Smallholders and plantation owners have big plans in Sierra Leone

By Gemma Ware in Makeni

Several large-scale plantation projects to produce for export are now underway, but the government's programmes to promote the activities of smallholders have yet to take off.

Despite the heavy rains, teams of sugarcane planters were hard at work in early July at the Addax Bioenergy estate near Makeni in northern Sierra Leone. Nearly 20 irrigation pivots of 1km in diameter were already in place and pumping water from the Rokel River to each 70ha circular plot.

"This is the first year that we're going all out. We want to be producing our first ethanol by the end of 2013," says managing director Nikolai Germann. The Swiss company's target is to have 5,000ha of cane ready by then to feed an ethanol plant that is now being built. Eventually, 10,000ha should produce 825,000m3 of ethanol per year for export to Europe. The waste will feed a biomass power plant to supply Addax's operations and the national grid.

In a country where agriculture, dominated by smallholders, contributed 62% of gross domestic product in 2010, the $270m Addax project is the largest in a new wave of export-driven agricultural investments. Goldtree Sierra Leone, part of US-based Goldtree Holdings, is investing $20m in oil palm plantations in Kailahun District to rehabilitate 30,000ha of palm trees using smallholders and outgrowers. It also plans to establish a new plantation and to build a processing mill with a capacity of 20-30tn per hour. Another US firm, MOST Ethanol, is developing a feasibility study for a sugar and ethanol project.

Energy minister Olunyoi Robbin-Coker supports biomass power projects, which produce energy from agricultural waste, and says they could become the "backbone of a rural electrification strategy". He brushes aside the food versus fuel debate, insisting there is plenty of land in Sierra Leone. "We have more than enough arable land to meet our food needs and still be able to do biofuels, should we wish to do that," he says.

The return to plantation-based agriculture has provoked criticism from environmental groups. The Oakland Institute pointed to local anger at Socfin Agricultural Company, a subsidiary of French group Bolloré, which has secured a lease for 6,500ha of land in Pujehun District. In October 2011, the police arrested 40 protestors after they blockaded the project area. Part of the problem stems from the power vested in the paramount chiefs who control land ownership and can sign leases without the consent of their communities.
Alongside the large plantations, the government launched the Smallholder Commercialisation Programme in 2009 with a target to set up 620 agribusiness centres (ABC) by 2014. Growth in production has been slow (see graph), and Abu Kargbo, a lecturer in agribusiness at Njala University, says the centres have struggled to function well “because the capacity to run the ABCs is lacking”.

**Expanding Markets**

Significant investment is also needed to create better markets for smallholder production. Africa Felix juice, a company that produces juice concentrates and is run by an Italian entrepreneur, exported its first shipment to Europe in December 2011.

Debate continues on how to manage land and forest use. There is currently a ban on commercial logging in Sierra Leone, introduced by President Ernest Bai Koroma’s administration in 2008. Lifted briefly last year to allow for the export of logs that had already been felled, the ban is unclear in its details. Logging for domestic use is largely unregulated.

Following evidence collected in a sting operation for an Al Jazeera documentary last year, two aides of vice president Samuel Sam-Sumana are on trial for accepting bribes to secure permits for commercial logging. “There is a lot of clandestine activity going on,” says Daniel Siaffa, chairman of the Environmental Forum for Action, who suggests fines should be larger and better enforced.

Tags:  
- Agriculture  
- Bribes  
- Investments  
- President Ernest Bai Koroma  
- Sierra Leone