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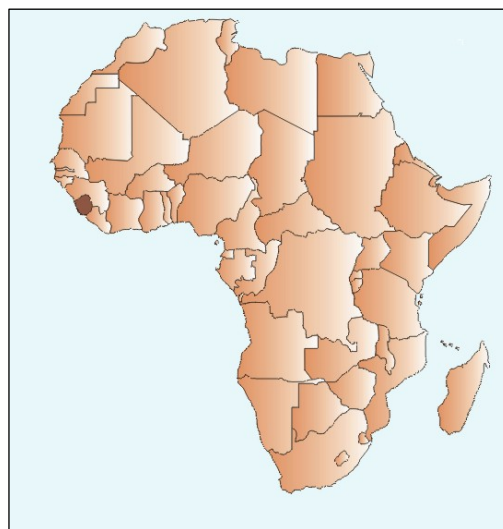
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The Role of the Private Sector in Agricultural Development¹

An Executive Interview with Joseph Zed Bahsoon

By Peter Goldsmith[Ⓞ]

Abstract: The Bennimix Food Co. Ltd., established in 1989 is the only food company currently operating in Sierra Leone, a small country of six million people on Africa's west coast. They produce Bennimix, which is a complementary porridge made of rice, sesame, pigeon pea, and sugar for children ages 6-24 months. Dr. Bahsoon bought a manufacturing facility in Bo, the second largest city that lies 250 km east of Freetown. The firm although badly looted, survived the long and brutal civil war, and now faces the many challenges of competing with imported food aid products and sourcing a consistent supply of raw grain inputs from over 600 small farmers. IFAMR Executive Editor, Peter Goldsmith recently sat down with Dr. Bahsoon in his offices in Freetown and Bo to discuss his experiences in private enterprise over the last 17 years.



Keywords: Sierra Leone, collaboration, small holders, Farmers to markets.

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[Ⓞ] Dr. Peter Goldsmith is Professor is an Associate Professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Illinois and Executive Editor of the IFAMR.

Introduction

Sierra Leone is one of the world’s poorest nations with a gross domestic product per capita of \$341 USD (World Bank, 2009). GDP per capita fell to \$140 USD in 2000 due to the lengthy civil war. The leading agricultural products are rice, cassava, vegetables, oil palm fruit, and ground nuts (Figure 1). Other significant grains are pigeon peas, maize, millet, and sorghum. The country is not self-sufficient in basic food stuffs as it still annually imports 150,000 mt (2008 data) of rice, 15% of what it produces, and 9,000 mt (2008 data) of palm oil, 15% of production (Figure 2).

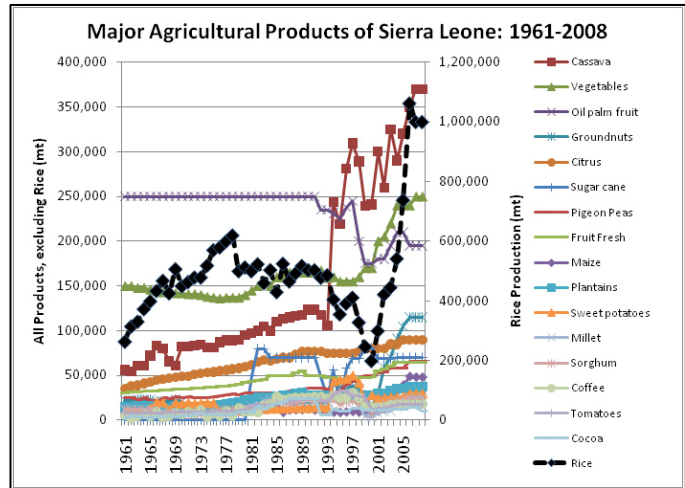


Figure 1.
Source: FAO

Multilateral and non-governmental organizations, policymakers, and academics increasingly recognize how private processing and manufacturing firms provide markets, technical knowhow, and value chain integration to small agricultural producers. Agricultural policy historically focused solely on farm productivity, subsistence models of production, and independence. This has often kept small holders isolated, unproductive, and unable to climb out of the poverty trap. Policy shifts within aid

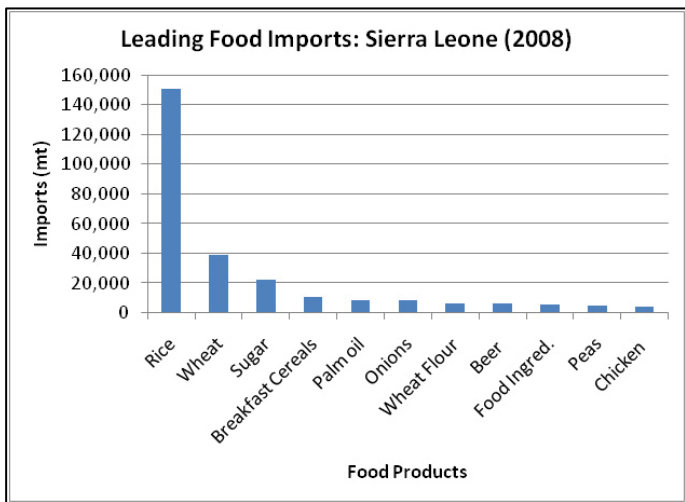


Figure 2.
Source: FAO

organizations now seek to locally source food products instead of relying on imports. They recognize the

complementarity between industrial enterprises and local agricultural producers. Replacing imported grains provides markets for local farmers, supports sustainable supply chains, utilizes adapted crops, and distributes local food products.

Besides being the name of your company, what is Bennimix?

Bahsoon: Bennimix, is the name of our leading food product. The name is derived from the creole word for sesame, benni. In the 1970’s the Food and Agriculture Organization developed the formulation for nutritious complementary food: Bennimix. They created a product using local ingredients that would not require fortification. Sesame grows easily in Sierra Leone, as do rice, pigeon peas, and sugar, the other ingredients in Bennimix.

Let me tell you an interesting story about benni. I have a friend who is an archeologist. He recently received a grant to help restore the historic, and infamous, slave export facility on the island of Bunce, off the coast. Sierra Leone was a major source of laborers destined for the Southeast United States. Sierra Leoneans were valued for their knowledge of rice production and resistance to malaria, prevalent in South Carolina at the time. My friend has discovered a cultural link between Sierra Leone and communities in eastern South Carolina. He says you will find the word “benni” appearing in songs and stories that comprise the cultural heritage of the region.

What products do you produce?

Bahsoon: Currently we only produce Bennimix, a rice, sesame, pigeon pea, and sugar recipe. It is a complementary porridge for children 6-24 months. Shortly we will release two new products, Powermix™ and Complimix. Complimix is a wholesale product, sold in 25kg bags, to be consumed by school age children and adults. School lunch programs for example will be an important market for this product. Powemix™ is a similar product, only packaged in 50 and 400gm. packets for use in the home as a breakfast cereal. Sorghum replaces the rice in these new products as it is easy to grow and supply has been increasing. We work with the local beer brewery that likes to use sorghum in beer making. Farmers find maize being more difficult to grow and store in this humid climate. The brewery needed help assuring farmers a consistent market for sorghum. So it seemed to make sense to develop the two new products using sorghum instead of rice, which has tighter markets.

We are very excited about our newest product designed and requested by the World Food Program. They have been distributing only imported grains until now, but are now willing to try our locally sourced product. They were looking for an elevated protein product for local distribution. Our WFP product contains elevated protein levels by increasing doubling the content of pigeon peas.



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Why sesame, rice, sorghum, sugar, and pigeon peas?

Bahsoon: All five products grow well here in Sierra Leone. Farmers know the products, especially sesame, pigeon, and rice. The crops are well adapted. Sorghum too has a long history of successful cultivation. Sugar cane is relatively new (1980's). Sierra Leone has a very harsh climate; heat, humidity, and numerous pests. These grains are relatively hardy and store with much less spoilage when compared to imported grains. Derived food products have a much

longer shelf life as well. Losses with imported foods begin as products sit in holds and demurrage mounts due to our inefficient port. Additional spoilage, cross contamination when mixing lots, and theft plague importers storing grains at the port. Then product must make the long journey inland to needy communities. Locally sourced products provide real savings when including post-harvest costs all the way to the consumer. But often food aid organizations only include CIF port costs in their calculations, and fail to account for the 30% shrinkage. Also, our local grains meet international nutritional standards without fortification. The country avoids having to import costly synthetic micro nutrients when natural and local fortification is available. People are used to eating products derived from the grains so they integrate well into local food customs and recipes. We purchase our raw inputs from over 600 farmers in quantities as low as 1kg. The payments stay in the country and are paid to those that need it most. The farmers know how to produce the crops, and they store well given the harsh climate and simple storage practices.

What is the greatest challenge procuring local grains?

Bahsoon: Procuring from small farmers was difficult post-war. We currently purchase about 120 mt of raw products annually. We have manufacturing capacity to process ten times more if we now that the agricultural sector has recovered from the war and the market is increasing. The war greatly diminished the nation's agricultural capacity. The quality we received has been poor postwar but is improving following training in HACCP by the Bennimix Food company. Farmers lacked quality control so we spent a lot of time removing sand, rocks, and foreign organic materials. Often farmers lacked clean surfaces on which to dry their grains. We have provided producers with tools, training, and materials to improve their yields and attain higher levels of quality. To be frank we lost a lot of money as producers took our assistance but failed to either produce or commercialize their crop. We are now having great success working with an NGO, ACIDI-VOCA (Agricultural Cooperative Development International/Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance), and their team led by program officer Ms. Sia Iscandari. Farmer groups have been organized, training has been provided, and the farmers better understand that we are partners, not adversaries. We know farmers too have had bad experiences with other unscrupulous traders. Bennimix Food Company Ltd. stands in the middle trying to meet international product standards while working with a supply chain that has little experience in international markets. It is a learning process for all of us. I am confident as I see progress every day.



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