

The effects of war on animal traction in Sierra Leone

by

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Abstract

The Sierra Leone Work Oxen Programme has passed through two distinct phases in its development efforts, namely the research phase (1979–84) and the development/extension phase (1985–95). The programme is at the verge of moving to a self-reliant phase but, due to the war, this is unlikely to be realised in the very near future.

The rebel conflict has generally affected the economic life of the country. Agricultural infrastructure and livestock have been damaged seriously and depleted. The farming population and activities have been disrupted and animal traction activities and development have been affected seriously. This state of insecurity is a serious constraint and has affected donor support and placement of field staff. Farmers are the worst off, since they have lost all their life-savings to the gunmen. A large proportion of the population are refugees who have been forced to flee their land.

A rehabilitation programme for animal traction should be effected immediately after the war, including schemes to assist in resettlement of farms and to restock the cattle herds. This requires the assistance of the animal traction networks in sensitising potential donors of the need to rehabilitate animal traction activities in Sierra Leone.

The status of animal traction in Sierra Leone before the war

The Sierra Leone Work Oxen Programme is the sole institution charged with the responsibility of developing animal traction in the farming systems of the country. The programme has gone through two distinct phases, namely the research phase and extension/development phase. The research phase lasted from 1979 to 1984 and included on-farm and on-station trials, surveys, testing and modification of animal traction equipment, all geared towards tailoring the technology to the agro-socio-economic circumstances of the users (Starkey, 1981; Bangura, 1990; Starkey, 1994).

The research phase showed that work oxen have a great potential in Sierra Leone for the small-scale farmers who still depend on hoes and machetes but are the principal producers of rice, the country's staple food. Equipment such as the plow, harrow and cart were developed with high versatility for use in the varying ecologies. (Starkey, 1981, 1994).

With research conviction, the Sierra Leone Work Oxen Programme moved to the development phase in 1985. During this period the programme strengthened the equipment production aspect at Rolako Work Oxen Technical Centre and adopted a catalytic strategy by working through development agencies to promote the technology among the various target groups. This strategy resulted in the spread of the technology in various parts of the country. The Work Oxen Programme also intervened in areas where there were no development projects, but conditions for ox traction were favourable (Bangura, 1990).

During the research and development phase the programme rendered its services free of charge and the goods were heavily subsidised. This strategy was essential for the project to convince farmers and development agencies to adopt the technology. This approach worked very well and the original 30 sets of oxen and equipment in 1980 multiplied to 2000 sets located in different parts of the country.

The survival and operation of the project was mainly due to donor support and Government of Sierra Leone funding. Donor funding is not permanent and the sponsors felt that a workshop should be organised in 1995 so that local experts of different disciplines could put their ideas together to shape up a model project that was self-sustaining. The project management is currently working on the outcome of this workshop so that the programme will eventually be independent of donor support. However, the effect of the war will make this difficult to achieve in the short term.

The war and its effects on rural Sierra Leone

The rebel war started in 1991 as an incursion of Liberian rebels to Sierra Leone, which was regarded by the Sierra Leone government as aggression. With the presence of Sierra Leoneans resident in Liberia, the rebel leader Charles Taylor took advantage of this situation and forcibly conscripted and trained youths, both male and female, to destabilise Sierra Leone. The rebel incursion then became a full-scale war which in 1995 affected almost every part of the country.

The rebel war in Sierra Leone is similar to other guerilla conflicts in Africa, since they all have common features such as:

- one section/group of society is politically disgruntled
- massive destruction of property including infrastructure, livestock and civilian life
- indiscriminate killing and massive abductions of civilians, particularly teenagers
- complete collapse of the economic activities of the country
- complete militarisation of the country.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, providing livelihood for over 70% of the population, 40% to the country's GDP and about 10% of its export earnings. Prolonged disruption to agricultural activities is bound to affect every facet of the national economy seriously. Since its onset in 1991, the rebel war has resulted in a fall in agricultural production and has damaged existing agricultural infrastructure severely. In the first year alone, nearly 30% of all cash crops and all livestock including domesticated animals were lost, thereby reducing 1.5 million people to destitution. By the beginning of 1995 nearly all districts except the western area had suffered from the effects of war.

The effect of war on the farming population

The total population of the country according to the last census is 4.7 million. The population of the capital city, Freetown, before the war was 500,000. By the end of 1994 over 60% of the total population had been affected by the war and most people in the affected areas had been forced to move away from their farming areas to refugee camps inside and outside the country, or to stay with relatives in the big towns and the rebel free

areas. As a result of the war, the population distribution in 1995 was as follows:

- Freetown has about 1.5 million inhabitants
- refugee centres outside the country have about 600,000 inhabitants
- refugee centres inside the country have about 1 million inhabitants
- the remainder of the population live in the so-called safe areas.

Over 60% of this total population are farmers, who have been moved away from their farming areas. They all survive on food aid provided by international bodies.

Farming activities are limited to the rebel-free areas, predominantly in the northern and western areas of the country.

The effect of the war on livestock

Since the war has affected almost every part of the country, the first victims of the war after dislodging the people were the livestock. All livestock including domesticated animals in the rebel-affected areas have been slaughtered for food by the armed men.

The effect of the war on animal traction

Animal traction technology has been affected seriously by the war, particularly as follows:

- work oxen farmers were forced to flee their farms, with most of them leaving their oxen behind
- the donor-funded projects that promoted work oxen stopped abruptly as a result of the rebel attacks and the heavy presence of soldiers
- the Work Oxen Programme was temporarily closed at one stage. One of its officers was abducted by the rebels and two others were reported killed. In January 1995, the project manager and a good number of his staff were refugees in the Republic of Guinea
- appropriate cattle for oxen are difficult to find due to the scarcity created by the conflict
- livestock are among the first casualties in any rebel attack on a village. As a result no farmers, even in the rebel-free areas are prepared to invest in animal traction for fear of losing the animals to the rebels or government soldiers

staff morale in the Work Oxen Programme is very low due to the state of insecurity in the country.

Conclusion

The rebel war has had a devastating effect on the general economic life of the country, and in particular animal traction development. The Sierra Leone Work Oxen Programme has scaled down its activities considerably. The work oxen population has been reduced drastically. Government and donors should put in place a serious work oxen rehabilitation programme after the war. This should include provision for resettlement of farmers and replacement of the cattle herds. The animal traction networks should assist in this respect to sensitise donors on the need to

rehabilitate the animal traction development activities in Sierra Leone.

References

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