**Green grabs and rural development:**

**How sustainable is biofuel production in post-war Sierra Leone?**

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**Abstract**

In Sub-Saharan Africa, now dubbed the ‘Green OPEC’ of the global bioenergy economy, biofuels have been hailed as a ‘new profitability frontier’ that will provide ‘win-win’ outcomes and deliver development to poor communities. Yet, in an era of economic recession and soaring food prices, their ‘sustainability’ has been at the centre of controversy. This paper focuses on the case of Sierra Leone, where in 2008, a Swiss bioenergy company ushered in the largest foreign direct investment since the end of the country’s civil war. Although recently set back by the catastrophic impacts of the Ebola crisis, there continues to be much support for the government’s strategy to secure foreign direct investment in biofuels production in agriculturally rich regions of the country. Bioenergy proponents believe that such investments will transform rural areas, in light of the fact that Sierra Leone has over the last decade been consistently ranked as one of the poorest in the world, facing food insecurity, high unemployment and entrenched poverty. But land access and control remain central to debates around biofuels and development, particularly for poor rural people living in project areas. This paper explores the perceptions of a wide range of project stakeholders, many of whom have differing interpretations of what biofuel sustainability entails. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications this may have for the present post-Ebola environment, where evolving policy discussions on land investment and ‘green’ development continue to assume a key part of the government’s recovery trajectory.

**Keywords** ‘green grabs’; biofuels; land; sustainability; livelihoods; Sierra Leone.

**1. Introduction**

In recent years, a dramatic increase in foreign land acquisitions across sub-Saharan Africa has focused academic and policy attention on a vociferous ‘global land grab’ debate. While some commentators have argued that foreign land investments will transform the rural economies of poor countries and stimulate new pathways to development, others have countered this position by pointing to their negative social impacts, including the loss of local land rights and threats to livelihoods and food security (Cotula, 2012). The latest installment of this debate has centered around the emerging process of ‘green grabbing’, whereby land and its associated resources are appropriated for environmental ends. Driven by so-called ‘green agendas’ and building on a long history of colonial and neo-colonial resource exploitation (Adams, 2008; Peluso, 1992), these new land investments have been justified on the grounds that they support ‘sustainable’ initiatives, such as biodiversity conservation, ecosystem service projects, ecotourism, carbon ‘offsetting’ or biofuels production. However, despite their green rhetoric, a number of critics have argued that such acquisitions are far from straightforward, often being driven by a diverse range of new actors and alliances, and involving new forms of valuation, commodification and markets (Fairhead et al., 2012; Green and Adams, 2015). This has raised a series of far reaching concerns about the implications of green grabs, and more specifically who wins and who loses, and how this has new consequences for ecologies, landscapes and livelihoods.

At the forefront of the ‘green grabbing’ debate, biofuel production in sub-Saharan Africa has reached unprecedented levels, and has been particularly controversial. Although long hailed as a panacea for reduced fossil fuel dependence, biofuels’ ‘green credentials’ have recently come under attack: the land grabbing associated with their production has been linked to increased food prices and hunger, incidences of land conflict and Co2 emissions. In response to growing socio-economic concerns over an emerging global ‘agroenergy complex’, multinational companies engaged in biofuel production in sub-Saharan Africa have adopted comprehensive CSR strategies to mitigate the negative impacts associated with land dispossession. Nowhere has this been more evident than in post-war Sierra Leone, an impoverished country which, despite facing acute food insecurity, is pursuing a liberalized path to development, including the promotion of foreign direct investment in biofuel production.

In this paper, debates concerning the ‘sustainability’ of biofuel production in poor developing countries are explored in further detail through a detailed case study of Sierra Leone and its emerging bioenergy sector. In the aftermath of the country’s decade-long civil war of the 1990s, and more recently in its current post-Ebola environment, concerns for food security, agricultural development and rural job creation have returned to centre stage on policy agendas. The present APC government is desperate to encourage international investors who will finance initiatives that address these key issues, and President Ernest Bai Koroma has made it well known that he believes foreign investment under a market-led approach to be the most effective pathway for meeting the country’s challenges. However, considerable obstacles remain for the country’s bioenergy sector. The Ebola out break in May 2014 had a devastating impact on foreign direct investment and the rural economy, and the country’s largest biofuels company – Addax Bioenergy, a subsidiary of the Swiss-based energy corporation Addax and Oryx – ran into severe financial problems. Alongside substantial delays, the company’s contractors declared ‘force majeure’ and abandoned the site, and the decision was made to downscale the operation in June 2015. More recently, the company was forced to transfer 75.1% ownership of its operations in Makeni, to a group of investors led by the UK-based firm, Sunbird Bioenergy Africa Limited. While it appears that the government remains committed to reviving the flagging bioenergy sector and providing a ‘business friendly’ environment for foreign direct investments, questions that concern land dispossession and livelihood displacement will remain central to debates that concern biofuel ‘sustainability’, particularly for those living in project-affected communities.

The analysis presented in the paper raises important questions around how sustainability is being interpreted by different groupings of actors, how such interpretations differ and are shaped by diverging underlying agendas, and what this ultimately means for ‘green development’. The Addax investment provides a clear example of how capitalist farming initiatives often fail to match up with the interests and needs of smallholder farmers, particularly with respect to land access and control. The ‘actor-oriented’ approach adopted in this study incorporates an interest in understanding how different perspectives, obligations and power relationships across different scales have shaped decision-making around the project, and, in particular, how these have been framed by wider discourses around sustainability.

Exploring these issues in greater depth, the paper proceeds as follows. Following this introduction, section two contextualizes the wider political economy that is currently shaping the on-going and rapid expansion of bioenergy investments across sub-Saharan Africa, and locates Sierra Leone within this process. This discussion sets the stage for section three, where a more detailed and nuanced analysis of Sierra Leone is developed through an examination of the Addax investment and its impacts on the livelihoods of stakeholders living around the project site. Here, a brief discussion of the research methodology is also presented. Drawing on in-country interviews carried out with a wide range of stakeholders, including company officials, governmental actors and people living in project-affected communities, as well as the analysis of key documents, section three sheds further light on the impacts that so-called green investments have for land, labour and livelihoods. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications this may have for the present post-Ebola environment, where evolving policy discussions on land investment and ‘green’ development continue to assume a key part of the government’s recovery trajectory.

**2. ‘Green capitalism’ or driver of development?**

Over the past two decades, the globalization of agriculture has seen the rapid expansion of agri-business into biofuels with its apparent ‘win-win’ formula of reducing greenhouse gas emissions without reducing consumption. In the face of rapidly escalating conventional energy costs, biofuel investment ‘represent[s] a new profitability frontier’ (Borras et al., 2010: 576). And yet, it has been at the forefront of enormous controversy that has brought to the fore many of the very issues that have long been at the heart of critiques of industrialized agricultural expansion. Across sub-Saharan Africa, ‘sustainability’ has been pitted against ‘development’ casting light on the extent to which both terms are wide open to interpretation depending upon the protagonist’s positioning. Those involved in biofuels production, as well as those endeavouring to hold it to account, must continue to grapple with such contested meanings, grounded as they are in their own operational realities that are both globally and locally contextualized.

In addition to mandates driving the expansion of biofuel production across sub-Saharan Africa, such drivers have themselves been underpinned by four forceful motivations, each of which have been critically explored by scholars in a wide range of contexts. These are: 1) the need to mitigate climate change; 2) the rising prices of fossil fuels; 3) concerns for energy security; and 4) the need for rural development in the global South (FAO/GBEP 2008). The combination of these drivers have created powerful discourses supporting the growth of the biofuel industry, which have persisted in spite of the legitimacy of each having been widely critiqued and challenged (see Figure 1).

In the context of this paper, a detailed review of the first three motivating factors is beyond the scope of the discussion.[[1]](#footnote-1) Instead, in the case of Sierra Leone, as already noted, the primary motivating factor that has most frequently been employed to justify plans for the expansion of biofuel production has been the critical need for rural development. This position has been strongly supported by biofuels proponents, who, in the aftermath of the country’s decade-long civil war of the 1990s, and more recently in the Ebola recovery period, believe that large-scale agriculture projects will provide a primary injection to kick-start both food production and the rural economy. While in recent years a critical counter-position that challenges the intensified commodification of farm land and labour has emerged,[[2]](#footnote-2) proponents of large-scale capital investments in agriculture believe that this will stimulate an ‘agrarian transition’ away from subsistence production and towards wage work on large farms. This, it is claimed, will invariably lead to economic growth, and, by extension, ‘trickle down’ and poverty reduction for rural populations.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Figure 1: Projected production of biofuels in Africa from 2015 to 2035 (in million metric tons of oil equivalent)**

Source: Statista. Accessed 10 January, 2017. Available from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/243951/african-biofuels-production/>

This scenario has stimulated a number of key international financial institutions, including the World Bank, to encourage countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Sierra Leone, to support, either directly or indirectly, the expansion of the production of bioenergy both for domestic consumption and for export (World Development Report 2008). However, at the very heart of the biofuels controversy for many critics – and an issue that has direct relevance to the current state of food insecurity and rural underdevelopment in Sierra Leone – has been the diversion of food crops from developing countries to ‘feedstocks’ to fuel over-consumption in the developed world. The scale and speed of this conversion has been unprecedented and is often cited as a contributing factor to rocketing food prices across the global South (Bailey 2007; McMichael 2009a). In 2008 and again in 2011, countering their potential contribution to rural development, were significant spikes in the prices of food commodities that had a considerable impact on poverty across sub-Saharan Africa.[[4]](#footnote-4) Such spikes have been linked to the dramatic rise in the production of bioenergy feedstocks on land that formerly would have produced food. When the rapid expansion of global agri-business into biofuels is underpinned by developed countries’ on-going over-consumption of energy, such a critique of biofuels is thrown into stark perspective.

The issue of land access and control, therefore, remains central to debates around biofuels and development, particularly for poor rural people living in project areas. This is particularly the case in sub-Saharan Africa, which as McMichael (2009b: 243) notes, is now often referred to as the ‘Green OPEC’ because its extensive land reserves have attracted agrofuel capital from a vast range of investors from Brazil, Saudi Arabia, China, the World Bank, USAID, the European Commission, and various private companies. While a recent World Bank (2011) report entitled, *Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can it Yield Sustainable and Equitable Benefits?,* suggests that large-scale acquisitions in land can stimulate the employment of wage workers and contribute to poverty alleviation, such arguments have spawned a series of critiques within the global ‘land-grab’ debate (e.g. see Li, 2011). Many land purchases have been controversial, even in cases where such land has not formerly been used to produce food but has been defined as ‘idle’, ‘marginal’ or ‘degraded’. In the case of Sierra Leone, for example, claims that the Addax project has been established on marginal land are highly contentious and do not demonstrate an effective understanding of land-use under small-holder farming systems. Upland rice farming – the main food production system in rural areas – is based on a system of shifting cultivation, whereby there is a need to frequently relocate to new ‘idle’ land. This decreases the willingness of landowning farmers to grant land to outsiders on a secure basis, due to the necessity of having those lands on reserve for their own shifting cultivation needs (Unruh and Turray, 2006). What may be perceived to be ‘idle’ land by the outsider is most often far from the case. Moreover, the local environmental consequences resulting from the continuously cultivated and mono-cropped plantation agriculture favourable to the commercial production of biofuels are that they adversely affect soil quality and fertility, biodiversity and water availability and quality (Magdoff 2008).

In summary, it is apparent that the political-economic drivers that have fuelled global biofuel expansion are complex, contradictory and framed by multiple discourses. Bioenergy feedstocks, such as sugar cane or oil palm, are typical plantation crops of the colonial era, and critics point to the danger of neo-colonial processes of accumulation and dispossession simply being reproduced in a new context (Li, 2010; Hall et al., 2011; Bernstein 2010). Consequently, for some scholars, the global political economy that has emerged around biofuels over the last decade appears set to intensify inequalities in developing countries and ‘reinforce and extend previous waves of livelihood displacement’ (Dauvergne and Neville, 2010: 632). Other observers, on the other hand, seem more optimistic, pointing out that emerging biofuels alliances will allow some actors to reap considerable benefits, although these will undoubtedly be unequal and mediated by power relationships. In the next section, this dichotomy is explored in further detail as the discussion turns more specifically to the case of Sierra Leone, and the implications that biofuels investments are having on land and livelihoods.

**3. Rural development and biofuel investment in Sierra Leone**

According to the 2015 UNDP Human Development Report, Sierra Leone is characterised by low human development, ranking 181 out of 185 listed countries (UNDP, 2015). Rural poverty became acute during the country’s protracted civil war of the 1990s, and more recently, rural dwellers have been confronted with the devastating impacts of the Ebola crisis. Despite Sierra Leone’s wealth of natural resources, the most recent survey data from 2013 suggest that 77.5 percent of the population is multi-dimensionally poor, while an additional 14.6 percent live near multidimensional poverty (UNDP, 2015). The socio-economic impacts of the Ebola crisis were particularly acute in rural areas, resulting in a significant reduction in agricultural production in the second half of 2014. According to Sierra Leone’s *National Ebola Recovery Strategy (2015-17)*, 47 percent of all agricultural activities were disrupted, reducing the agricultural sector’s GDP contribution to negative numbers. The impact of the crisis had disastrous consequences for a significant proportion of farm families. Critically, small-scale farming remains an activity which currently provides a livelihood for some 420,000 people across the country (GoSL, 2015).

As the government makes plans to revive its third PRSP, *The Agenda for Prosperity (2013-18),* a key objective is to provide support to the agricultural sector, and rebrand the country and its image through de-stigmatization campaigns to attract private investment. However, in attempting to do so, the single most pressing policy issue that will need to be addressed is land. Without clarity in land titling and ownership, there will continue to be significant conflict between different stakeholders, resulting in uncertainty for any private sector investor in large-scale commercial agricultural investors, and therefore creating a disincentive to invest or to plan for the long term.

In the pre-Ebola period, the government’s optimism for commercial agriculture, and foreign investments in biofuel production more specifically, was high. When the Addax bioenergy project was launched in 2008, it was hailed as the country’s greatest achievement for development in recent times. The 400 million EUR (approximately 500 million USD) sugarcane ethanol project is, in fact, the largest single investment in agriculture ever made in Sierra Leone. The Greenfield project began production in May 2014 and made its first sales in early 2015, building on the opportunity presented by a growing market for bioenergy and biofuels in Europe and Africa, as well as preferential trade agreements and suitable climate and lands in Sierra Leone. Initially, Addax was aiming to produce 90,000m3 of ethanol per annum, primarily for export to the European Union market, but 15MW of power was to be fed into the national grid. Supporters of the investment have had high expectations for operations, which they claim will simultaneously stimulate an enabling environment for future investment, provide job opportunities for youth and contribute to food security by increasing local food production. Such aims fit squarely within the government’s ‘business-friendly approach’ to investment, through which it aims to attract large companies with big projects and in turn promote commercial agriculture through private sector participation.

While the government continues to prioritize food security as one of its primary development targets, at the forefront of this agenda has been the promotion of foreign investment, with large land leases for export-oriented plantation agriculture. This approach, shaped by Rostovian discourses around ‘modernization’ and ‘progress’, is embedded in the strongly held development narrative that African countries are destined to experience an agrarian transition similar to that of Europe in the eighteenth century (Li, 2009), if they pursue the right path to development. A central aspect of this trajectory, according to the World Bank, is for governments to stimulate the transition by removing the barriers to investment. Such a market-led approach for private sector development of commercial agriculture is based on the assumption that the private sector drives the organization of value chains that bring the market to smallholders and commercial farms, a model that the World Bank has referred to as ‘Agriculture for Development’ (World Bank, 2007).

To send the right signals to foreign investors such as Addax, the government has established the Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SLIEPA) with the direct assistance of the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC). Amongst the many incentives offered to foreign investors, including tax holidays, low agricultural labour rates, and ‘flexible’ labour regulation, one of the major pillars of SLIEPA’s marketing strategy is that Sierra Leone can offer investors vast areas of ‘available’, ‘unused’ or ‘under-utlilised’ land at low lease rates. As noted by Li (2011), for international companies, who are driven by the goal of maximizing profit, access to cheap and abundant labour and land are essential elements of their investment:

In most cases…land acquisition takes the form of an investment by a corporate actor bearing capital, and seeking profit. Such an investor operates in a competitive context that compels it to seek maximum profit on the capital it deploys. The attraction for investors is vast areas of free and virtually ‘empty’ land on which they can install the optimal technology-labor regime for profitable production (2011: 282).

Addax has leased 57,000 ha of prime agricultural land for a period of 50 years and sugar cane plantations will cover 10,100 ha, in addition to 2,000 ha which will be developed as part of the project’s Farmer Development Programme (FDP). In interviews with Addax’s former HSSE Manager based in Sierra Leone, it became clear that the company believes that this latter investment will impact positively on food availability, as this surface will be divided into 60 community fields to be established and sown by the company and dedicated to staple food production (mainly rice and cassava) to the benefit of the local population. There are some 13,617 people that live in areas affected by the project (Anane and Abiwu, 2011), and in 2013, Addax received the first African certification by the Roundtable for Sustainable Biomaterials (RSB). Official company literature states that Addax is ‘actively engaging with those whom the project may affect, the project affected people, and has structured the project in a manner designed to ensure that the views of the local population are accommodated and taken into account so far as possible and ensured that the local communities have been engaged in the project from the beginning’. Considering the project-affected population as a homogenous group, however, as most definitions of ‘community’ tend to do, is problematic given that the local population is highly socially differentiated and characterized by conflicting values and unequal power relationships. Vermeulen and Cotula add that although community consultation is now a standard component of negotiations around projects that involve large-scale land acquisitions in Africa, the voices of marginalized actors often become stifled: ‘local people’s capacity to bargain or give free consent to investments is limited by their lack of access to economic and institutional alternatives’ (2010: 899).

To understand the diverse spectrum of perceptions of those living in the projected-affected area, in-depth fieldwork was carried out in the three settlements of Lungi Acre, Yankasa and Marokie, all of which are in close proximity to the Addax project site. Adopting an ‘actor oriented’ approach, the research targeted a wide range of community actors (e.g. chiefs, youths, women, hired company labourers, and displaced farmers). A broad range of qualitative methods was adopted in the fieldwork, including key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and structured observations at community meetings, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the wide range of perspectives held by community stakeholders. In July 2011, a total of 40 semi- structured interviews were initially carried out, and follow-up interviews were undertaken in 2013 during the pre-Ebola period. In all cases, the objectives of the research were carefully explained to participants, and informed consent was obtained orally from respondents to ensure that they were willing to participate in the project. Written consent forms were inappropriate for this research, predominantly because of the high degree of illiteracy in the population. Interviews were carried out in the local Temne or Mende language, or in *Krio*, the lingua franca of Sierra Leone, and were recorded on a dictaphone. The audio transcripts were translated by a research assistant verbatim into English.

As anticipated, a wide range of perspectives were reported and the research revealed that the underlying agendas and expectations from the project were vastly different from the positions of the government and the company. For project-affected communities, the concept of ‘sustainability’ may be summarized as being fundamentally about reconciling livelihoods and the environmental resources upon which they depend. The field research confirmed that there were significant concerns about the ‘sustainability’ of the company’s operations. These ranged from contentions over land acquisition, to the disruption of traditional sources of income, to increasing poverty, and claims of failed promises by Addax. However, while it was clear that even within communities there were ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ spawning from the project’s activities, with some individuals having considerably better access to benefits than others, interviewees referred to two overarching issues that were at the forefront of concerns over ‘sustainability’.

The first issue, as has already been discussed in some detail, concerned land access and control. Central to the governments’ promotion campaign to secure foreign investment in rural areas has been the message that there are vast tracts of ‘unused’ arable land available for agricultural development. For example, on the SLIEPA website, the abundance of available agricultural land and an ideal agro-ecological setting are highlighted as key selling points for potential investors:

Only 15 percent of the country’s 5.4 million hectares of cultivatable land were being farmed as recently as 2003; growing seasons in most parts of the country exceed 260 days per year; annual rainfall averages 3,000 millimeters (118 inches); and irrigation potential of the country’s nine major and three minor rivers is largely untapped.[[5]](#footnote-5)

However, a report on land investment produced by the Oakland Institute (2011) suggests that SLIEPA’s frequently cited notion that 85 per cent of the country’s arable land is available to investors is based on outdated land survey documents that are over 30 years old. Moreover, as noted earlier, such estimates do not reflect an accurate understanding of how the small-holder farming system in Sierra Leone works. Smallholder agriculture is heavily reliant on the bush fallow system, whereby farms are cultivated for a number of years until the soil’s fertility is reduced, but are then left fallow for 10-15 years to recover. Land that is left ‘idle’ remains vital for providing key environmental services, maintaining biodiversity and serving as a reservoir for essential livelihood resources for poor people, such as firewood, animal fodder, or medicinal plants. As recognized by McMichael (2010: 617), ‘marginal peoples’ often depend on ‘marginal’, or non-productive, land for their livelihoods and, with insecure land tenure, will be most vulnerable to its alienation.

In rural Sierra Leone, land is held under various forms of informal communal tenure, with the paramount chief serving as the custodian of the land. Unruh and Turray (2006) 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. However, although the customary laws that regulate access to land may appear to be clearly defined, tenure systems have also been known to exhibit a certain degree of flexibility. In some cases, as an early study by Richards (1986) 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 piece of land may not actually change hands, but its possession or usufructory rights can change, as land is circulated through inheritance, loan, lease or pledge (Bassett and Crummey 1993).

The point being made here is that land ‘ownership’ is not always as clearly defined an issue in Sierra Leone as international investors would like it to be. When Addax initially negotiated its project land leases through chiefs and landowners, 104 village boundary sites were demarcated by the company’s surveyors in order to determine which land would be used and which families would receive compensation for the use of their lands. While the company appears to have made a concerted effort to ensure that it was adhering to Sierra Leonean laws and behaving in a socially responsible fashion, it is clear that the redistribution of land for biofuel production will make it increasingly challenging for local land-users to access the natural resources upon which their livelihoods depend, and impossible to engage in traditional shifting cultivation practices. Moreover, even though the MOU signed by the company stipulates that landowners are to be compensated through lease agreements, critics warn that landless households who rent land on an annual basis could potentially be displaced (Andrew and van Vlaenderen, 2011). In a number of cases, long-standing land disputes between families have also been exacerbated and in one case, the sensitivities of a local court case that goes back to 1967 have been re-ignited. These disputed claims have further been complicated by post-war return issues regarding land, where over-lapping claims have come into question (Unruh and Turray, 2006).

The more serious concern over land, however, involves the issue of how some individuals in project impacted communities, who are now landless, will gain access to food. While the company has committed itself to a Farmer Development Programme (FDP), which will prepare and sow more than 2,000 ha of fields for local food production and train some 2,000 farmers in improved farming techniques, not all those living within the project area have been able to benefit. For example, as explained by one resident of Lungi Acre:

The problem is that all the farmland [around Lungi Acre] has been taken up by the company, and not everyone has been lucky enough to get a job. Here we are surrounded by the company’s operations, but no community farmland has been provided for us. So I am very worried about how I will feed my family.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Moreover, in an impact evaluation of the project carried out in 2011 (Anane and Abiwu, 2011), it was reported that in some cases, affected communities have been provided with alternative communal farmlands that are smaller than those they previously possessed. The distances between their homes and their new farmlands are often much greater, which has made it difficult for members of the affected communities to access their farms as they used to. While it is clear that the mechanical ploughing provided by the company has made it possible to prepare a considerable volume of land in a short period of time, Bolten (2009: 79) also points out that contrary to the beliefs of many, tractors are not well suited to the high clay-content of African soils in the Bolilands, and the disturbance of the gravel under the soil is not appropriate for rice farming. Reports also suggest (e.g. Anane and Abiwu, 2011) that there have been problems with the company’s promises to provide ploughing, harrowing and seeds, which have often been delayed in their delivery. As a consequence, less food has been produced in the communities than anticipated, primarily because in some cases farmers were not able to plant on time.

The second main issue widely mentioned in interviews with project-affected people, and one which is directly related to the issue of access to land, concerned the question of labour and employment. Some 70 percent of the population in Sierra Leone is engaged in smallholder agriculture as a primary livelihood activity, and without access to land, new employment opportunities need to be stimulated. Interviews carried out with residents in the three project communities revealed that many individuals were initially supportive of the new labour regime being proposed by the company, in anticipation that a decent living wage would be offered. Indeed, other research carried out in and around Makeni by Bolten (2009) suggests that many young people in the area today are no longer interested in being subsistence farmers, but are set on entering the ‘modern’ world of consumerism as wage labourers. This position ties into a wider body of literature on de-agrarianisation in sub-Saharan Africa (Bryceson 1997; Ellis 1998), which argues that young people continent wide are seeking an ‘exit option’ out of small-scale farming, with the hope of securing a better life through the off-farm wage economy.

However, those living in the project-impacted villages complained bitterly that, much to their disappointment, the salaries being paid by Addax were not sufficient to live on, and there had been a number of misunderstandings concerning the promises made by the company. According to Addax’s HSSE Manager, the company has created 2,000 jobs for local people, which will inject an estimated US$3.5 million into the local economy each year.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, in discussions with individuals in the affected communities it was revealed that people hired from the villages tended to work as casual labourers, and often for less than three months at a time. Interviewees complained that the majority of local people employed were temporarily laid-off after two or three months. This pattern was confirmed in a project evaluation report which noted that ‘…workers are also laid off when the planting season is over and that means having to wait till the next planting season to continue with life as a farmer. This situation unleashes frustration, poverty and hunger on the unemployed casual workers who have families to feed’ (Anane and Abiwu, 2011).

While the government’s position is that foreign investment in large-scale agricultural projects is the key to ‘sustainability’ and will stimulate an agrarian transition based on a new wage driven economy, paradoxically, it is undermining this agenda and increasing poverty through the promotion of a cheap pool of labour. According to SLIEPA’s promotional material for investors, agricultural labour rates in Sierra Leone are exceedingly low at US$ 2-3 per day, which is considerably less than in alternate locations in Asia or Latin America.[[8]](#footnote-8) For companies such as Addax, profit largely depends on an abundant supply of cheap, disciplined labour, and for this very reason, neither poverty alleviation nor local concerns for ‘sustainable’ development are likely to be the most pressing considerations.

**Conclusion**

In the aftermath of the Ebola crisis, Sierra Leone’s poverty has deepened and fragility has increased once again. The hopes embodied in the country’s development roadmap, *The* *Agenda for Prosperity (2013–2018),* and its chances of achieving *Vision 2035* – to be an inclusive, green, middle-income country by 2035 – have been badly undermined. The government’s strategy for recovery involves re-engaging the *Agenda for Prosperity*, and more specifically restoring growth through the private sector and agriculture. However, whether or not large-scale bioenergy projects such as the Addax investment can play a role in stimulating the growth and employment needed to get the country back on track, remains to be seen. The analysis presented in this paper suggests that, in the context of Addax, differences in interpretations of sustainability, and, more specifically, how such interpretations are shaped by conflicting interests and underlying agendas, have increasingly resulted in mounting tensions between different groups of stakeholders. For grassroots actors living in and around the project area, the sustainability of the company’s operations is framed around key livelihood questions that primarily concern land, labour and food-security. The government, on the other hand, appears more concerned with nurturing an environment that will put agribusiness at the centre of the country’s development trajectory, and thereby send the right signals to future bioenergy investors. While the agendas of both project-affected communities and the government must, to a certain extent, be embraced by Addax in the design of its operations, the company’s core consideration in implementing sustainable practices is in its ability to mitigate social and financial risk to the company’s operations and its investors.

For local communities, land access and control will remain one of the key elements for sustainability. While companies such as Addax have tried to address these problems through the creation of farmer development schemes and adherence to certification schemes such as the Roundtable for Sustainable Biomaterials, such initiatives have been criticised from a number of quarters. In relation to voluntary standards and certification schemes, Dauvergne and Neville (2010) have argued that such voluntarism in sustainability initiatives is limited. Furthermore, they have argued that, ‘for landless and non-agrarian rural peoples’, such initiatives ‘do not solve, and may even exacerbate, the problems that industrial and globalised biofuel production cause for land rights and land tenure’ (2010: 653). Mol meanwhile warns that such standards are likely to incorporate the environmental issues and problematisations of the ‘cosmopolitans (such as climate change) rather than those of the locals (who are concerned with water and soil degradation)’ (2007: 307). Furthermore, he recognises that such standards can be seen as ‘green imperialism’, restricting developing countries’ ability to participate in production (*ibid:* 309).

For project-affected communities around the Addax site, obtaining a living wage is a necessary trade-off for relinquishing access to their land. However, securing a sufficient wage is unlikely given the very contradictions inherent in the global capitalist system, whereby profit maximisation is dependent on externalising costs and pushing down the price of labour. As Redclift (1987) argued many years ago, ‘sustainable’ development and global capitalism are incompatible, because the quest to accumulate capital always undermines the social and environmental resources upon which it depends. Li (2011: 289) further adds that, ‘it is against prevailing capital-logic to expect private investors to take the lead in designing and managing schemes that reduce their profits in favor of the labor of their attached smallholders/suppliers’. For this reason, poverty reduction, or meeting the needs of project-affected communities, cannot be left to corporations alone, and the government of Sierra Leone must ensure that communities are adequately compensated for their loss of land. This will be a great challenge for the government in the current post-Ebola recovery phase. There will indeed be a fine line to balance as the government sets forward to stimulate foreign direct investment, while at the same time ensuring that it doesn’t ‘give away the keys to the shop’ in the process.

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1. For a critical discussion on how bioenergy expansion has been shaped by its perceived potential for mitigating climate change see, Franco et al. (2010); Dauvergne and Neville (2009); or Searchinger et al. (2008). For elaboration on how the rising price of fossil fuels and concerns for national energy security have driven biofuel production see, Kojima and Klytchnikova (2008); Franco et al. (2010); or Dauvergne and Neville (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, for good critiques of this perspective see Li (2011), McMichael (2009b) or Watts (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This trajectory is most notably embedded in the narrative that the World Bank refers to as ‘new agriculture for development’. See the World Bank’s World Development Report 2008 for elaboration. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While the relative impact that biofuel markets have on commodity and food prices is highly debated, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has estimated that biofuels were responsible for 20-30 per cent of the food price spike in 2008 when 125 million tonnes of cereals were diverted into biofuel production (cited in Vidal, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. SLIEPA website, <<http://www.sliepa.org/investment>>, accessed 01.08.12. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Personal communication, farmer, Lungi Acre, 16.07.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Personal communication, Bovid HSSE Manager, Makeni, 15.07.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. SLIEPA, http://www.sliepa.org/downloads/sugar-opportunities-sierra-leone [↑](#footnote-ref-8)