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Urban farming associations, youth and food security in post-war Freetown, Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

As skyrocketing global food and energy prices have recently triggered a stream of riots in urban centres across sub-Saharan Africa, underscoring the desperation of urban residents as food becomes unobtainable, cities in the West African country of Sierra Leone face a series of new challenges as the country emerges from a decade of civil war during the 1990s. Focusing on the question of urban food security in and around Sierra Leone's capital city, Freetown, this paper explores the proliferation of urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) as a response to the rising demand for food and employment. In this context, the paper examines a recent upsurge in cooperative activity associated with UPA in Freetown, drawing upon the knowledge and perceptions of those involved in urban farming associations. In seeking to better understand the associational and livelihood strategies of urban residents in the post-war era, the paper highlights how UPA activities are currently driving a resurgence in community-based cooperation, a development which could play an important role in safeguarding livelihoods and urban food security during a particularly critical point in the country's post-conflict recovery trajectory.

Introduction

Sub-Saharan African cities have faced many new challenges during the first decade of the 21st Century. In addition to rapid urban growth, increasing levels of poverty and deteriorating urban environments, new pressures have emerged in recent years. These include the ongoing impact of externally imposed structural adjustment programmes, the massive rise in both staple food prices and oil prices, and, more recently, as World Bank economist Shanta Devarajan has pointed out (World Bank, 2009), the effects of the worst global recession since the Second World War. The UN FAO estimates that between 2004 and 2006, some 30% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa, equivalent to 212.3 million people, were undernourished (FAO, 2009). In the face of such difficult economic and social conditions, and the general absence of state welfare benefits, urban households in particular have been forced to adopt a range of survival strategies to ensure that basic household food security is achieved. A particularly common strategy in many African cities is the growing of food crops both within and around the urban area, commonly referred to as 'urban and peri-urban agriculture' (UPA).

In the last two decades, there has been a wealth of empirical research undertaken on UPA in African towns and cities (see, for example, Hovorka, de Zeeuw, & Njenga, 2009; Mougeot, 2005; Shackleton, Pasquini, & Drescher, 2009). Evidence suggests that urban agriculture can make a significant contribution to ensuring food security, particularly among poor households, as well as providing jobs in situations where there are high rates of unemployment. In particular, structural adjustment programmes, often leading to large-scale retrenchment of civil servants and others, have been an important factor in encouraging the growth of urban agriculture, as occurred in Ghana during the 1980s and early 1990s (Barwa, 1995; Grant & Yankson, 2003; see also; Drakakis-Smith, Bowyer-Bower, & Tevera 1995; Redwood, 2009; Riddell, 1997). In some countries, a high proportion of producers are women, adding a prominent gender dimension to UPA activities. However, in many cases, women's vital contribution to UPA has been overlooked by policy makers, planners and practitioners, suggesting that there is an urgent need for a better understanding of the gendered dynamics of urban food production (Hovorka et al., 2009).

There is also evidence to suggest that women are key actors in the marketing of UPA produce. A considerable proportion of this food is sold in urban markets, helping to satisfy growing consumer

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demand in Africa's rapidly growing cities and also providing valuable financial rewards for producers and sellers (Binns & Lynch, 1998; Ellis & Sumberg, 1998; Lynch, Binns, & Olofin, 2001; Simatele & Binns, 2008). In fact, a survey conducted in the late 1990s by Smith (2001) in a number of West African cities found that urban agriculture accounted for between 20% and 60% of urban household income and savings.

In addition to these broad urbanization trends across the African continent, in a number of countries, patterns of urban growth have been affected considerably during periods of protracted conflict, with large-scale migration both into and out of cities. This paper examines the situation in Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone, which during the country's decade long civil war (1991–2001) received a large proportion of an estimated 2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) who sought both protection and livelihood support in the city (IDMC, 2004; UN/OCHA, 2000). Largely as a result of the civil war, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty in Sierra Leone increased from 57% in 1990 to an estimated 89% by 2002 (EURODAD, 2005), and a strong link was evident between poverty and malnutrition (IMF, 2005). There was a significant increase in poverty in Freetown during this period, and the first Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) published in June 2005, reported that due to overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions, '. . .a pattern of severity is piling up in the big city (Freetown). The severity of poverty is higher than expected' (IMF, 2005).

Focusing on the question of urban food security in and around Freetown, this paper seeks to better understand the evolving associational and livelihood strategies of urban residents in the post-war era, by exploring a recent upsurge in cooperative activity associated with UPA. On one level, the paper explores an important livelihood response to making ends meet in the city: urban farming has not only become an essential survival strategy for combating the high cost of food and ensuring urban food security, but it has also become a key source of income generation and employment. More broadly, however, our focus on the dynamics of associational life ties in with wider scholarly interest in identifying the institutions which might better link state and societal interests, thereby increasing the possibility of a more pluralistic and democratic political order (Benjamin, 2008; Meagher, 2007). A third area of interest, which has particular relevance to Sierra Leone, tries to link these first two focal points to the 'question of youth' and the role that the country's burgeoning youth population is assuming in the post-conflict development process.

The paper begins by providing a brief contextual discussion of food security and Sierra Leone's 'urban challenge' in the aftermath of the war. In particular, an overview of the factors leading to the rapid growth of Freetown are presented, noting that as the urban food supply continues to be subjected to stress, it is likely that the social and political stability of the city will be further challenged. The paper then explores how UPA has increasingly become an important survival mechanism in urban livelihood portfolios for Freetown residents, especially during an era of rising global food prices and high urban unemployment. We then build on this discussion and examine a recent upsurge in cooperative activity associated with UPA in Freetown. Three main constraints faced by associations are identified: (i) problems of gaining access to urban land to cultivate; (ii) difficulties in mobilizing farm labor; and (iii) challenges in getting foodstuffs to the market to sell. The discussion demonstrates that collectively, UPA associations are often able to negotiate these challenges in creative ways, thereby playing an important role in safeguarding livelihoods and urban food security. In the process, however, the paper highlights how UPA associations may also be addressing a number of key livelihood issues that have particular salience to the youth population, an issue which has important significance for the country's future development trajectory (see Fanthorpe & Maconachie, 2010).

Post-conflict food security, youth, and the urban question in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has recently emerged from a long period of instability and dislocation following the end of a brutal decade-long civil war during the 1990s. Since the formal declaration of peace in 2002, the country has made great strides in post-conflict recovery and, with extensive donor support, has taken encouraging steps towards strengthening state security and governance and rebuilding infrastructure. While early efforts in post-war reconstruction focused primarily on rural development and the rehabilitation of rural livelihoods (see UN, 2004), more recently, attention has shifted to a daunting new set of problems unfolding in urban areas.

A variety of economic and human development indicators suggest that Sierra Leone continues to be ranked as one of the world's poorest countries (UNDP, 2009), and concerns among international donors and government policy makers about rising levels of urban unemployment and food security have returned to centre stage. These concerns are often framed against the backdrop of a series of challenges associated with the social reintegration of marginalized young men and women into society, and the underlying 'crisis of youth' narrative that continues to drive post-war development discourse and policy-making.[1] Indeed, the challenges faced by the country's youth cohort are acute, if not merely for the fact that youth represent such a significant proportion of the population. According to the 2004 Census, 79% of Sierra Leone's total population is under the age of 35 years and 33% is between the ages of 15 and 35. Nearly 70% of the latter group are unemployed and 53% are illiterate.

In the aftermath of the war, the government's focus on both job creation and food security was heavily reflected in the 'second pillar' of Sierra Leone's first Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, developed for the 2005–2007 period, and this has taken on a new 'youth' context in the second PRSP of 2009 (GoSL, 2009). While there continues to be much concern about the lack of opportunity and uncertain future of Sierra Leone's youthful population, this may be particularly so for those living in urban areas. One of the demographic consequences of forced displacement during the civil war was that the country's population became much more mobile and more urban (Brown, Fanthorpe, Gardener, Gberie, & Sesay, 2005). The economy and quality of life deteriorated rapidly during a decade of instability during the 1990s, when many young people in rural areas were forced to flee their homes and abandon their mainly agricultural livelihoods due to the rebel insurgency. It is estimated that more than 500,000 farm families were displaced by the conflict, and agricultural production was so severely dislocated that by 2001 only 20% of the annual rice requirement (the staple food) was produced in the country (EIU, 2002).

During the war, not only did food production in rural areas become severely dislocated, but Freetown became cut off from its rural food supply catchment. This was especially serious during the interregnum period in 1997, when there was a complete land, sea and air blockade in the Western Area surrounding Freetown. Since this time, the urban food supply has been put under further

[1] The 'crisis of youth' narrative has particular salience for increasing pressures associated with urban areas in Sierra Leone. In a number of informal settlements in Freetown, particularly in the east and central parts of the city, reports suggest that there are high concentrations of ex- combatants, many of whom did not formally undergo the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process and lack employment skills and training. This remains a source of great concern in Sierra Leonean government and donor circles. While security concerns during the colonial era centered on the fear that a flood of migrant youth into cities would serve to break the bonds of traditional rural communities, thereby undermining the system of 'indirect rule', more recent concerns focus on the risk of a return to violence if the economic oppression and political exclusion of youth does not cease. Indeed, 15–30 year-old males are the very demographic group that is most likely to resume warfare if left frustrated and excluded (MSI, 2004).