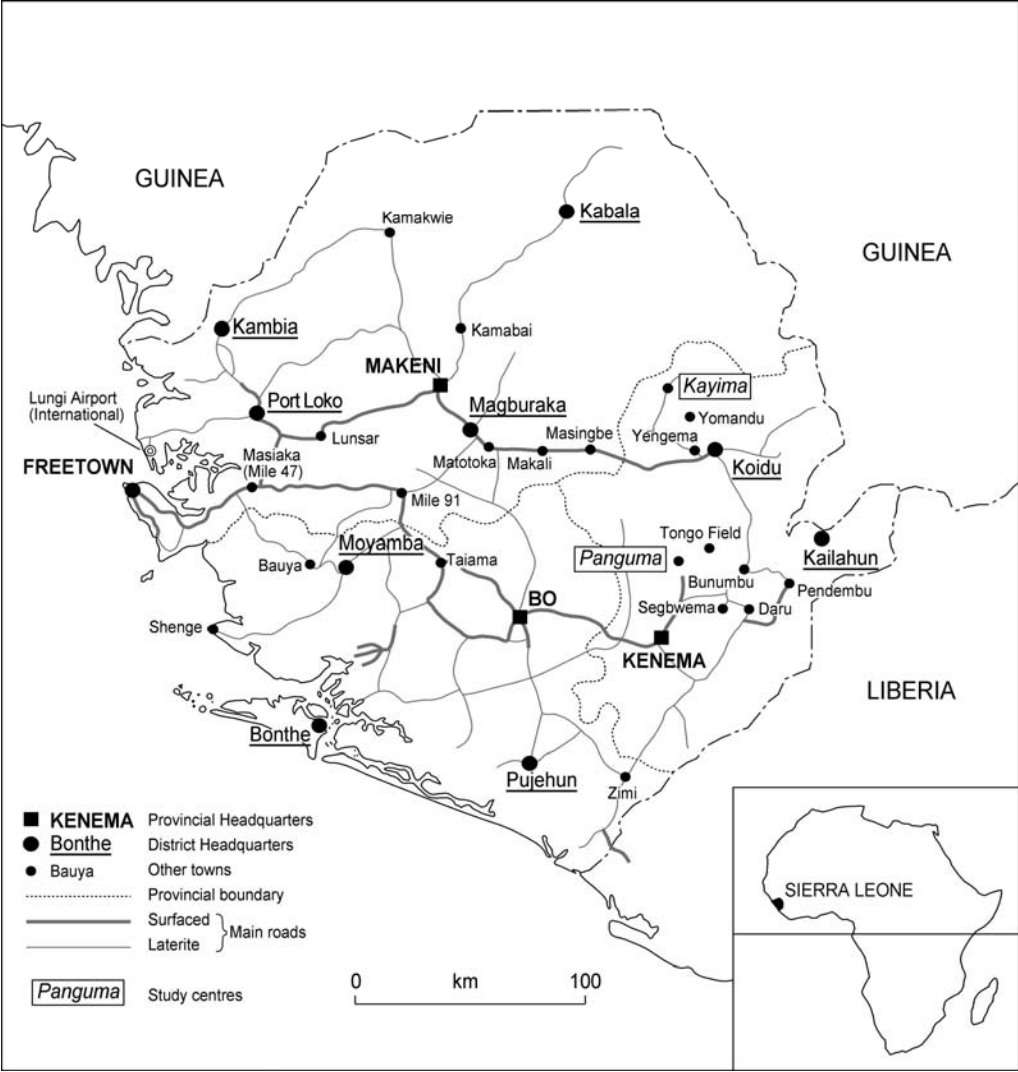
The paper begins by briefly reviewing recent definitions of institutions, and locates the discussion in a post-conflict context. It then examines the dynamics of wetland development and utilisation in the rural economy of Sierra Leone, exploring its continuity and change from

pre-colonial times to the present. Here, the discussion focuses on institutional processes associated with negotiations over two main productive resources – access to wetlands themselves and access to labour. Although negotiations over both of these resources frequently involve conflict and struggle, and are often steeped in micro-politics, the means to access labour, and not the wetlands themselves, remains the principal constraint on production. The paper then considers the implications of these institutional challenges for the government's ambitious wetland rehabilitation programme, including the recent devolution of power and responsibilities within the Ministry of Agriculture, and discusses current attempts to deal with the 'labour issue'. It concludes by stressing the urgent need for a better understanding of the political and social relationships that continue to shape and define the institutional processes that regulate wetland management opportunities and abilities, if wetlands are to contribute to sustainable, decentralised development and post-conflict food security.

2. Conceptualising wetland institutions in post-conflict Sierra Leone

In recent years, a burgeoning body of work has emerged which examines the notion of 'institutions' as a social practice in relation to natural resource management (Berry, 1989; Leach et al. 1999). In this context, the term 'institution' is not primarily used to refer to the organisations involved in natural resource management, but rather is employed in a wider sociological sense to denote 'regularised patterns of behaviour between individuals and groups in society' (Leach et al. 1997: 5). Institutions are thus the formal and informal mechanisms that play a defining role in shaping a group's access to natural resources, and may also determine who has the rights to resources within that group (Watson, 2001). However, other observers have also pointed out that it can be problematic to view institutions merely as rules themselves, since the distinction between rules and social practices can, at times, become blurred (Leach et al. 1997). Since different social actors command varying degrees of organisational capacity when it comes to resource use, the informal rules and regulations associated with institutions are ultimately about power. In this light, Davies (1997: 24) notes, 'institutions are the social cement which link stakeholders to access to capital of different kinds to the means of exercising power and so define the gateways through which they pass on the route to positive or negative [livelihood] adaptation'.

While a number of recent studies (e.g. Adams, 1993; Dixon, 2003) carried out elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa have drawn attention to the critical role that social institutions play in wetland management regimes, other research has demonstrated that these institutional arrangements are not static, and are subject to change over time, especially during periods of political upheaval or uncertainty (Kepe & Scoones, 1999). It has been suggested that dynamic, resilient institutions may play a fundamental role in mitigating livelihood vulnerability often associated with conflict and population displacement (Watson, 2001). However, in societies that have been affected by violent conflict, there are often complex challenges in rebuilding social capital, which remains vital in operationalising collective action and mobilising community-driven development (Richards et al. 2004). Of critical significance in the case of wetland management is the way in which the social networks and relationships of reciprocity that exist between farmers are reshaped by more powerful actors, and affect the character and strength of community-based institutions.

Customary multiple-use wetland regimes are based upon experience accumulated over generations by local communities. Wetland resource access and control is shaped by the intersection of various institutions, and the relationships of power and authority that exist between them. For example, discussions with wetland managers at both study sites in the Eastern Province revealed that at the micro-level there was an informal code of conduct used

to guide management practices but that these rules were frequently influenced by institutional practices at wider scales. The 'customary' laws of the chieftaincy or 'native administration', the local government policies concerning land management, the agricultural policies of the line ministries, and the conditionalities of international donor agencies, all influence, directly or indirectly, approaches to community-based wetland management. The broader backdrop of a post-conflict environment, and all of the institutions associated with post-war reconstruction, also influence people-environment relationships at the micro-level. As has been noted by Clover (2004), because institutions are often distorted during times of protracted conflict, there are significant challenges in reshaping them into fully operational and soundly-managed bodies in a post-war recovery period. Rebuilding governance mechanisms, which are both accepted by, and accountable to, local populations, takes considerable time and resources. However, understanding institutional processes and appreciating how patterns of resource use may be outcomes of negotiation between various social actors with different priorities, remains at the heart of exploring the politics of resource use in wetland environments.

The analysis presented in this paper has particular relevance for the significant political and institutional reform that is currently taking place in Sierra Leone. In recent years, a number of researchers have called for a more nuanced and robust understanding of the way in which institutional processes at different scales inter-link and impact upon each other (Leach et al. 1997, 1999). This observation appears to have marked significance for Sierra Leone and its current vision of decentralised agricultural rehabilitation. Brown et al. (2006) argue that for all the destruction and disruption caused by the war, its resolution may have opened up new spaces for challenging and changing pre-existing social rules and institutionalised practices. However, they also note that in many respects, Sierra Leonean society and politics have proven to be much less malleable than many observers had initially assumed. Evidence from this research suggests that many of the patrimonial institutions, practices and networks that were instrumental in shaping natural resource access and control during the pre-conflict era may have been preserved, and in some cases even strengthened, in the post-conflict period. Ultimately, the findings from the two case study areas may inform ongoing debates concerning both wetland agriculture and decentralised natural resource management, and reveal patterns and processes which could have wider relevance for governance reform in Sierra Leone, and other regions of sub-Saharan Africa.

3. Post-conflict challenges for wetland management in Sierra Leone: Access to land and labour

The fieldwork on which this section of the paper is based focuses on how institutional arrangements function in a series of differentiated wetland sites in the Eastern Province near Kayima and Panguma, the region where the first IADP was established in the 1970s. Between May and July 2004, June and September 2005, and November and December 2006, primary data were collected at the community and lower government levels through a programme of participatory sessions held onsite in wetland areas. Participant observation also played a key role in the research, and close contact was maintained with wetland labour groups in both communities over the course of the fieldwork period. Crucial insight into the institutional challenges faced by local actors was gained by working with labour groups during the preparation of their wetland farms, as well as attending community and wetland group meetings. Focus group discussions and interviews were also conducted with key informants, which included a wide range of wetland management stakeholders. Further interviews were carried out with paramount chiefs, district councillors, and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) and government staff in the towns of Koidu (near Kayima) and Kenema (near Panguma). Drawing on this fieldwork, the discussion that follows examines the institutional

processes associated with negotiations over two main productive wetland resources: (1) access to land; and (2) access to labour.

3.1 Access to wetlands

In terms of production, land availability in Sierra Leone is often described as being one of the least constraining factors. The role that land tenure systems assume in constraining agricultural productivity is frequently played down by critics: it is believed by many commentators that 'customary' or indigenous systems have generally accommodated the needs of farmers seeking access to land. Initial consultations with farmers in this study predominantly confirm this observation. According to local actors themselves, land appears to have always been plentiful in the Eastern Province, and farmland is easily acquired and easily abandoned. However, detailed discussions with wetland managers in both Kayima and Panguma also revealed that gaining access to wetland sites can be a highly political process that is shaped by an individual's social relationships. An appreciation that struggles over land and other productive resources can thus be of a political nature provides sufficient reason to question many of the 'blueprint' solutions to land issues that have so frequently been prescribed in the past. Although many commentators (e.g. Turay, 2006; Williams, 2006) have noted that land reform in Sierra Leone is both necessary and possible, 'standardised' remedies such as tenure reform, may well not be enough to address many of these land access considerations on their own. As Bassett (1993: 4-5) noted some time ago:

> The notion that tenure reform is the panacea to Africa's agrarian ills is an old idea that ignores critical social dynamics that strongly influence how productive resources are acquired, utilized, contested, and immobilized…Land access, control and management strategies are more often than not embedded in social, political and economic structures that vary and change over time.

This observation resonates clearly with Berry's (1988) pioneering work on the changing patterns of land control in sub-Saharan Africa, which suggests that it is social identity that determines access to land, and the definition of property rights frequently hinges on the demarcation of social boundaries. The author argues that 'exploitation operates through the subordination of some people within access-defining groups, rather than on the complete exclusion of people from ownership of the means of production' (*ibid.*: 63). Elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, a number of well-documented case studies (e.g. Bassett & Crummey 1993; Peters, 2004) have also demonstrated how power relationships can become infused in the process of obtaining and defending rural land rights, highlighting how access to land has become increasingly difficult for certain groups, such as women, pastoralists and the poor.

In Sierra Leone, rural lands are generally abundant and held under various forms of communal tenure, with the paramount chief serving as the ultimate custodian of the land. Unruh and Turay (2005) note that in Sierra Leone, there are as many different forms of customary tenure law as there are language groups, but in most places, male family and lineage heads representing the 'original' settlers of an area appear to have control over land. In such situations, the involvement of higher ranking elites, such as the paramount chief, appears to be restricted to validating the rights of those lineage heads to make decisions in relation to land, to arbitrate between them, to make grants of unallocated or forfeited land, and to become involved in grants to non-natives and 'strangers' under the provisions of the *Provinces Land Act (Cap 122)* (Williams, 2006).

In rural areas, swamps become privately held 'property' when occupied and worked by a 'native' family for a series of unbroken years. Once a family or group is established on a certain wetland site, plantation crops, such as coffee, cocoa, kola nuts, or bananas, are

planted around the margins of the swamp to demarcate private family 'ownership' and secure tenure. However, although the customary laws that regulate access to wetland sites appear to be clearly defined, land tenure systems have also been known to exhibit a certain degree of flexibility. In some cases, as an early study by Richards (1986: 61) in the Mende region of the country suggests, land rights and even their associated family histories have actually been 'bought' and 'sold' in the past. In other instances, the physical 'ownership' of a swamp may not actually change hands, but its possession or usufructory rights can change, as land is circulated through inheritance, loan, lease or pledge (Bassett & Crummey 1993).

During the course of interviews for this research, several informants noted how it was common practice for a young man to negotiate access to a wetland site through his wife's family, if he did not already have a family swamp of his own. Typically, a token gift referred to as 'kola', which usually comprises a small portion of the rice harvest, labour, or sometimes money, is offered to the land 'owner' in exchange for access to the swamp. Similar arrangements take place in other West African countries, and as Berry (1993: 33) points out, in communities where status and wealth accrue to those who can attract dependents or followers, '"strangers"' have generally been welcomed into rural societies – as wives, clients, "blood brothers" settlers or disciples – because they enhance the prestige and the labour force of the head of household, kin group or community'.

As individuals mediate access to the resources necessary to engage in swamp agriculture, negotiations are thus shaped and refashioned by their relationships with other actors. Jackson (2005: 53) points out that although achieving 'native' status generally means rights to land, residence, the law and political representation, the definition of 'native' remains unwritten and is left to the discretion of the chiefs. Traditional authorities thus remain an extremely powerful presence in rural society, and may play a direct role in determining who has access to wetland resources and who does not. For example, in the words of the Town Chief of Kayima:

> The first inhabitants here had to be strong to claim ownership over a piece of swampland. But as those strong family members have weakened or passed away, the remaining family members may no longer be well equipped to care for the land. If a family becomes unable to do the work [on that swamp], the land can be allocated to somebody else who is more able to do so…It is the chief's job to oversee any reallocations of land[1].

The point being made here is that the process of acquiring and defending land rights is often steeped in micro-politics and based on power relationships, among and between members of social groups. These institutional challenges not only have ramifications for those who wish to acquire access to wetlands, but also have implications for developing commercial enterprises in the countryside more broadly, where there are similar issues concerning the ownership and use of land. The influence of paramount chiefs as custodians of the land has been critical in controlling access to rural resources, and can obstruct the access of local councils or other investors to productive land, especially land that is rich in natural resources (Jackson, 2007). For example, the control of mining land for gold, diamonds and rutile rests to a large extent with traditional authorities, and mining investment cannot take place without the consent of the chiefs (Jackson, 2005).

A recent World Bank-funded social assessment study carried out by Richards et al. (2004) suggests that there is a growing cleavage between the ruling classes, dependent lineages and 'strangers' in rural Sierra Leone, which is maintained by the power that the rural elite exercise

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[1] Personal communication, Sahr Umaru Kasewa, Town Chief of Kayima, Kayima, 01.07.2005.

over marriage systems and youth labour. It suggests that current notions of an 'agrarian crisis' are therefore largely institutional, with the rights of land-owning elite being over-protected, and those of 'commoners' being under-protected. As the authors note, 'a stranger will be given land for annual food-crop farming for a token payment only so long as he meets the customary expectations of landowners' (*ibid.*: 52).

In many respects, as has been widely argued in other African contexts (see Chanock, 1991; Mamdani, 1996), 'customary' tenure in Sierra Leone today largely remains a construction of colonial rule. As in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, one of the key legacies of colonialism in Sierra Leone was the development of a dual system of land tenure arrangements that has emanated from policies of indirect rule (see Mamdani, 1996 for a full articulation of his thesis of the 'bifurcated' state). The present-day Western Area (Freetown and environs) was originally established as a British Crown Colony, and was administered under 'European' laws. At the same time, the rest of the country (i.e. rural society) was administered as a British Protectorate under the jurisdiction of customary law and tradition. Two distinct systems developed under this colonial bifurcation, resulting in an artificially-created dichotomy between the urban and the rural, the 'modern' and the 'traditional', citizen and subject, and a dual set of laws relating to land. In short, many elements of this dualism have survived to this day; the chiefdom system itself is still strongly associated with the 'indirect rule' and 'native administration' of the colonial period, and most rural Sierra Leoneans continue to obtain their political and legal rights as 'natives' of chiefdoms rather than as citizens of the state.

This dichotomy, according to Mamdani (1996), has resulted in a form of 'decentralised despotism', whereby traditional leaders may benefit at the expense of their 'subjects'. In rural Sierra Leone, paramount chiefs are custodians of the land, and all decisions on contested land claims must go through the chief. Although, as Berry notes, traditional tenure systems may exhibit a degree of flexibility based on the fact that they are 'embedded' in social relationships, this must be understood in light of the fact that rural agrarian society in Sierra Leone remains highly unequal. Simply put, membership in a particular social group, or being a 'son or daughter of the soil' is, by itself, not always a sufficient condition for gaining and maintaining access to land. Some actors possess greater land management capabilities, in that they are better positioned to nurture important social relationships and draw more fully on networks, which may increase their capacity to farm and secure wetlands. Cleavages between groups may have been accentuated during the conflict in Sierra Leone, as more powerful actors were able to strengthen relationships with local-level elites and accumulate assets in the wartime 'shadow economy'[2], while the situation of poorer households deteriorated further. As has been pointed out, an individual's status (age, gender, ethnic affiliations, economic position, etc.) can play a key role in the tenure building process (Bassett & Crummey, 1993; Watts, 1993). However, in post-conflict situations, the impact of war on social institutions and processes can further affect tenure-building relationships as kinship relationships unravel, exacerbating mistrust between groups and resulting in the breakdown of cooperation and the weakening of local governance structures (Clover, 2004).

In the aftermath of Sierra Leone's decade of war, the process of obtaining and defending access to swampland has become complicated and politicised in new ways. As increasing numbers of conflict-displaced residents return to their villages, new burdens and stresses are being encountered, particularly on key environmental resources, such as inland valley swamps. In both Kayima and Panguma, a number of ongoing court cases were noted, where overlapping claims to the same parcel of swampland were being made by different returnees. Decisions on these contested claims rest squarely under the authority of the paramount chief, and as Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and van Dijk (1999: 6) suggest, 'natural resources and

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[2] See Reno's (1995) discussion of the rise of the 'shadow state' in Sierra Leone.

land allocation are domains in which chiefs' nostalgic claims to authentic ritual power are effectuated in terms of real political power'. In some cases, however, as was revealed in discussions with the Chief Administrator of Kono District Council, Alice Bockerie Torto, the chiefs themselves have become implicated in land disputes, and have been reported to the District Council by the parties involved:

> The chief, or some member of the chief's family, may occupy a swamp…where there has been an unsettled claim. Maybe this is because the swamp has not been utilised by the rightful family for some years, perhaps due to the war. So a chief may step in and 'temporarily' take over, to undertake the cultivation of rice. If there are no plantation crops planted around the swamp, it may be difficult to prove 'ownership'. We have seen many disputes and court cases like this[3].

It would appear that such reports are not isolated incidents. A recent paper (Jackson, 2007) indicates that consultation exercises carried out by the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) during the reconstruction of the chieftaincy immediately after the war revealed systematic abuse of the system by chiefs. Jackson further notes that the Ministry of Local Government in Freetown continues to receive a significant number of complaints concerning the chiefs each day, many of which have to do with land issues. Ribot (2004: 31) has argued that in the course of negotiating their positions within the community, chiefs frequently fall back on notions of 'custom' and 'authenticity' by invoking 'ritual rights from the past'. Chiefs may use these positions to gain leverage within natural resource management and land allocation, as may well be the case in some recent disputes over wetlands.

3.2 Wetland utilisation: access to labour

In addition to customary tenureship arrangements, the informal institutions that regulate wetland labour also play an instrumental role in determining who has access to swamps, and who does not. While a number of observers have presumed that there is minimal social differentiation within the peasantry provided that land is plentiful, Mamdani (1996: 147) notes that land is but only one part of the production system, whose other key elements are labour and its 'implements'. In Sierra Leone's post-conflict scenario, where there is a pressing need to increase agricultural yields, wetlands appear to have become an extremely valuable asset for certain members of society, but only if they possess the capital, labour networks, and other resources necessary to transform them into food production sites. As the following discussion illustrates, it is, in essence, these social relations of production that appear to be critical to wetland cultivation, in that they regulate production by determining whether or not a farmer will be able to successfully mobilise and co-ordinate a labour group (Johnny et al. 1981).

In Mende (Panguma) and Kono (Kayima) regions of the country, it is still largely the case that the powerful ruling families who presently dominate rural society and have better access to much of the natural resource base, were historically the successful warrior groups. Discussions with village elders at both study sites revealed that initially, it was these powerful families who had large groups of followers, possessed the best access to labour supply, and had the ability to effectively manage the swamps and stake a claim to the land. Early work by Johnny et al. (1981: 614) suggests that in the past, these powerful actors typically controlled large household groups by 'providing physical protection, covering the expenses of marriage and litigation…taking responsibility for ritual and social needs…(and)…in the early colonial period…paying taxes for household members'. In exchange for these services, they suggest, household groups were obligated to provide labour for trade, military protection and farming

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[3] Personal communication, Alice Bockerie Torto, Chief Administrator of Kono District Council, Koidu, 12.7.2005.

activities. While such patron-client relationships undoubtedly have a long history in the Eastern Province, recent scholarly work also suggests that these power structures continue to be as strong as ever in present day rural society. A recent paper by Richards (2005) explores the agrarian dimensions of the conflict in Sierra Leone, and presents this dominant group as an elderly rural elite – a group whom Jackson (2007) refers to as a 'gerontocracy' – who, it is suggested, are the descendents of warlords who once controlled slave populations. The author argues that these unequal power relations are today maintained by various 'traditional' institutions, most notably the bridal and court systems, which are designed to coerce labour from the local population.

Today, it appears that many of these powerful groups continue to possess the most fertile and productive wetland sites in the most desirable locations and that heavy labour requirements continue to be a major factor in limiting wetland cultivation (Richards, 1996). Although these requirements vary greatly depending on local conditions, a study by Dingle (1984) carried out before the war estimated that in order to transform a 'virgin' swamp into an 'improved' swamp with a water control system, as many as 170-200 man-days per acre were needed. To put this into context, if this work was to be carried out by a single farmer on an average sized swamp alongside his or her normal farming practices, it would take at least three years to develop an acre of swamp. During the years of the civil war, however, much of the countryside was evacuated, and swamps were abandoned and lay dormant for prolonged periods, in most cases becoming completely overgrown with dense forest. Presently, the initial labour inputs required to re-develop wetland areas are enormous; the difficulty of mobilising the labour forces required to clear the land was an issue frequently raised by interviewed farmers. Interviews conducted in both Kayima and Panguma suggest that although there may physically be enough swampland available for all farmers to cultivate, the ability to utilise swamps to their full potential is generally restricted to the wealthier and better connected families, who possess the resources required to feed the labour groups, hire the labour, and own the tools required to work the land. The situation is clarified by one wetland farmer in Kayima:

> Many of the problems we face have to do with labour – for clearing, for developing water channels, for fencing or for building the farmhouse. There is never actually a problem finding enough people to make up a work group – labour is generally plentiful and available. The main challenge is that there are so few resources to go around now, and there is not enough food to do the work effectively. While some of the more well-established members of the community can mobilise or hire a work force, most of us cannot. We cannot afford the 'food for work' needed for the *boma* (work) group. This is especially difficult in the hungry season when we need the work most. Jumping the gap from June to September is the most difficult time of the year for us[4].

Wetland agriculture in Sierra Leone is characterised by a distinctly peaked labour profile (Figure 2). Traditionally, large reciprocal work gangs (referred to as *boma* groups in Kono and *kombi* groups in Mende) have been vital in undertaking a sequence of demanding farm activities which must take place within a brief window of opportunity in the agricultural cycle. Such institutional arrangements, either formal or informal, are based on a set of rules or procedures that have often developed progressively over time, and have been affirmed by community leaders and members (Blunt & Warren, 1996; Shivakumar, 2003). The co-ordination of activities within a community remains critically important to the management of

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[4] Personal communication, Tamba Soghbe, farmer, Kayima, 21.7.2005.

wetland resources, where one farmer's actions directly affect another's. In this respect, the formation of institutions that govern management behaviour is particularly vital, and reflects the need for co-ordination of activity in working towards a particular goal, which could perhaps not be fully achieved by individuals alone. Wetland agriculture, especially where drainage structures and water management are involved, is a prime example of a natural resource management activity requiring such co-ordinated effort. The fieldwork conducted for this paper suggests that where this element of co-ordination is absent, the management goals of wetland stakeholders are compromised, in that wetlands are not managed in a way that maximises or sustains their range of benefits.

Some respondents noted that a significant reduction in the availability of family farm labour over the years[5], and more recently, increased levels of poverty in the post-conflict period, had made wetland agriculture much more challenging. Fieldwork further revealed that even individuals who presently find themselves with formal access to sufficient swampland can still find themselves 'land poor', because they do not have access to the means necessary to set the labour cycle in motion (i.e. they lack the 'food for work' or the social capital). Considerable benefits appear to accrue to the farmer with the networks, social skills and opportunities to organise large working parties. This suggestion echoes Mamdani's (1987) analysis of 'the agrarian question' in Uganda, where smallholders possessing similar sized plots of land still frequently found themselves in different socio-economic positions, because some were 'implement' (and

hence labour) poor and others were not.

Figure 2: Seasonal profile of the wetland agricultural cycle
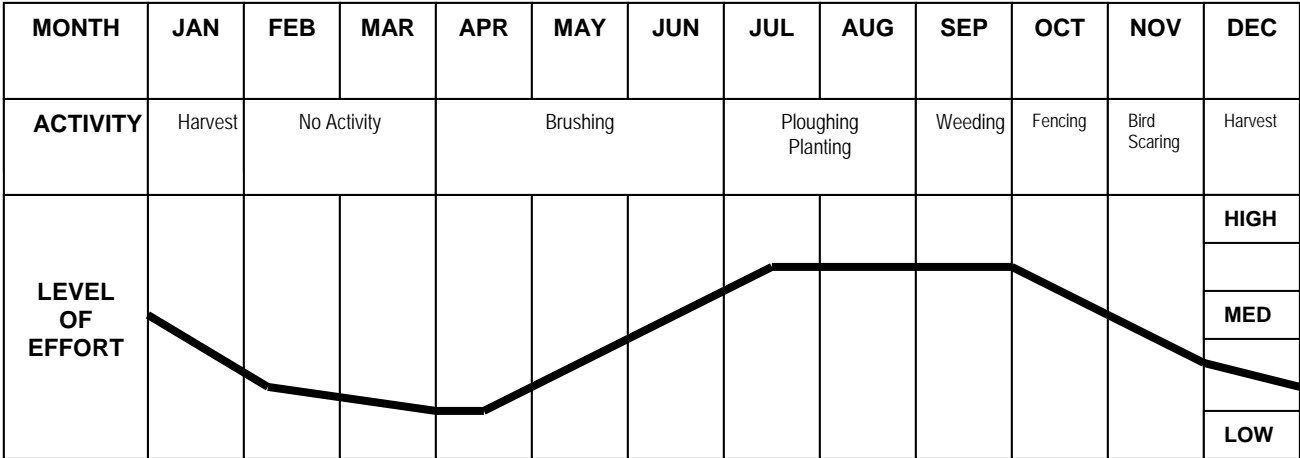
Source: Adapted from Temple (2006)

Fieldwork carried out for this study suggests that traditional farm labour patterns have been further challenged and fundamentally altered in the post-conflict scenario, as temporary off-

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[5] Little (1948) (cited in Johnny *et al.*, 1981) notes that during the 1950s in the Mende region of the country, a domestic unit of 40-50 persons working a household farm of 10-15 ha was considered to be the norm. Recent fieldwork near the Mende town of Panguma revealed that farm family units now rarely exceed 8-10 persons, although farm sizes were typically smaller.

farm labour migration has become increasingly common (Maconachie et al. 2006). Peters' (2006) recent account of the reintegration process in the diamondiferous region of Tongo Field (near Panguma) suggests that many ex-combatants have chosen to become full time miners, because they find the option of returning to their villages increasingly difficult. While many of these miners may fear retribution for the atrocities they committed during the war, Peters also suggests that some young men may now be looking to agriculture, and wetland development in particular, to escape pre-war violence and labour exploitation associated with diamond mining. However, interviews carried out for this paper did not reflect this finding. Rather, wetland cultivators in both Panguma and Kayima complained that farm labour had been drastically reduced as youths were being drawn away from agriculture, especially to nearby towns and diamond mining areas (Maconachie & Binns, 2007). In Panguma, structured interviews were conducted with 50 randomly sampled households, and 42 percent of those interviewed reported that there was at least one household member who engaged in seasonal mining work after the farm work was completed. While some (14 percent) believed that this link was positive and allowed farmers to reinvest diamond income into their farms, more (38 percent) demonstrated concern that farm labour had diminished greatly since youths now preferred to be full-time miners.

When the same structured interviews were carried out in Kayima, 78 percent of those surveyed indicated that either they or one of their family members were part-time miners during the dry season. A further 46 percent of households in Kayima believed that the number of youths who were now seasonal miners had increased since before the war. There were a number of explanations for this phenomenon. Most commonly, it was recognised that there was a desperate need for financial capital to re-invest in both farming activities and post-conflict reconstruction. While seasonal labour migration to the nearby mining regions may play a fundamental role in spreading livelihood risk by allowing individuals to 'straddle' different productive zones and generate much-needed income during uncertain times, it was also acknowledged that certain cultural changes had taken place since the war, which had increased mobility within the rural areas. For example, many youths reported that they had become more accustomed to moving about during the war, and a 'culture of mobility' had developed. In addition, however, it was reported that mobility had increased because a rift had developed between youths and community elders, such that many youths no longer felt any allegiance to the chiefs. Recent work by other researchers has reinforced this observation, and has convincingly argued that this division is not a new phenomenon, but is rather the product of a 'long-term crisis of agrarian institutions' – with labour exploitation by the rural elite at heart of the matter (Richards, 2005: 588).

Richards argues, it is highly likely that the agrarian tensions which continue to divide rural society in Sierra Leone reflect power abuses associated with rural custom. However, many wetland cultivators interviewed during this study also complained bitterly that the war had exacerbated their poverty and weakened their farming capabilities. It was acknowledged that being equally as important as possessing sufficient financial capital to farm was having strong access to social networks, the other key component necessary to activate the labour cycle. As Adger (2000) points out, a strong or empowered social capital with inherent adaptive capacity that promotes social resilience is increasingly seen as a pre-requisite to environmentally and socially sustainable natural resource management. In the pre-war period in the Eastern Province, those families with more material wealth at their disposal may have been better able to form patron-client relationships and consequently may have also possessed stronger social capital and the networks required to access labour. In the post-conflict scenario, however, it is apparent that relationships of trust and reciprocity between different social actors have been greatly challenged. As one farmer put it, 'the war has made us all poor now'.

Detailed structured interviews with a sample of community members[6] in both Panguma and Kayima revealed the extent to which the war had impacted upon reciprocal relationships, especially those to do with labour. Referring to Table 1, where a sub-set of the most popular responses is presented, a high degree of consensus is apparent in both communities that both poverty and the need to prioritise one's individual obligations have made reciprocal relationships increasingly difficult. Azarya (1994) notes that when resources become scarce or difficult to access, an individual's immediate needs take priority over any social contract which recognises the rights of others. As is most certainly the case in both study sites, the institutions that regulate wetland utilisation – including the so-called 'moral economy', or the range of redistributive processes which occur within communities – have become considerably challenged in the aftermath of the civil war. This has had drastic implications for reciprocal labour relationships, which are absolutely vital to swamp cultivation. In this light, there was general consensus in both communities that in the post-war period, reciprocal relationships now generally only existed within the immediate family network.

Table 1: Changing reciprocal networks and exchange mechanisms in the post-war period: summary of statements from interviews in Panguma and Kayima

Post-war changes in relationships of reciprocity mentioned in interview	% respondents who referred to issue	
	Panguma (n=50)	Kayima (n=50)
Poverty and a lack of resources have made it more difficult to engage in reciprocal farming relationships.	60	50
An individual's immediate needs take precedence over helping others.	38	36
Community trust has been damaged by violence and atrocities that took place during the war.	36	4
Population mobility during the war changed people's attitudes towards helping others, especially amongst the youth.	30	2
The war divided rural communities – especially elders and youths. People no longer pull together in times of need.	30	16
Helping relationships have been damaged by the chiefs. Chiefs have become hostile and have taken advantage of youths by levying excessive fines.	28	12
The war has made youths more independent and less willing to fulfil the demands of the chiefs.	26	8
Extended family assistance has become weaker following the war – immediate family assistance is the only kind of assistance that can be relied on now.	22	18

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[6] Before undertaking interviews, detailed maps were created of both communities to indicate the exact location of households, which became a vital element of the sampling frame. Each household was identified by a number, and a random sample of 50 households was then drawn in each community to ensure that a broad cross-section of society was represented. An approximately equal gender balance was maintained in the sample, and all respondents reported that they were currently involved in farming to some degree. In Panguma, 42 percent of the sample reported that at least one member of their household was involved in seasonal diamond mining, and in Kayima, 78 percent reported that this was so. In both communities, all respondents reported that they were internally displaced at some point during the war. The sample in Panguma contained a slightly higher element of youth respondents than that in Kayima.

Labour has become monetised after the war – the need for money has overshadowed reciprocal labour relationships.	10	18
Post-war community associations have taken the place of many informal reciprocal relationships, especially in relation to farming.	8	0
Reciprocal labour relationships are stronger in the villages now than before the war.	8	0
Farming families are weaker and smaller in size, which has challenged reciprocal labour relationships.	0	18
Individuals do not have the time to engage in helping relationships – it is not possible to satisfy everyone's demands.	0	6
The 'big men' who helped us before the war have either left or were killed during the conflict.	0	4

Source: Field data

On further examination of Table 1, however, some responses seem to be contradictory. For example, a small percentage of respondents in Panguma believed that formal post-war associations had replaced informal reciprocal relationships, while at the same time noting that reciprocal relationships were now stronger than before the war. Some respondents appeared to confuse agricultural associations with *boma* or *kombi* groups, since most associations are based on traditional relationships of reciprocity. In comparing responses between the two sites, however, respondents in Panguma – many of whom were women – appeared to be more aware of the importance of having strong links to nearby mining communities. Unlike in Kayima, relatively short distances and good transport links between Panguma and the mining areas provide a vital market for many women to sell their produce and generate much-needed income. Many women respondents in Panguma noted that this income could then be reinvested in both farm labour and 'standing funds' for agricultural associations.

In comparing responses between the two sites, there also appears to be a discrepancy in attitudes concerning the relationship between youths and elders, and how this has affected reciprocity. In Panguma, there was a stronger sentiment that a division between young people and elders now existed, and in particular, that the chiefs had isolated youths by unjust treatment. This belief may have come out more strongly in Panguma because there were slightly more youth represented in the sample. Nevertheless, in both study sites, it was acknowledged that although a labour pool of strong, able-bodied youth was essential for reciprocal farm work, in the aftermath of the war there had been an increasing trend towards the monetisation of labour. In a number of cases, it was suggested that the need for cash income had overshadowed the desire to engage in reciprocal agricultural work. Such sentiments tie into a growing literature on the emergent agrarian 'politics of youth' in post-war Sierra Leone (e.g. see Archibald & Richards, 2002; Peters et al. 2003), and may reflect the wider belief that young men in rural areas now have a much greater sense of their power to control their own labour, and do not feel tied to their villages.

In short, following Harvey (1997), it is likely that the moral economy in Sierra Leone has been significantly impacted upon in three main ways. First, displacement has divided farming communities in both Kayima and Panguma, and has taken individuals away from a context in which they can draw on reciprocal networks. During the conflict, many rural communities were destabilised and traumatised by the three main factions in the war – the army, civil defence fighters (CDF) and RUF insurgents – who often burned crops and houses, leading to the widespread out-migration of people seeking safety in Freetown. It is, in fact, only very recently (since 2002) that displaced people have started returning to their rural homes, and it will take time for the social contracts that govern reciprocal mechanisms to become fully reconfigured.

Second, the destruction and looting of assets carried out by all three factions has resulted in an overall lack of resources within both communities, which has undermined exchange networks. Simply put, the wealthier members of society may no longer have the material means to assist those in need, and hence redistributive mechanisms are no longer able to function properly. Third, the tactics of terror employed by armed agents during the war, including the widespread use of torture, mutilation and sexual violence, may to some extent have played a role in destroying the social fabric that forms the basis of the moral economy. Many interviewees in Kayima and Panguma disclosed that in the aftermath of war, community trust and co-operation had become frayed, and it would be very difficult to forget many of the acts that had been committed during the conflict. However, this lack of trust may also reflect opportunistic alliances that were formed among civilians during the war, as competing armed groups occupied the diamondiferous regions of the country[7]. The fact that some people are now more cautious about engaging in social contracts with others has meant that 'helping relationships' including reciprocal labour agreements are also more challenging.

This discussion has raised a number of key issues that may concern government initiatives to rehabilitate wetland sites within the transition to a decentralised system. In exploring the social, political and economic dynamics of wetland cultivation in the post-war period, it has become apparent that institutional relationships and practices are often embedded in unequal relationships – a concern also identified by other researchers in different contexts (Fanthorpe 2006). Indeed, the current emphasis to decentralise the state's management and responsibilities may partly be seen as an attempt to redress historical legacies that have created social differentiation in the countryside. By bringing government 'closer to the people', some optimistic commentators have argued that the decentralisation process could be instrumental in alleviating the poverty and social exclusion that have been responsible for the marginalisation of rural voices in the past. Most donor agencies are aware that the highly centralised system of government typical of the All People's Congress (APC) regime under the former President Siaka Stevens (1968-1985) played a major role in fomenting the preconditions for war. The World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UK Department for International Development (DfID) all strongly advocate that decentralisation should be a key element of Sierra Leone's post-conflict reconstruction strategy. Although an extended discussion of Sierra Leone's decentralisation initiative is beyond the scope of this paper and indeed much has been written on this elsewhere (see for example, Jackson 2005, 2007), it is appropriate to comment briefly on the implications of this research for the decentralisation of agriculture and its impact on wetland development.

4. Decentralisation and wetland development: New agricultural frontiers for Sierra Leone?

For many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the concept of decentralisation is currently at the heart of development and governance debates, raising questions about interactions between local government and community institutions, and their roles in poverty eradication and the strengthening of livelihoods at the grassroots level. In Sierra Leone, the passing of the *Local Government Act, 2004* has allegedly seen the state strengthen its position at the local level, and has, in theory, created new spaces for increased interaction between state agencies and communities. Although a 'fast-track' decentralisation programme has been initiated, it remains to be seen what this will actually mean for the agricultural sector or the rural poor. Notably, one might ask, how will such devolution of governmental responsibilities influence the effectiveness of local wetland management arrangements and institutions, and will this have

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[7] See Peters (2006) for a detailed discussion of how the legacy of the war has had an impact on reintegration and post-conflict development in the Tongo Field region.

positive implications on some of the constraints associated with wetland access and utilisation? In practice, decentralisation efforts elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa have not lived up to expectations (Crook, 2003; Hilson & Potter, 2005; Smoke, 2003), and in Sierra Leone, poor farmers who desperately need tangible improvements in their lives have so far seen very little in the way of livelihood upliftment.

In conjunction with the government's vision of wetland development under the five-year agricultural rehabilitation programme, one of the cornerstones of its *Strategy for National Transformation* (GoSL 2003) has been to decentralise the structure of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security (MAFFS). It is envisaged that by devolving power to the local level, field-level planning and decision making will be improved, creating closer interaction between extension staff and farmers, and enhancing the budgeting and funding of agricultural activities (*ibid.*). *Statutory Instrument No. 13* (2004) describes the functions of MAFFS to be devolved to local councils, including virtually all the responsibilities of agricultural extension services, jurisdiction over demonstration and multiplication plots, field days/open days, sensitisation meetings for farmers, and the development of farmers groups (GoSL 2004b: 28). However, while such a move may, in theory, have the best of intentions to improve grassroots livelihoods by concentrating resources and decision-making abilities more firmly in local hands, a number of far-reaching questions emerge concerning how the interactions between institutions at different scales will be operationalised in practice.

The specific model of decentralisation adopted in Sierra Leone is premised on the notion that traditional leaders will continue to work alongside elected councillors, with chiefs being responsible for rural security, justice and land issues, and local government being liable for rural 'development' and service delivery. In such instances, Toulmin (2000: 244) warns that there is a risk of tension developing between the two systems of authority, if the division of responsibilities is not clear. While the decentralisation of responsibilities for agriculture appears to provide greater opportunity for increasing the relevance of local authorities to local people, at the same time, 'power sharing' remains a threat to central authorities, traditional leaders and elites, who may fear a loss of power, income or patronage resources. Other observers have pointed to the considerable political conflict and resistance that have ensued in similar scenarios elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, where power and resources have been redistributed under the banner of decentralisation initiatives (Ntsebeza, 2004). Larson and Ribot (2004) point out that although governments may decide to devolve power structures for a variety of political, economic, social and ideological reasons, the intense pressure from aid agencies is often the driving force behind decentralisation initiatives. In Sierra Leone, where donors currently provide an estimated 50 percent of government revenue, external agencies have placed strong emphasis on decentralisation as a 'political conditionality' for post-war reconstruction assistance (Jackson 2005: 50). Such reform programmes are frequently driven by globalised conceptions of 'effective markets' and 'good governance', and have significant impacts on localised processes that shape people's livelihoods (Mehta et al. 1999).

Whatever the actual motivations driving the government's decentralisation process, decentralised agricultural rehabilitation policies currently interact, directly or indirectly, with local interests and power relationships in complicated ways. To focus on one example, at the forefront of efforts to decentralise the Ministry of Agriculture and support democratic grassroots institutions, the 'Agricultural Business Unit' (ABU) initiative has recently been introduced as a joint venture between the government and the UNDP. By mobilising farmers into community-based associations and encouraging members to combine their resources, there is great hope that ABU farmer groups will be able to effectively deal with some of the agricultural constraints mentioned in this paper, especially the labour bottlenecks associated with wetland farming. Labour cooperation in the groups is typically modelled on traditional reciprocal arrangements, such as *boma* or *kombi* groups, and many of the ABU associations are currently involved in wetland cultivation.

In addition to pooling their labour efforts, ABU farmers are also encouraged to increase the total acreage of land they are cultivating, save a certain percentage of their personal harvest for 'development', pay a 'community contribution' to the local council, and monitor the activities of local government to ensure that resources are being invested in services that are meaningful and relevant to local people. One major objective of the programme is to stimulate increased revenue mobilisation for the local councils themselves, and it is anticipated that eventually, ABU farmer contributions could account for as much as one third of the total local council budget[8]. During the initial years of the programme, the Ministry of Agriculture has vowed to provide ABU farmers with training, rice seed loans, and eventually access to micro-credit, confirming the government's commitment to a 'package approach' to agricultural recovery. As noted at the outset of this paper, however, earlier attempts at 'package driven' government interventions, particularly during the 1970s, abounded with problems and yielded disappointing results.

Overall participation in the ABU scheme is significant: each group comprises 400 farmers, and as of June 2005, there were 140,000 participating farmers and 347 ABU groups nationwide (UNDP, 2006). Kono District reported having 38 ABU groups, while Kenema District confirmed having 32 groups. During the course of fieldwork for this paper, research contact was limited to three different ABU groups that were engaging in swamp agriculture in the Eastern Province. Discussions with members in both Kayima and Panguma revealed that although the ABU scheme was generally perceived to be a much-needed attempt to re-establish grassroots associations and facilitate livelihood recovery, some important concerns emerged in the early stages of their development – particularly over accountability and the lack of meaningful engagement between farmers and the local council. These grievances made some farmers sceptical of the overall mandate of the initiative, and led several individuals to question whether the government was actually being motivated by a hidden agenda underlying the formation of the groups. High levels of distrust were reported between farmers, local agricultural staff working under MAFFS, and local councillors, and allegations of power abuse, misuse of funds and corruption were noted during interviews. Such grievances have also reportedly been common in past wetland rehabilitation initiatives, and Richards et al. (2004: 52) note that much of the investment in the IADPs during the 1970s was also subject to capture by elites.

While the ABU programme may be a well-intended effort to fill the institutional vacuum left by the loss of farmers' associations and community-based groups during the war, its impact must be understood within the broader political economy of rural society in Sierra Leone. For example, how will the ABU initiative play out in practice, in light of the basic struggle over control of labour that is currently taking place in the countryside, whether it is labour exploitation by the rural elite, or the efforts of youth to escape 'traditional' authority through diamond-mining and other non-agricultural income opportunities? Ultimately, the interplay between government policy and local politics can serve to reinforce or enhance different patterns of privilege, creating new forms of exclusion that are often couched in well-meaning platitudes claiming to protect community rights or facilitate development (Berry, 2004). A number of recent studies suggest that many of the assumptions that concern decentralisation need to be carefully assessed, as conflict over natural resources and contested institutional responsibilities between competing user-groups have become increasingly common (Ribot, 2004). In the case of Sierra Leone, observers have warned that in its present form, there is a risk that decentralisation may become old wine in new bottles, as the 'old way' of doing politics threatens to re-surface in a new guise (Fanthorpe, 2006; Hanlon, 2005; Jackson, 2007).

In short, in order for the ABU programme to function effectively, there must be frequent and meaningful engagement between farmers and the local council. Indeed, a lack of contact

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[8] Personal communication, Tom Cairnes, former ABU Program Director, UNDP, Freetown, 28.6.2005.

between these two groups was one of the main criticisms of the initiative voiced by both ABU members and local councillors themselves. While farmers reported that councillors were not interested in coming to the swamp to learn about their problems, councillors indicated that ABU members had not accepted any of their invitations to attend sensitisation meetings in town because they were 'too busy farming'. Local agricultural extension staff (who work under the Ministry of Agriculture) reported that they also felt excluded from the ABU scheme, because they had not been asked to participate in any of the initial sensitisation induction meetings with farmers, or the seed delivery plan. Instead, 'master trainers' from Freetown were employed by the central government to work with local communities from the outset. This reportedly caused great resentment amongst extension staff, who added that because these trainers were 'outsiders' and ignorant of local conditions, they had spread a considerable amount of misinformation.

Perhaps of greater concern have been efforts at carrying out the seed procurement programme, which in many cases have apparently proved disastrous. For each district, the Ministry of Agriculture has earmarked sufficient funds to the councils so that seed can be purchased for distribution to the ABU groups and other qualifying associations. However, rather than transferring the funds directly to the councils, in most cases, 'seed buyers' have been sub-contracted by the Ministry. The funds allocated to these 'middle-men' are supposed to cover the cost of transporting the seed to distribution sites, which is necessary since the seed has to be sourced from many different locations in each district. Reports suggest that because proper fiscal decentralisation has not taken place and funds have not been directly under the control of the councils, there are concerns about accountability, resulting in serious accusations of corruption. For example, interviews with councillors in Dodo Chiefdom, and Lower Bambara Chiefdom in Kenema District, revealed that there has been widespread mismanagement of funds. In 2005, the budget allocated for seed purchase in Kenema District was calculated to secure a target of 9,600 bushels of rice seed, but only 5,000 bushels were ultimately supplied. Consequently, instead of each ABU group receiving 240 bushels of seed, as originally planned; only 76 bushels were allotted to each group. Councillors did not know and could not explain what had happened to the 'missing' funds which were supposed to be used for seed purchase. Concerns were also voiced over the seed procurement programme in Kono District during the 2005 planting season, with the main grievance being the very late arrival of seeds. The ABU group in Kayima did not receive its supply of seeds until 1 August 2005, long after planting should have taken place. This being the case, many of the angry farmers announced that rather than saving the seed for next year's planting season, they were going to eat it instead.

The structures of governance reform in Sierra Leone are still at an embryonic stage, and it is perhaps too early to tell whether decentralisation, or the ABU experiment, will offer any real improvements for agriculture or rural livelihoods in Sierra Leone. Although one DfID Social Development Advisor in Freetown explained that the proponents of decentralisation may be expecting 'too much too quickly'[9], the fact that the decentralisation progress is so slow to gain momentum may be telling in itself. As Jackson (2007) notes, governance reform has resulted in a series of political struggles between those who consider themselves to be the 'winners' and 'losers' of decentralisation: the outcome of these confrontations will determine the future of local government and the success of agricultural rehabilitation programmes. The ABU initiative is but one attempt to restructure local farming institutions, a step which is vital for enhancing rice production in the inland valley swamps and re-building national food security. Ultimately, however, the questions over power relationships and the effectiveness of rural governance are the most pressing issues ahead. Local interests in rural society are embedded in unequal social relationships in far-reaching ways. Redressing the tensions

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[9] Personal communication, Jane Hobson, DfID Social Development Advisor, Freetown, 14.11.2006.

created by this social inequality remains paramount in helping to achieve the positive benefits of decentralisation. The creation of democratic, accountable institutions at all scales, that increase equity and empower grassroots decision-making abilities, will not only be essential in making wetland rice production more effective, but more broadly, may also be the best bet for achieving food security, maintaining peace and stability, and keeping the country on the track to sustainable development in the years to come.

5. Conclusion

Focusing on the experience of Sierra Leone, this paper has examined how power relationships can, and often do, become infused in the process of gaining access to wetlands and their resources. Indeed, the social relations necessary for negotiating access to both wetlands and labour are shaped by politics. In the process of mediating access to the resources necessary for swamp agriculture, the micro-politics between different groups of social actors, at a variety of scales, can become 'ratcheted up'. In such a scenario, especially in a post-conflict environment, it remains critical to identify and plan the implementation of strategies that can strengthen institutions, restore rural livelihoods, and encourage community-based self-reliance and co-operation. In the case of Sierra Leone, the challenges posed to wetland management have evidently been deeply exacerbated in the aftermath of war. Displacement caused by conflict and the resulting transformations have disrupted established management patterns within wetland agriculture, and the different institutional arrangements between actors that govern these social contracts.

Watson (2001: 5) points out that conflict situations can lead to a power vacuum on the ground: 'enforcement of the regulations and rules controlling the use of resources can break down, and local and other residents may seize the opportunity to exploit their environment unsustainably'. In post-conflict situations, however, the institutions governing people-environment relationships are also under stress, and when the pace of the rehabilitation process is slow, the possibility always exists that frustrations could mount and conflict could resume. A key priority in Sierra Leone's transition from war to peace is to create a safe and enabling environment for forced migrants to return home and rebuild their mainly farming-based livelihoods. As increasing numbers of residents return to their villages, new burdens and stresses are being encountered in rural communities, including increased pressure on key environmental resources such as inland valley swamps. Evidence suggests that the current institutional challenges faced by rural actors, many of which are exacerbated by inter-generational conflicts associated with unequal power relationships, present a major barrier to wetland development.

During the course of fieldwork for this paper, many farmers demonstrated a wealth of environmental knowledge and displayed great skill in manipulating a range of environmental features in the management of their wetland plots. However, it was also apparent that differences in the capabilities, opportunities and constraints of individual actors played a significant role in defining their management abilities, particularly with respect to mobilising and gaining access to labour. One of the central points raised in this paper is that it remains important to explore the role that power relationships assume in formulating land-use decisions and determining access to resources within wetland environments. The fieldwork suggests that community-based institutions do not operate in isolation: they interact both with their constituent members and with local governance institutions. The latter include administrative arrangements with a wide range of actors, including paramount chiefs, community committees and district administrators, as well as the technical agencies of the state that may be responsible for matters such as water, agriculture and health (for example, within the Land and Water Development Division). Through these institutions, particular policies and requirements may be imposed upon communities, compromising the effectiveness of local management arrangements for wetland resources (Dries, 1991).

Moreover, within community institutions themselves, political and social relationships continue to shape and define management opportunities and abilities. In short, local government, paramount chiefs and grassroots institutions all have important roles to play in wetland management, and their relative strengths and effectiveness need to be evaluated, as Sierra Leone continues to experience a strong move towards decentralisation. To date, emphasis on the importance of local and community-based institutions drawing on indigenous knowledge has tended to neglect the fact that these institutions generally operate within a broader framework developed primarily by other actors, notably governments and their local representatives (Watson, 2001).

In the process of exploring the role that politics and society play in shaping land-use decisions and mediating access to resources in wetlands, this paper has raised some key concerns about changes to livelihoods and their sustainability in areas of increasing pressure and resource competition. It has also shown that without first addressing these underlying issues – especially those which concern labour and access to land – efforts to decentralise agriculture, or fulfill the government's vision for wetland rehabilitation, are destined to fail. Moreover, evidence further suggests a danger that decentralised agricultural programmes, such as the ABU initiative, may become a new source of patrimonial resources for the elite. Although 'good governance' remains an essential pre-condition to sustainable development in the countryside, ultimately, the institutional arrangements of decentralisation are embedded in a series of larger political and economic struggles. The possibility of a return to pre-war systems of patrimonialism and the continuing institutionalised power abuses of a rural gerontocracy remains one of the greatest threats to derailing the recovery process and subverting its potential benefits in the countryside.

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The University of Manchester

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Executive Director
Professor Tony Addison

Research Director
Professor Michael Woolcock

Associate Director
Professor David Hulme

Contact:

Brooks World Poverty Institute
The University of Manchester
Humanities Bridgeford Street
Building
Oxford Road
Manchester
M13 9PL
United Kingdom

Email: **bwpi@manchester.ac.uk**

www.manchester.ac.uk/bwpi

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