

## LAND ACCESSIBILITY AND URBAN AGRICULTURE IN FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE

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### ABSTRACT

*Urban agriculture enables many urban dwellers to eke out their incomes but it has to compete with other land uses for land. In many cities in sub-Saharan Africa, where land is communally owned, access to land has often not been difficult for the urban farmer. In Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone, land is held in individual freehold ownership and access to land is dependent on one's financial capacity. This is critical, as Sierra Leone has just emerged from a long civil war, which has destroyed the basis of livelihood for many urban residents. The paper examines the approach currently adopted by urban farmers – many of who are women – to obtain land. Access to land by two groups of women farmers from Leicester and Goderich is examined. While the Leicester farmers compete in the market for land, the farmers in Goderich have access to land which is owned by government and is virtually free. The policy implications for urban agriculture are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Sierra Leone, land accessibility, urban agriculture*

### INTRODUCTION

In many countries in the developing world, policies regarding agricultural development have concentrated on large-scale commercial agriculture, which produces food for the market and for exports, or on the peasant farmer producing for subsistence. The paradox of this situation is that much of the food produced by the conventional agricultural activities end up in the city where the ever-bourgeoning population consume it.

The need for the urban population to produce at least some of its food requirements has not been seriously addressed in many cases. One reason has been the obvious lack of land for the purpose. Urban land is often deemed too expensive for a gricultural use. Again, a griculture, particularly non-commercial agriculture is often seen as not too glamorous an activity for the educated citizenry of the cities. Our cities are therefore often seen as consumers rather than producers of food. The evidence is abundant that if some serious attention were paid to it, urban agriculture could hold a great potential for feeding the popu-

lations of our cities. (Diallo, 1993; Jeavons, 1974; Rakodi, 1985; Tricaud, 1987; Drakakis-Smith, 1992).

Urban agriculture does not only provide food for the urban population, it also provides employment for the city's unemployed. Such employment could be either directly related to the cultivation of the land or could be in off-farm activities such as marketing of agricultural produce or food processing. A UNDP publication has observed,

*"Urban farming provides secure jobs to many in the city. In some cities, as many as one-fifth to one-third of all families are engaged in agriculture, with as many as a third of these having no other source of income. Tanzania's 1988 census found that urban agriculture was the second-largest employer in the district of Dar es Salaam, with a population of about two million ... One in five adults of working age in Dar es Salaam is a farmer" (UNDP 1996:170).*

For the urban employed, urban agriculture provides opportunities for improving their nutritional standards and for eking out their incomes to improve their living standards.

One of the greatest impediments to urban agriculture is accessibility to land. This is due to the fact that urban land is considered too valuable to devote to agriculture. In many cases, the use of land for agriculture has been considered only transitory while waiting for the right price for the land. Urban planners and land economists often view land in terms of its development value and are not impressed by arguments for devoting land for agricultural purposes. In many cases these arguments are fuelled by competition for urban land by investors eager to derive high profits from land development. Thus, in many cities, particularly in the developing world, land, which has been devoted to agricultural activities, are unbuildable lands - in the swamps and along drains.

*"Farmers simply expand onto unused public or private land or work out an informal agreement with the owner, taking over land planned or set aside for other purposes (such as forested areas) or encroaching on land that should be conserved for environmental reasons (such as wetlands)" (UNDP 1996:207)*

While it may be justifiable for reasons of economy, to restrain land in the centre of cities from being used for agricultural purposes, there is abundant land on the outskirts of cities. Peri-urban agriculture holds the key to the future of urban agriculture (Maxwell, 1993; Freeman, 1991). On the other hand, as many countries in the developing world seek to modernise, peri-urban land appear to hold the key to housing and industrial development. This is because most of the inner city land has already been developed and re-development schemes tend to be expensive in terms of money and social engineering. Competition between agriculture and development projects for peri-urban land is, thus, unending.

Urban agriculture in many cities has concentrated on market gardening, the production of poultry products, and some animal production. The emphasis has often been on market gardening because this produces fresh vegetables for the ready market provided by the urban centre. This is a well established phenomenon in location theory (e.g. see Alonso, 1964; Chisholm, 1973). This makes land availability and accessibility critical in urban agriculture as market gardening requires substantial amount of land for its success.

Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, presents a challenging situation for urban agriculture. This is because unlike in many other cities in sub-Saharan Africa, land in Freetown is not communally owned but is owned by individuals in freehold titles. Thus, accessibility is highly dependent on the money economy and one's ability to pay for land, and social considerations, which sometimes operate in communally owned

areas, are often ignored. For many of those engaged in urban agriculture, access to funds is a problem and therefore they have to devise various ways of obtaining access to land for their activities. It needs to be mentioned that the system of land holding in the city of Freetown is similar to the system operating in the city region – this area is referred to administratively as the Western Area and much of the discussion in this paper equally refers to this area. The names *Freetown* and the *Western Area* are, thus, used interchangeably in this paper. The paper concentrates on women farmers because they are in the overwhelming majority of farmers in the Western Area and also because they are the only ones organised into identifiable groups for agricultural purposes. The paper begins with a brief history of Sierra Leone and shows how the settlement was established. This is done to help in providing an understanding of the land tenure system. The land holding system in Freetown is discussed with particular reference to accessibility to land and its implications for agricultural activities. Gloucester and Goderich, both suburbs of Freetown are chosen for discussion because they present two different access routes to land for agriculture.

### SHORT HISTORY OF SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone began as a settlement established by the anti-slavery campaign in England, for the settlement of freed slaves from that country. The liberated slaves were settled in the Sierra Leone Peninsula, principally in Freetown, on land which was purchased from local chiefs in the name of the British Crown (Asiama, 2003). Other settlements, such as Wilberforce, Waterloo and Wellington, later developed, as Freetown grew, and became suburbs of the city. Freetown and its suburbs became known as the Western Area for purposes of administration. The Western Area was declared a colony of the English Crown in 1808 and was governed directly by the British. The inhabitants of the Western Area became known as the Creoles and spoke the Creole language, a hotchpotch of Eng-

lish and some West African languages. The Creoles were British in their outlook and mannerisms and these were evident in the clothes they wore, their quest for western education and the architecture of their buildings.

In 1896, the rest of Sierra Leone was declared a Protectorate of the British Crown and was governed by the British through the local chief under the colonial policy of *indirect rule*. Thus, while in Freetown and other parts of the Western Area, British laws and customs prevailed, life in the rest of the country was entirely different and followed local customs and traditions. The separate systems of administration persisted in the country till independence and their effects are still being felt - not least in the country's land tenure relations.

### LAND TENURE IN FREETOWN

Land tenure in Sierra Leone strictly follows the separate systems of administration in the country inherited from the British. While land is held communally in the Provinces where accessibility is enhanced, land in the Western Area is held predominantly in individual private ownership and accessibility depends on the market economy (Asiama, 2003). Government also owns a significant amount of land in the Western Area whereas in the Provinces government only has *reservations*, which are usually leasehold interests not exceeding 99 years and are used as residential quarters for government employees, offices for the machinery of government, forest reserves, etc. Land holding in Freetown is classified into two – private lands and public lands.

#### Private Lands

Private lands in Freetown are classified as those lands held in individual ownership as freehold titles. In many cases title to such lands has been inherited and few owners have any evidence of ownership. In the words of Chief Justice Livesey Luke,

*"It is a matter of common knowledge that most of the lands in the Western Area outside the city of Freetown are based on possessory title and most of them are not covered by title deeds. That situation is the result of the history of land holding established in the Western Area about two centuries ago. The system which has been in operation since the founding of the Colony (now the Western Area) is that land passes within the same family from one generation to another in many cases without the existence of any document of title." (Renner-Thomas 2000:44)*

It appears that many of the settlers acquired more land than they actually needed. The evidence shows that some landowners hold as much as sixteen hectares of land in peri-urban Freetown. The large amount of unoccupied lands has meant that there is a good store of land for agricultural purposes.

#### **Public (State) Lands**

Public lands in Freetown are known generally as Crown Lands. These comprise lands which have been acquired "for the service of the Colony" under the Public Lands Ordinance, 1898 (Cap 116), and lands which were "claimed as Crown Lands" under the Unoccupied Lands Ordinance, 1911 (Cap 117). The exact amount of such lands is not known as government is still assessing its land holdings but it is generally known to be substantial.

#### **AGRICULTURE AND ACCESS TO LAND IN FREETOWN**

Access to land for agriculture is determined by land availability - which determines land prices, and a person's purchasing power. Land prices in Freetown could be quite high. Peri-urban land in the Gloucester, Leicester and Regent enclave sell for between \$20,000.00 and \$40,000.00 per hectare (actual price depends on topography, ease of accessibility, and ease of access to municipal services). Land prices are fixed in relation to the residual value of land and therefore reflect the development potential. This means that though

the land may currently be vacant or used for agriculture, its value is estimated not for its current use but for its highest and best use. Agriculture can hardly pay these high prices.

#### **Access to Land**

The high land prices mean that agriculture is not able to compete favourably with other land uses for land. As already explained, agriculture is seen only as a transitory activity which keeps the land in use while the land owner waits to exploit the residual value. Landlords are, thus, averse to granting long-lasting interests in their land and farmers are only given licences which, in most cases, last only for the farming season. The terms of the licence are unwritten but generally, both landlord and tenant are aware of their obligations. The licence expires at the end of every farming season and needs to be renewed. Though the renewal can be fairly automatic, farmers often have cause to feel insecure. Some landlords complained that some farmers do not use good husbandry methods and do not take care of the beds. In such cases, the licences may not be renewed. Some farmers also complained that where another farmer offers the landlord a higher rent, he is likely to eject the existing farmer in favour of the new tenant. Notwithstanding the unwritten nature of the agreement, landlords often give receipts for rental payments.

Rents are fixed according to the size of the land, which is determined by the number of beds (locally called *heaps*), on the land. The beds are often made by the farmers and become permanent. They are fortified on the sides by stones carefully arranged to prevent the soil dropping off. When a farmer discontinues the use of a particular piece of land, she leaves the beds for the next farmer. In the Gloucester, Leicester and Regent areas, an area of land with 20 beds (i.e. about 0.1 ha.) attracts a rent of \$40.00. Rents are usually paid up-front before the group is allowed onto the land.

Farmers are generally restricted, by their landlords, in the type of crops they can cultivate. In

Gloucester, Leicester and Regent only vegetables can be cultivated. This means that in the rainy season, the women farm upland and in the dry season, lowlands. The landlords do not permit the cultivation of rice in this area because rice takes a long time in maturing and the use of the land may over-run the farming season. In addition, if the land is cultivated all year, it does not fallow and loses nutrients after each farming season; fertiliser application is often necessary but expensive. Thus, uplands lie fallow in the dry season.

Rents paid are for the farming season only and not for the calendar year – this is normally for the period, October to June. This is the rainy season. During this period, the lowlands are usually flooded and the uplands are cultivated. Where the farmer wishes to cultivate the lowlands in the dry season, that has to be the basis of a fresh agreement with the landowner.

The study examined access to land for two farmers groups – one in Gloucester and the other in Goderich, both suburbs of Freetown - to identify how they obtained land for their farming activities. Owing to the pre-eminence of women in agriculture in Freetown, the discussion that follows relates to women who were the focus for the study.

#### **The Gloucester Cultural Group**

A typical farming group in Gloucester is the Gloucester Cultural Group which has about 50 members, mainly women. As the name implies, it is essentially a cultural group, which gives cultural performances on contract. To help the womenfolk meet their financial obligations to the group and to their families, the group entered into farming in Gloucester Village, which lies on a hill beyond Fourah Bay University.

To obtain land for farming, the Group negotiated with a local Creole landowner and obtained about 0.4 hectare of land. The land slopes into a small stream at the foot of the hill. Though, like

all such licences, there is no documentation on the transaction, both parties are aware of, and observe the, terms of the grant. The grant lasts for a year and the Group can farm the land all year. This means that in the rainy season, the Group farms the slopes of the hill, and farms the valley in the dry season. Rent is fixed at \$40.00 per season or \$80.00 per annum. The terms of the grant do not permit the cultivation of rice; thus, the Group grows vegetables, such as carrots, cabbage, Chinese cabbage, thyme and lettuce.

The group's leaders were concerned about the lack of a formal agreement as experience in the area suggested that it was possible for them to lose the land to a farmer who offered a higher rent to the landlord. This sense of insecurity means that the Group loathes investing in land improvement. For example, the group complained that *grasscutters* destroy their crops when they farm upland. This has restricted the amount of land they can cultivate though they are paying for the entire land. The solution would be for them to fence that part of the land and set traps for the animals, which would provide meat to supplement their protein consumption since the farmers consider *grasscutter* to be a delicacy. While they agree that this is a possible solution, they do not want to make the investment because they cannot be sure of their access to the land in subsequent farming seasons.

#### **The Ogo Farms Women Farmers Association of Goderich**

The land on which the Ogo farmers work is irrigated and is part of about 61 hectares owned by the government. The Njala University College, the Institute of Agricultural Research, the Rice Research Institute, and the National Agricultural Training College currently utilise part of the land for research purposes. A substantial part is, however, shared among women farmers' groups in the area who have formed an association, the Ogo Farm Women's Farmers Association, for the purpose of farming.

The Association was formed in 1996 and currently has 400 members divided into six Associations each having six Unit Groups. Each Group has its elected leadership structure and the Executive come together to form the leadership of the Association. Members pay annual dues of Le 500.00. No payment is made for the land but each group pays Le 2,000.00 p.a. as its contribution to the maintenance of the irrigation lines and other facilities. Each group has been allocated two plots of land for its use. Members cultivate the land all year and grow vegetables and rice in rotation between the rainy and the dry seasons. The Association cultivates exotic vegetables like coriander, cabbage, lettuce, carrots and local vegetables like garden eggs, okra, spinach, pepper, etc. Root crops like cassava and potatoes are also cultivated. Each group cultivates about 0.1 hectare and realises annual average revenues of about Le 600,000.00 about half of which goes into the cost of inputs such as fertilisers, chicken manure, seed, etc.

Though the farmers have no formal title to their land, they do have a deep sense of security as they deal directly with the government. They do not pay rent for their use of the land and they can use their land all year round with no limitations on the type of crops to be grown. This sense of security has encouraged them to invest in the maintenance of the irrigation lines and other facilities.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

There is no doubt that urban agriculture holds good prospects for augmenting the incomes of women farmers in Freetown and other parts of the Western Area. When the women have access to land, they are able to participate meaningfully in agriculture. But access to land has been affected by their inability to purchase land owing to the land tenure system and its reliance on the money economy. Added to this are issues relating to security of interest. Currently, the women farmers have licences, which last for

farming seasons only. This does not augur well for long term planning and investment.

The possibility of the landowners to give short leases to the farmers to improve their security needs to be examined. These short leases must ensure that the landowner's interests are not jeopardised in terms of his ability to enter the land market should the conditions demand it. To enhance the farmer's security, the option to renew should be built into the agreement, as should a provision for the tenant to remove his improvements at the end of the lease.

Farmers in the Gloucester Area are restricted in the use of their land for the cultivation of rice. This naturally affects the farmers' ability to get the most out of their land. Leasing the land to the farmers throughout the year and not only for the farming season would enable the farmers to plan their cultivation strategies.

The experience of the Ogoo farmers is not replicable. The farmers need to be made more self-sufficient. A more realistic rent, which with time would approach the market value, should be charged for the use of the land. This should help to make more land available to the farmers and also ensure the optimum use of land.

The Western Area does not have an up-to-date Structure Plan on land use. This means that areas have not been demarcated for agriculture and the other land uses. The evidence from the Goderich area suggests that the dedication of the area to agriculture has meant that there is little competition from other land uses and thus, the low land values. In the Gloucester area, however, agricultural land is in constant competition with other land uses and hence the high land values. This could adversely affect the future of agriculture and urban food security.

### **CONCLUSION**

Urban agriculture in Freetown and other parts of the Western Area is quite significant in provid-

ing employment to the womenfolk who would otherwise have no employment.

While problems of marketing, transportation, off-farm storage facilities, training and access to micro-credit militate against an efficient system of farming, it appears that improving access to land is a *sine qua non* for a successful system of agriculture in Freetown. And this should engage the attention of policy makers.

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