

*This issue of the
Australasian Review of African Studies
is dedicated to*

Cherry Gertzel OA (1928– 2015)

*Former Editor of the Australasian Review of African
Studies; Founding member and former President of
the African Studies Association of Australasia and the
Pacific*

*For your inspiration and dedication to African
Studies.*

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'The Diamond of Western Area is Land': Narratives of Land Use
and Land Cover Change in Post-conflict Sierra Leone

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Abstract

In a rapidly changing urban environment, land use and land cover change (LULCC) have occupied the research agenda of the human-environment relationship discourse for decades. Although much LULCC research has addressed non-conflict environments, narratives that shape such emerging landscapes both during and after conflict have received little attention. This article therefore explores landscape dynamics in the Western Area (WA) of Sierra Leone through nine focus group discussion sessions involving 73 participants, and 30 key informant interviews with participants drawn from ministries, government departments and agencies whose work is environment related. Drawing on these data, this study has helped establish an understanding of the main drivers of post-conflict landscape change in the WA of Sierra Leone. Findings indicate that increases in WA's population, underpinned by the decade long civil conflict, culminated in high demand for land and hence its high economic value. The article also argues that weak environmental regulation, low staff capacity and the post-conflict land management framework contributed to the landscape changes observed after the conflict.

Introduction¹

The recognition that civil wars and other forms of conflict that underpin human displacement (hereinafter, conflict) as underlying drivers of landscape change (Geist & Lambin, 2002; Tejaswi, 2007), has become a growing research interest in the scholarship of conflict-induced land use and land cover change (LULCC) (Gorsevski, Kasischke, Dempewolf, Loboda, & Grossmann, 2012; Nackoney et al., 2014). Documentation about the level and intensity of conflict-induced impacts on both flora and fauna serves as a guide to post-conflict environmental recovery programmes. This is important because 90% of major civil conflicts between 1950 and 2000 took place in countries with rich biodiversity, and 80% occurred within biodiversity hotspot areas (Hanson et al., 2009). Whilst some scholarly works have examined the impact of conflict on wildlife, others have utilised geospatial technology to examine the effect of conflicts on forest cover (Ordway, 2015) and agricultural lands (Witmer & O'Loughlin, 2009).² Geospatial technology such as remote sensing techniques can provide improved temporal frequencies of data and its use is relatively inexpensive when

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² Note that serious discussions about the environmental impact of conflicts using geospatial technologies emerged after the Iraq-Kuwait conflict because of its widespread and long-lasting environmental damage (see Abuelgasim *et al.*, 1999; Husain, 1994; Kwarteng, 1998; Stephens & Matson, 1993). Prior to its extensive use in conflict-environment studies, geospatial technologies have played a pivotal role in monitoring landscape dynamics at various scales (local, national and international levels). The inaccessibility of conflict-ridden areas to undertake in situ assessment of landscape change parameters, in part, justifies the reliance on geo-spatial data both during and in the immediate post-conflict period for the assessment of forest cover loss or gain, and monitoring agricultural activities, the abandonment of agricultural lands, and resource extraction during such periods (Gorsevski, Geores, & Kasischke, 2013; Gorsevski et al., 2012).

compared to field data collection. It is viewed as particularly beneficial in conflict and post-conflict research seeking to understand changes in ecosystems, forest cover and resource extraction (Gorsevski, Geores, & Kasischke, 2013).

Post-conflict periods are delicate, fragile, and challenging because the economy transitions from one characterised by complete breakdown of economic activities and statutory institutions to one that is configured to provide improved social protections and livelihoods for people (Lynch, Maconachie, Binns, Tengbe, & Bangura, 2013). One of the most contested and important resource issues during post-conflict periods is the 'land question' because unresolved land tenure problems can rekindle conflict (Bruch et al., 2008; Unruh & Williams, 2013). After conflicts, attempts by internally displaced persons (IDPs) to resettle to their homes of origin or access land elsewhere, for agricultural activities or housing construction, generate serious competition for and confusion over land (Unruh, 2001). Significant land-related problems that come into focus during the post-conflict period include: (a) housing shortages, which result from housing destruction during conflict, (b) surges in housing needs in urban areas from IDPs and returnees, and (c) an increase in illegal land possession activities (UN-HABITAT, 2012). While it is important to acknowledge that latent land-related problems may exist prior to civil conflicts and other forms of conflict, some authors have argued that civil conflicts exacerbate problems with 'access to' and 'ownership of' land (Bruch et al., 2008; Unruh, 2003). This presents a chaotic situation because while returnees attempt to repossess their land, landless migrants often make efforts to access unclaimed land parcels, contributing to urban sprawl and unplanned development. Furthermore, amid these competing demands, rural-urban migrants with agricultural skills often undertake urban and peri-urban agriculture (hereafter, urban agriculture – UA) as a livelihood strategy for household subsistence and to generate income.³

For the most part, discussions about conflict-induced landscape change have focused on the degree of such changes using categorical data from classified satellite images (Ordway, 2015; Witmer & O'Loughlin, 2009). Such data are insufficient for exploring landscape dynamics because they do not answer the 'why question' of landscape

³ Urban agriculture, as used in this article, includes activities related to food production and market distribution in the inner city and along urban 'fringes', providing sustenance and income for urban dwellers (Thornton, Momoh, & Tengbe, 2012).

change. Research aimed at understanding observed landscape changes from the perspective of ‘locals’ is rare. In the case of Sierra Leone, however, an exception is Wilson and Wilson (2013), who integrated people’s perspectives of observed landscape changes into their analysis.

Sierra Leone’s civil conflict caused widespread displacement of the country’s population, disrupted economic activities, destroyed the country’s infrastructure, and caused entrenched poverty (Maconachie, Binns, Tengbe, & Johnson, 2007).⁴ The IDP crisis caused a population influx into the country’s capital, Freetown, and placed tremendous pressure on the Western Area landscape (Figure 1).⁵ Through narratives of local actors, this article examines the various factors that influenced and continue to shape the WA landscape. The article contributes to the LULCC discourse by exploring the local perspective on causes of landscape change from a conflict view and adds post-conflict perspectives as opposed to those of a politically and socially stable society.

The remaining sections of this article describe the data collection and analysis methodology, followed by the analysis themes that will be explored later in this article including population growth and increased housing needs, changes in livelihood portfolios, and government policies and low staff capacities.

Data Collection and Analysis

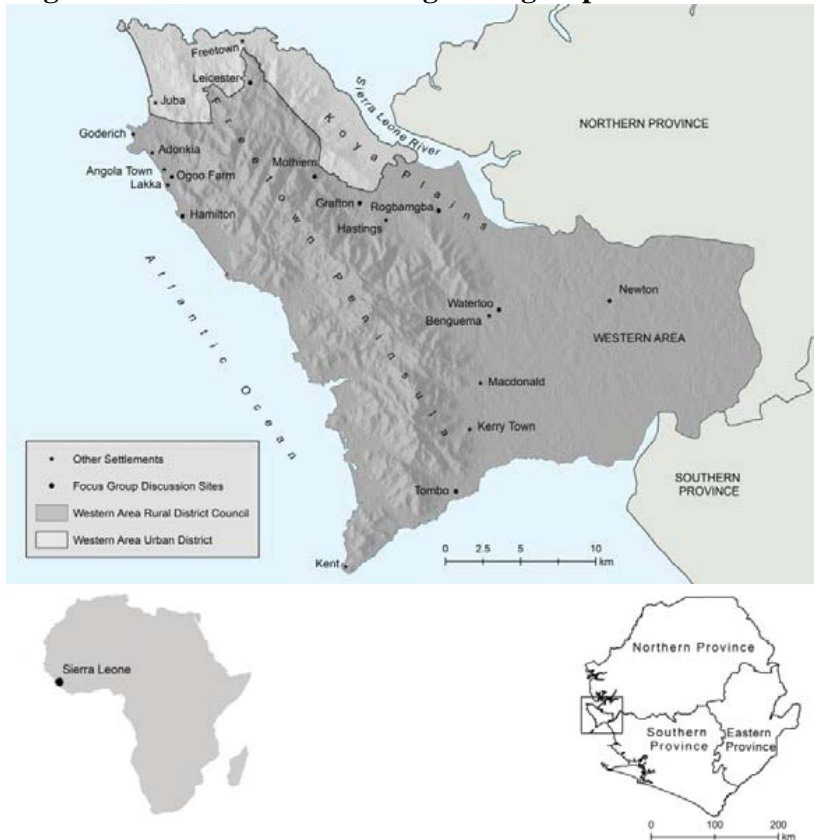
The argument in this article is derived from PhD research data collected between November 2012 and May 2013, through nine focus group (FG) sessions involving 73 participants and 30 key informant (KI) interviews. Although the FG and KI participants were purposively sampled, the criteria of age and long residential status in the selected or nearby

⁴ The civil conflict had a debilitating effect on Sierra Leone’s agrarian and mining sectors, to the point that in 2000, the country officially became the world poorest country, ranked 174 out of 174 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2000). More than a decade since the conflict ended, the country still occupies the bottom rungs of the HDI report, ranked 183 out of 187 (United Nations Development Programme, 2014).

⁵ The WA is home to the only chimpanzee sanctuary in Sierra Leone. Its forest, the Western Area Peninsula Forest Reserve (WAPFoR), gazetted as the Western Area Peninsula National Park (WAP-NP) in 2012 and tentatively listed as a World Heritage site (see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5741/>), is a biodiversity hotspot and home to approximately 80-90% of the Sierra Leone’s terrestrial biodiversity (at least 316 bird and 200 plant species). During the conflict, seven of 18 IDP camps were located within the WA (Wilson, 2004).

communities (Figure 1), and work experience with environment-related government ministries or agencies aided the selection processes for the FG and KI participants, respectively.⁶

Figure 1. Western Area showing focus group discussion sites.



Note: *Grafton = FG1, Rogbamgba = FG2, Mothiem = FG3, Ogoo Farm = FG4, Waterloo = FG5, Leicester = FG6, Hamilton = FG7, Tombo = FG8 and Newton = FG9.*

⁶ All FG participants (aged 20 years and above) had lived in the selected or nearby community for at least 10 years. KIs from environment-related government ministries and agencies (Ministry of Land, Ministry of Agriculture, and the Environmental Protection Agency) had at least five years work experience with their respective ministries or agencies. Participants who met these criteria were thought to have considerable knowledge of changes in the WA's landscape and were therefore in a position to report about the driving forces of the observed changes. FG sessions were organised in groups of seven or nine participants. This was aimed at preventing any possible tie on issues under discussion that required voting.

All interviews and discussion sessions were held in the national *lingua franca*, Krio.⁷ The adoption of multiple qualitative data gathering techniques stems from the consideration that understandings of human-environment relationships is improved through adopting mixed methods (Cheong, Brown, Kok, & Lopez-Carr, 2012). An important strength of using multiple methods is that it allows triangulation between data sources, to build confidence in the findings.

Participants described their perceptions about the reasons for the level of landscape change observed in the region over the years, especially in the conflict and post-conflict periods. The recorded interviews and discussions were transcribed and analysed into themes using a CAQDAS software package, NVivo 10.⁸ To report the direct voices of some participants and to maintain their anonymity, every participant was assigned a 'name code' based on the data generation category to which they belong (FG = Focus Group, KI = Key Informant), followed by a 'participant number' (FG1-P1, FG2-P5, FG3-P9, KI-1, KI-2, etc.). Field observations on the level of landscape change recorded during the 2012-2013 fieldwork helped to reinforce their stories.

Population Growth and Increased Housing Needs

It is projected that 66-69.9% of the world's population will live in urban areas by 2050 and 56% of Africa's population will become urbanised by the same time (UNDESAPD, 2014). The environmental impacts of this increase in urban population and the resulting conversion of vegetated regions to built-up areas has become a major focus of research, especially in developing countries. Many FG and KI participants throughout the research process consistently suggested that changes in the WA landscape were the result of the unprecedented increase in WA's population (e.g. FG5-P3 and FG5-P6; FG7-P1, FG7-5, FG7-P6 and FG7-P7; KI-7, KI-10 and KI-18).⁹ Commenting on the level of deforestation in the region, Hoffman (2007) noted that the swell in population has helped transform a once sleepy coastal capital into one

⁷ Krio, the national *lingua franca*, was used to narrow down the linguistic divide among speakers of the different languages during the discussion sessions.

⁸ CAQDAS is an acronym for Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software.

⁹ The displacement of half of Sierra Leone's 4.5 million people contributed to WA's population increase from 554,243 in 1985 to 947,112 in 2004. Its population is projected to reach 1,307,507 in 2014, with rural-urban migration contributing a significant portion of this increase (Koroma, Turay, & Moigua, 2006).

of the metropolitan nodal points along the Senegal-Nigeria stretch of coastline.

Hoffman's comment gives an indication of the role of IDPs in the transformation of both the social and environmental landscapes of regions that serve as host communities to IDPs. Although there is a dearth of accurate statistics on the number of IDPs who were resident in the WA (McGoldrick, 2003), several FG and KI participants made strong connections between the IDP-driven increase in population within the WA and the observed landscape changes in the region. About 80% of research participants acknowledged the refusal of some IDPs to return to their original homes after the conflict as a contributing factor to the observed changes. For example, FG5-P3 and KI-10 stated:

[The] majority of the people that came to the Western Area [during the conflict] did not bother to return to the provinces [after the conflict]. They decided to stay within the Western Area (FG5-P3, 18/2/2013).

During the repatriation programme of IDPs from the WA towards the ending and after the conflict, some of the people who were repatriated have to come back to the Western Area because they have [become] used to the area. They went only to get the resettlement package given to them (KI-10. Freetown, 7/03/2013).

The comments by FG5-P3 and KI-10 above bring to attention the social networks that IDPs built over the years and the social opportunities (electricity, education and health) that the WA offered these IDPs. These issues were clearly evident in the responses of several participants, including but not limited to FG9-P3, FG9-P5 and FG9-P7. Narrating her reason for staying in the WA, a decade after the official declaration of peace in 2002, FG9-P7 remarked:

I have realised that I will have to start all over again when I get back to the village. The conflict made me to lose everything. I have now become used to city 'dredging'. I will find it difficult if I return to my village. Facilities that are found in the WA are not in the villages (FG9-P7, 15/04/2013).¹⁰

¹⁰ Dredging in the Sierra Leone context means to eke out a living.

Research by McGoldrick (2003) into the resettlement and re-integration of IDPs into their rural homes in Sierra Leone after the conflict identified the lack of protection in case of post-conflict relapses, loss of alternative livelihood coping mechanisms, and the unavailability of infrastructure and basic social amenities, as reasons for the unwillingness of some IDPs to be resettled in their rural homes. Although some 220,000 IDPs were resettled between April 2001 and October 2002, thereby officially ending the IDP re-integration programme, Maconachie et al.'s (2007) argument that the suggestion that the IDP crisis ended with the closure of the resettlement and reintegration programme is misguided is clearly supported by the responses of FG9-P7 and KI-10 above.¹¹

More than a decade after the official declaration of peace in 2002, discussions about the post-conflict influx of people into the WA for economic, health and educational reasons are very much alive. Increased housing needs from population growth have, for the most part, resulted in the conversion of prime agricultural and forestland, especially at the urban-bush interface, into habitable areas. During the FG sessions, some respondents (e.g. FG6-P4, FG6-P5 and FG6-P7) made a strong connection between the continued urban population increase, the rise in house rents, and the pressure on the available land for infrastructure development. A male FG participant from Leicester village demonstrated this connection in the following statement:

... WA's population has increased more than what it was in the early 1980s and even in the 1990s. Because house rents are getting expensive even in this village, everybody wants to free him/herself from [the burden of] paying rent. Now that everybody wants to build [a house], land has become expensive too. Before now 1-2 Million Leones will give you a plot of land where you can build, but now, if you don't have up to 10-50 Million Leones you cannot get it (FG6-P5, 10/3/2013).

Discussing the increase in rent as a driver of the observed landscape changes, about 87% of KI and FG participants agreed that the rising cost of house rents started with the arrival of Liberian refugees in the 1990s.

¹¹ The reluctance of some IDPs to return to their rural homes led to the transformation of temporary camps into permanent homes, to the extent that their growth merged with nearby communities, as is evident in the Grafton-Jui stretch.

They opined that the willingness of Liberian refugees to pay house rents in dollars helped change the housing economy, especially in the Greater Freetown area.¹² Although the legal tender in Sierra Leone is the ‘Leone’, research participants consistently mentioned that some property owners price their houses in United States Dollars. A KI from the Ministry of Lands observed:

The dollarisation of the [house] rent started all of this. Because, if you [want] a poor man [...], to rent a house, self-contain¹³ [say] 3,000 USD a year, he would rather go to the bush and find somewhere to build one small hut out of mud bricks and give it self-contain [status] with that money (KI-27, Freetown, 02/4/2013).¹⁴

FG participants explained that the increase in house rent, especially in the Greater Freetown area, is pushing low-income earners to build houses in uninhabitable areas. During the fieldwork, evidence of high levels of desperation as experienced by individuals were noted in their efforts to erect a house anywhere they deemed feasible in both the mountainous and coastal regions (Figure 2). Such scenes were also evident in the creeks of Aberdeen in the western part of the capital, Freetown.

It was clear from discussions with FG participants, particularly among those who were engaged in farming activities in rural areas of Sierra Leone before their relocation to the WA, that, in the WA, they were confronted with a land tenure system that requires an outright purchase and title deeds, which was not the case in the rural areas.¹⁵ Scholars have argued that if IDPs, ex-combatants and other rural dwellers are not provided with secure land access or reintegrated into their original rural settings, they will relocate to areas they consider to be ‘open access’, including forest areas, mangroves, and national parks (Alao, 2007; Shambaugh, Oglethorpe, & Ham, 2001).

¹² Dollars here refers to United States Dollars (USD).

¹³ A ‘self contain’ in this context refers to a house with a lavatory, bathrooms and kitchen all in one housing unit

¹⁴ During the fieldwork in November 2012 to May 2013, 1 USD was equivalent to Le 4,317.19.

¹⁵ See Renner-Thomas (2010) for discussion on Sierra Leone’s dualistic land tenure system.

Figure 2. Mangrove vegetation cleared for housing development in Jui, Western Area.



Photo credit: S. Gbanie 2012-2013 Fieldwork.

FG and KI participants argued that the desire to own a house has caused land to become the most valuable commodity in the region. The high financial value of land that accompanied the increased population pressure helped to promote uncontrolled and haphazard land access as Figure 2 illustrates.¹⁶ Seventy-eight percent of FG participants and KIs equated the quick rise in the monetary value of land in the WA, particularly after conflict, to that of diamonds, a resource that provided tremendous financial support to the Revolutionary United Front during the conflict period.¹⁷ As FG2-P6 stated:

Land has become [...] so important and expensive in the Western Area [...]. People just think that land has become [a] diamond. Formerly, when they talk about [the]

¹⁶ Several newspaper reports have alleged that the increase in land price has caused some individuals in the Ministry of Lands to engage in fraudulent land deals. See for example: “The scramble for land in Sierra Leone”, Politico Sierra Leone, 12th May 2013 available from: <http://politicosl.com/2013/05/the-scramble-for-land-in-sierra-leone/> and ‘Conspiracy’ Corrupt officials exposed at Ministry of Lands, Housing and the Environment’, Standard Times 28th June 2008 available from: http://www.standardtimespress.org/artman/publish/article_2602.shtml.

¹⁷ See Abdullah (1998) or Gberie (2005) for details on the role of diamonds in Sierra Leone’s conflict.

diamondiferous areas, [...] everybody was welcome [to] legally or illegally mine. They just think the same thing has happened in the Western Area and [as such everybody thinks] the diamond of Western Area is land (FG2-P6, 15/3/2013).

With the underscored high financial value of land as in FG2-P6's comment above, it was therefore not surprising when several participants identified illegal land acquisition as a cause for the changing landscape. They described the illegal, uncontrolled and haphazard land access driven by the surge in land demand from the growing population and its high financial value as 'land grabbing'. This phrase, used by 98% of the research participants, has a different meaning to its typical academic use.¹⁸ Like all other research respondents, for one KI:

Land grabbing is when somebody does not want to buy land, either private or state ownership, but just go and deforest the place and start to sell or sometimes just inhabit the place. Land grabbing is a major cause of deforestation around the WA (KI-21, Freetown, 4/4/2013).

Whilst this might also be described as squatting, research participants defined it as grabbing, because it is illegal and some individuals are doing it only for perceived financial benefit while squatters build illegal and shanty houses. It is important to note that respondents from the FG sessions and KIs heavily debated 'what type of individuals' are involved in the land grabbing trade. Nevertheless, 64% of respondents considered unemployed youths and ex-combatants to be the 'kingpins' involved in this activity.¹⁹ Research participants suggested that the readiness of some Ministry of Lands officials to do 'land laundering' is fuelling the illegal land trade.²⁰ According to some

¹⁸ The term 'land grabbing' has been commonly used in the academic literature to describe land deals between governments and multinational companies for the cultivation of commercial crops (e.g. sugar cane and oil palm) that may limit smallholders' livelihood potential within rural communities that rely heavily on subsistence farming.

¹⁹ Sierra Leone's youth unemployment, which is estimated at 60%, is among the highest within the West African sub-region (African Economic Outlook, 2012)

²⁰ 'Land laundering' is used here to mean the transformation of grabbed land into legally owned land.

participants (FG4-P1, FG4-P2, FG4-P4 and FG4-P6), some of the land grabbers used influential community members to gain access to land. In that light, FG4-P6 remarked:

Some people use influential people [e.g. government officials, chiefs or community elders]. When they call their names, to say that this person is the owner of this land and because of their position in government, some land officials are scared of pushing [the land grabbers] away. (FG4-P6, 07/02/2013)

Narrating his personal experience as a government official with some political clout, KI-21 clearly expressed how land grabbers lured influential people into the complex web of illegal land acquisition.

People have approached me [to ask] whether I want land. According to them, they have a land parcel, which their great-great-grandfather used to farm as far back as the 1960s. However, they have no document for such land but if I can help them get the land documents, they will give some portion of it since they do not have money to pay me. Now, if you investigate what they are saying, you will find out that it is not their land but rather a state land. You know, we used to rely on a document we called 'indemnity'. The chief will sign that document if he is aware that any of a family owns the land before but there is no document to prove the ownership. Ministry has long stopped using such documents [indemnity] (KI-21, Freetown, 4/4/2013).

So far, this article has demonstrated that continued population growth of the region and the associated increased demand for infrastructure, including dwelling houses, was and remains a major driver of landscape change for the WA. It is now necessary to focus on the different livelihood portfolios that the growing population embarked upon after they moved to the WA and how these portfolios shaped WA's landscape.

Livelihoods

Investigations into an IDP livelihood framework in the Pader District of Northern Uganda concluded that charcoal production, rock and sand mining, and brick making resulted in complete degradation of wetlands

and deforestation of forests surrounding IDP camps (Owona, 2008). Similarly in the WA, approximately 83% of FG and KI participants stated that the various livelihood activities that IDPs adopted (UA, charcoal production, wood fetching, and stone mining) helped shape the landscape. It is estimated that 95% of Sierra Leone's population relies on firewood and charcoal as energy sources for cooking (UNEP, 2010). FG and KI participants (e.g. FG5-P2, FG5-P4 and FG5-P8; KI-1, KI-3, KI-5 and KI-8) claimed that IDPs seized the opportunity of the increased demand for firewood and charcoal, especially with the disruption in its supply from the provinces during the peak of the conflict, to clear the forests and mangrove vegetation that were in close proximity to IDP camps for their energy and income needs. According to KI-8:

During the conflict [...], firewood was difficult to obtain from the provinces. People needed charcoal and firewood to cook and some for sale. Because of that, almost all the trees in the Botanical Garden and Tree Planting area around Fourah Bay College community were cut down and sold either as wood or burnt for charcoal (KI-8, Freetown, 05/3/2013).

In addition to firewood and charcoal needs for the purposes of energy provision and income generation as illustrated by KI-8's comment, increased agricultural activities were second most common driver identified by respondents. Forty-six FG participants and twenty-three KIs stated that for IDPs to become resilient to the shocks that accompanied their displacement from their rural homes and the subsequent food crisis that ensued following increased rebel activities that cut-off WA from its food supply catchment (the north, south and eastern provinces) and the embargo of 1997, IDPs and low-income urban dwellers with agricultural skills embarked on UA. Note, however, that the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Food Security (hereinafter, the Ministry of Agriculture), gave temporary land access to displaced rural farmers to undertake UA in some areas within the WA. This is illustrated in the explanation of FG1-P7:

The Forestry [Division of the Ministry of Agriculture] was giving temporary permits to people to undertake agricultural activities. Some farmers who the Ministry of Agriculture gave permission to cultivate those land are the

[illegal] owners of such land parcels today. They have demarcated those areas they were cultivating and converted it to their own (FG1-P7, 13/4/2013).

The quote from FG1-P7 underscores the importance of agriculture to the livelihood of IDPs as majority of them were farmers in their rural homes. The majority of the IDPs who found themselves in the WA were involved in one form of farming activity or another (Maconachie, Binns, & Tengbe, 2012). The increased UA activity in the WA during the conflict gained policy recognition in 2002 through the national food security drive, 'Operation Feed the Nation'. Today, UA is considered a strategy for food security and income generation within the region (Thornton et al., 2012).²¹ Although the decision to give temporary access to unoccupied land to displaced rural farmers to cultivate was a food security measure, participants argued that some individuals took it as an opportunity to deforest and possess such lands illegally. Like other FG participants, FG1-P4, FG1-P6 and FG1-P7 argued that those who were granted the farming permits possibly misunderstood the nature of the permit they were granted and also took advantage of the weak environmental regulatory framework that existed both during and after the conflict. It is important to note that English Land Law, which allows freehold and state land ownership in the WA governs land ownership in the region, as opposed to communal land ownership in the provinces. KI-8 opined that to a typical 'Salone Man', anything that concerns the state is assumed to be 'free for all', without realising that it is their responsibility to protect it. It is important to note that the land parcels, to which the Ministry of Agriculture gave temporary access for cultivation, were classified as 'state land'.

Having discussed the contribution to the transformation of the landscape of various livelihood activities including UA, charcoal production and firewood fetching that residents in the WA embarked on during the civil conflict and in the immediate post-conflict period, the next section of this article addresses the policy issues and (lack of) institutional staff capacity that helped WA residents to take the advantage they took in transforming the region's landscape.

²¹ Cultivation of vegetables in the mountain rural villages of Leicester and Gloucester, which dates back to the colonial era, became increasingly important and compensated for the food security crisis that accompanied the embargo and the disruption of agricultural activities in the provinces during the conflict period.

Government Policies and Low Staff Capacity

Respondents identified a policy of community land ownership, supposedly adopted by the Ministry of Lands, as a major cause of landscape change during the peak of the conflict. FG and KI participants pointed out that the inclusion of community leaders in the WA land management framework, especially in communities outside the Greater Freetown area, was in itself a welcome initiative. Nearly 68% of research participants stated that the premise for the inclusion of community leaders was based on the understanding that they would help reduce illegal land possession in their communities if they considered themselves to be a part of the process. Instead, KIs from the Ministry of Land pointed out that these leaders sometimes colluded with land grabbers. This sentiment is succinctly encapsulated in a quote from KI-4:

The declaration of community land during the conflict was meant for the community leaders to help protect their environment from deforestation. It was not intended for them to take ownership of state lands in their community. What it resulted to was that the leaders were selling or colluding with people to sell the very land they were to protect (KI-4, Freetown, 4/2/2013).

Whilst the remark of KI-4 suggests that community leaders were to assume an oversight role, there was a strong belief among some respondents who were community leaders that their roles should have been inclusive rather than oversight. The argument around oversight versus inclusive roles of community leaders generated serious debate in the focus groups, where FG8-P6 remarked:

It sounds odd for land to be administered in any area without the knowledge of the community leaders especially the chiefs. In the provinces, the chiefs and community leaders are actively involved in the sale of land. I think the community leaders in the WA especially in the rural areas should have a say in the administration of land in their community. (FG8-P6, 10/04/2013)

The quote from P6 suggests that community members should have input into decision-making regarding land use in their community. KI-8, however, remarked that the concept of community land ownership was

misunderstood to the extent that some community heads gave dubious land documents to vulnerable buyers.²² Some respondents suggested that while people are aware that these documents are not recognised by the Ministry, people still buy land this way with the hope that it will be legalised in the course of time (KI-2, KI-3, KI-11 and KI-16).

Half of the FG participants acknowledged the efforts made by the Sierra Leone Government, through the Ministry of Agriculture, in protecting the WAPFoR from further deterioration.²³ One important outcome of this effort was the demarcation of a new forest boundary and the temporary listing of the WAPFoR as a World Heritage Site.²⁴ Additionally, the project increased the number of forest guards for WAPFoR from 12 to 24 personnel. It should be noted that a major concern among KIs from the Ministry of Agriculture was the longevity of the gains made by the WAPFoR project. KI-17 from the Ministry of Agriculture summarised the successes of the WAPFoR project and his apprehension about its sustainability.

Although the government through WHH have succeeded in demarcating a new forest boundary, my fear is whether people will not go beyond the boundary later. This is not the first time the government have demarcated the forest boundary. The Ministry used to have 12-forest guards for the entire WA. WHH increased it to 24. Now that WHH is going, what is the fate of the forest guard is not yet clear. [...]. Donors funded it. Therefore, my fear is that the contract for new forest guards will end when the project ends and if that happens, people will start to deforest all over again and we go back to square one (KI-17, Freetown, 10/03/2013).

The apprehensiveness of KI-17 about the sustainability of the WAPFoR project underscores the need for national governments to finance environmental protection initiatives. This concern is further

²² The non-existence of ‘Chiefdoms’ and ‘Paramount Chiefs’ in the WA give way to the existence of ‘headmen’ and ‘headwomen’ who assume similar roles to those of their provincial counterparts.

²³ From 2009-2014, a German Non-Governmental Organisation, Welthungerhilfe (WHH) implemented a 3.1 million Euro conservation project in WAPFoR

²⁴ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5741/>

amplified by the comment from KI-1 concerning the implementation of forestry regulations in protecting WA's forest reserve:

[...] some people, like the government officials in charge of the forest are not implementing the regulations. They are doing things as it used to happen because if they decide to implement the regulations to the fullest, they will not get kickbacks (KI-1, Freetown, 31/1/2013).

Specifically, some respondents (KI-22, KI-30 and FG2-P8) were concerned over the potential for corrupt practices in land acquisition:

People sell one town lot in the western part of Freetown around 15-20 Million Leones. We have a situation where people who are to protect the land within the Ministry of Lands are paid less than 1 Million Leones. I tell you, it takes a man to resist any anybody who may want you to compromise your position (KI-30, Freetown, 15/4/2013).

The concern of KI-30 perhaps brings into focus why illegal land documents issued by community leaders would later be 'laundered' and become legal.

Another policy issue that was identified within the WA was the presence of people whom the public considered to be 'surveyors' but who are not employees of the Ministry yet were being used to survey or demarcate land areas. Respondents (KI-2, KI-5 and KI-8) stressed that the use of unlicensed surveyors by the Ministry of Lands amidst the low staff capacity also contributed to illegal land deals. This form of illegal land deal is best described in the response from a land surveyor to a KI question: 'Why do you think things are still going in the manner you have just described'?

It has become a system. It is part of us. Except that, successive governments have attempted to eradicate what is happening but they are doing it at a slow pace. The system that had existed yesterday is still happening. [...] they will call we the surveyors to do the surveying for them and we process their papers (KI-5, Freetown, 8/04/2013).

KIs from the Ministry of Lands (KI-1, KI-2, KI-4 and KI-28) also pointed out a lack of both human resources and equipment led to

rampant land grabbing. There was some agreement in their opinion regarding the (lack of) staff capacity in the Ministry, which suggested that they were not well-equipped. KI-4 from the Ministry of Lands lamented:

There used to be state land guards whose duty is to protect state land. This [protection] no longer exists. We do not have the equipment to do the job. ... Like the Surveying School, that one closed since 2006. Today you go around the city, you see quack surveyors all over. This is a Ministry dealing with land without vehicles (KI-2, Freetown, 31/01/2013).

Another institutional challenge identified by KIs from the Ministry of Lands was the conspicuous absence of a comprehensive land use plan. Some KIs (KI-3- Ki-5, KI-7 and KI-28) indicated that this absence created an environment for an unplanned development. While the absence of comprehensive urban development plan could be described as an institutional failure, KI-25 and KI-29 underscored that in the recent post-conflict development plans, the government is making an effort to consolidate land development.

A discussion of the research findings, which were reported in the foregoing sections, is provided in the next section.

Discussion

This article, which focuses on the drivers of landscape change in the WA from the perspective of local actors, identified the rapid increase in urban population (triggered by the decade long civil conflict as opposed to natural growth) as one major driver of landscape change observed in the study area. Whilst the desire for a 'better life' in terms of education, health, and employment remains a major driver for the continued increase in global urbanization, security concerns during the conflict were the principal reasons for WA to become highly urbanised during the conflict. After the official declaration of peace in 2002, the decision of many IDPs not to return to their places of origin was tied to the unavailability of opportunities in their rural homes compared to the WA. The excerpts from FG9-P7 above, like several other FG participants, highlighted the inequalities that exist between rural Sierra Leone and its urban centres, especially the capital, Freetown.

Responses from FG and KI participants underscored the fragile nature of the post-conflict environment. Earlier scholars have argued

that post-conflict societies are marred by acute land disputes including access and claimant issues (Bruch et al., 2008; Unruh, 2003). KI participants (KI-7, KI-22, and KI-26) argued that much confusion existed around land issues both during the conflict and in the immediate post-conflict period. The community-based land management framework, which the Ministry of Lands adopted during those periods, neglected the potential for the land management framework to be misunderstood, especially so when two different land tenure systems govern different parts of the country. It is important to recall that communal land ownership operates in the three provinces of Sierra Leone (North, South and East) whilst English Land Law that allows freehold and state land ownership exists in the WA. From the narratives of FG and KI participants, there is some support for the suggestion that the weak land regulatory framework that existed before the conflict provided an enabling environment for illegal land acquisition to thrive. For instance, the personalisation of state land by some IDP farmers who were given the opportunity to cultivate such land, as illustrated in the excerpt from FG1-P7, could not have permeated the land management system if regulations including the Forest Ordinance (1912), the Forest Policy (1946 & 2010) and the Forest Act (1988) (Grainger, & Konteh, 2007) were implemented. Also the non-implementation of other relevant environmental regulations including the National Environmental Policy 1992, Sierra Leone Environmental Protection Agency 2000, National Commission for Environment and Forestry 2005, and the Environmental Protection Agency Act 2008 (amended in 2010) have in some ways helped in shaping the region's landscape. The illegal land grabbing identified in this article, which is underpinned by the ineffective implementation of the foregoing environmental regulations, confirms the assertions by earlier commentators on post-conflict land management issues (Unruh, 2001; Unruh & Turray, 2006).

Amidst the weak regulatory framework and low staff capacity, land administration was also mired by corruption. This was clearly evident in the response of KI-30 above. Discussing the problem of illegal land procurement and its tenure, KI-25 argued that neither buying land from the state nor a private individual guarantees secure tenureship. She continues to argue that poor land record keeping has provided the platform for a given parcel of land to be sold to more than one party.

Conclusions

The aim of the article was to document the drivers of landscape change in the WA from the perspectives of local actors and government

officials. One of the most obvious findings from the study is that the rapid population increase in the region was and remains a major driver of landscape change within the WA. The lack thereof or non-implementation of the environmental regulatory framework during the conflict and the ad hoc land management framework adopted in the immediate post-conflict period created an enabling environment for IDPs and the urban poor to acquire land illegally and use it in an unregulated fashion. A number of livelihood activities including urban agriculture, and charcoal and firewood production contributed to the modification of the landscape. The findings from this study contribute to the understandings of landscape change research in a post-conflict context. It underscores that the freehold land tenure system, which is used in the WA, was misunderstood to be the same as the customary land tenure arrangements in place in locations from where most of the IDPs were displaced. One potential solution to this problem might be a reform of the country's land tenure arrangements so that they are uniform countrywide.

An interesting extension of this study might be a comparative analysis of the driving forces of the region's landscape change within urban and peri-urban locations. This would help to identify whether the drivers discussed herein were common to both the urban and peri-urban locations or differences exist in the drivers at these two locations.

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