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Sierra Leone farmers return to dig fields, not gems

Source: Reuters South Africa ([Original Article](#))

By Katrina Manson

KOIDU, Sierra Leone (Reuters) - The battle for Sierra Leone's eastern diamond fields fuelled its 11-year civil war, but now the muddy pits are being returned to farming under a scheme funded by U.S. luxury jewellers Tiffany & Co .

As normal life broke down at the start of the 1991-2002 war, farmers tore up their crops around the eastern town of Koidu in the hope of finding precious stones. People dug up their gardens, the roads, even the floors of their homes.

Many residents, who fled as the army and Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels clashed for control of the diamond pits, returned to find a ravaged landscape dotted with craters.

Food supplies are scarce in a lush region once touted as the potential bread-basket of the poor West African country.

"Up until now there has been no land reclamation at all and we are running out of land," Daniel Gbondo, local representative of U.S. charity the Foundation for Environmental Security and Sustainability (FESS), told Reuters on Thursday.

As a first step, communities in three pilot projects have set about reclaiming 45 acres, growing staples such as rice and maize, plus vegetables like aubergine and okra. The first rice season yielded a good harvest, and improved seed varieties will be sold to local farmers, Gbondo said.

"The bumper crop is particularly important for the community because they have never seen land reclamation and really think there is no use for the land after mining," Gbondo said.

Stagnant water which collects in the pits is a breeding ground for mosquitoes which transmit malaria, while children have fallen into the steep craters and drowned.

DIAMONDS BRING MISERY

Sahr Bockarie is among 150 workers, many of them former diamond miners, paid to reclaim mined-out land as part of the \$200,000 [project](#) funded by Tiffany's charity arm.

The 27-year-old spent 12 years bent [ANZ First Credit Card](#) double searching for diamonds in the ...[continue reading](#)

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