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Making a living: Land pressures and changing livelihood strategies among oil palm settlers in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

Since the establishment of oil palm land settlement schemes (LSSs) in West New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea, the settler population has increased significantly as second-generation settlers marry and raise families on their parents' blocks. We explore how settlers are responding to demographic and socio-economic change in an environment in which opportunities for land-use change are limited. In the context of rising population pressure, LSS smallholders are developing innovative livelihood strategies by pursuing non-farm income sources, increasing food production, acquiring additional land and migration. The type of migration or land accumulation strategy depends on household access to various resources, especially social and kinship networks, and capital. Agricultural extension and rural development policies have not yet responded to this socio-agronomic transformation. We conclude that economic diversification amongst smallholders creates new opportunities for the oil palm industry to formulate more innovative and sustainable policies that strengthen the oil palm industry in PNG while facilitating broad-based rural development.

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1. Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG), like other developing countries in the 1950s and 1960s, established land settlement schemes (LSSs) to promote agricultural and economic development. The LSSs were an attempt to shift settlers from a dependence on subsistence production to a reliance on export cash crop income where smallholder households would become intensive agriculturalists working their own land. Not imagined were the population and economic pressures and broader societal changes that would emerge over time on the LSSs. In the highly regulated oil palm LSSs with individual leases over fixed areas of land, settlers' options for agricultural change have been limited.

This paper explores how oil palm smallholders on the LSSs maintain agricultural production, household economic security and social stability in the context of population growth, limited opportunities for land-use change and fluctuating commodity prices. Drawing on fieldwork conducted as part of a socio-economic study among oil palm smallholders in West New Britain Province (WNB), PNG, we emphasise the agricultural and non-agricultural responses to the various pressures and opportunities present in smallholders' everyday lives and highlight the extent to which smallholder livelihoods are increasingly reliant on a range of income sources. The diversification of livelihood strategies occurring on the LSSs together with the associated changes in household structures and social relations is a major socio-agronomic transformation that has implications for smallholder extension policies and rural development more generally. We conclude by discussing the policy implications of this rural transformation.

2. Rural livelihoods

That Papua New Guinean smallholders diversify their incomes and livelihood strategies is not a new theme in the rural development literature. There is now an extensive literature acknowledging the income diversity of rural households in developing countries (e.g., Haggblade et al., 1989; Boomgaard and White, 1991; Koppel and Williams, 1994; Reardon, 1997; Dorsey, 1999; Bebbington, 2000; Ellis, 2000; de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2001; Rigg and Nattapoolwat, 2001). Much of this literature highlights the importance of off-farm income for household economic and food security, and for financing farm investments. An early study by Anderson and Leiserson (1980) reported that off-farm income was increasing rapidly as a proportion of total employment in rural regions in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Reardon's (1997) review of 25 studies of income diversification among rural households in Africa shows convincingly that rural non-farm wage labour as a share of total household income was significant, and on average made up 45% of rural household incomes. Whilst there were insufficient data to determine if the non-farm sector was increasing in importance in rural household earnings, some studies have pointed to increases over time (see Reardon, 1997).

Complementing these studies is recent research on de-agrarianisation in parts of Southeast Asia and Africa (Bryceson and Jamal, 1997; Ellis, 1998; Rigg and

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