

Article

“This Is Where We Have Scored”: Exploring the Interface between Project and Institutional Sustainability Facilitated by a Faith-Based Development Organisation in Sierra Leone

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Abstract: This paper explores the issue of project sustainability through an analysis of the experiences of a Faith-Based Development Organisation (FBDO) in Bo, Sierra Leone. The FBDO in question was approached by members of their local Catholic Women Association (CWA) to help them with the planning and management of a farm that had been donated to them by a chief. They agreed to this, and a series of workshops were held in June 2014, along with follow-up discussions with local experts and businesses as to what could be done to help support the women in their endeavour. Amongst other priorities, the women identified the need for the farm to produce food, income and help with their development. However, an outbreak of the Ebola virus that occurred between 2014 and 2016, following as it did on the back of an 11-year (1991–2002) civil war in Sierra Leone, led to a re-evaluation of the farm project in the eyes of the FBDO as they decided to shift to earlier priorities in education and health care. Given the constraints regarding resources and personnel, community projects, such as the CWA farm project, became of much lesser importance even though it resonated strongly with the goals of the FBDO and government, and had garnered much support amongst international donors. The paper sets out that story, beginning with the workshops and discussions held in 2014, and the ramifications of these responses to various ‘shocks’, such as those presented by the civil war and disease outbreaks (Ebola and COVID-19); it also provides recommendations that might be of use regarding the interface between project and institutional sustainability within FBDOs and, indeed, the wider community of development organisations.

Keywords: project sustainability; institutional sustainability; faith-based development organisations; shocks; Ebola; Sierra Leone



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1. Introduction

The sustainability of interventions is an important consideration in the work of development institutions that aim to help those in the developing world. The nature, form, and function of institutions, known as institutionalisms, have been well covered in the literature; these institutions include those known as Faith-Based Development Organisations (FBDOs). The relationship between FBDOs and those providing the funding for their development interventions, including more secular donors, have also been explored given the issues of power disparity that can often be embedded in such relationships [1]. FBDOs typically compete for resources with other FBDOs and secular development organisations, and make adaptations to their structures and functions to help them succeed [2]. FBDOs have increasingly been recognized as an important component of international development [3,4], especially where government service provision is weak and fragile [5] and provide rapid aid and support in emergency situations such as natural disasters, conflict, and disease outbreaks [6,7]. FBDOs often have a long-term engagement with the communities in which they are embedded and are highly trusted by those they seek to help, as well as by other important actors [8] such as the government, in the development and aid domains; as a result,

they may often be “better connected to the poor than are their secular counterparts” [9] (p. 810). Indeed, the relevance of FBDOs in Africa should be easy to appreciate given that “Africans eat religiously, dance religiously, trade religiously and organize their societies religiously; but this is done in a holistic manner, without any dichotomy of the material and the spiritual.” [3] (p. 5).

FBDOs are not without criticism [10,11]. For example, a common and oft-repeated perception is that FBDOs only help those in the community that share the same beliefs as the FBDO. Nonetheless, for all their importance and relevance, it has been argued by some that “the secular bias within academia and development studies has hindered the study of religion and development” [9] (p. 810). This ‘hinderance’ in the study of FBDOs occurs despite evidence that suggests FBDOs and secular development organizations have much in common, such as a strong focus on justice [12]. As Olivier et al. [5] (p. 1772) have noted regarding FBDOs that focus on health care provision: “For the presence of FBHPs [Faith Based Health Providers] to be invisible in some contexts is no longer acceptable, particularly in fragile and post-conflict states where their role seems to be potentially important.”

While community empowerment and social entrepreneurship have been at the heart of what many FBDOs are engaged in, particularly regarding the creation of a sustainable society, there are still some key gaps in the literature on the practices that they employ, the challenges that they face and the positive impact that they have [4,5,13,14]. In Kenya, for example, Ndemo [13] (p. 460) notes how social entrepreneurship facilitated by FBDOs “utilize[s] different methods of incubation to make an economic impact”, and when it comes to rehabilitating disadvantaged women, the FBDOs tends to take a group approach. In many cases, the ways that FBDOs have tried to promote social entrepreneurship has been via start-up funding alongside training but considering that those they work with live within challenging environments, it may be necessary to provide longer term support; however, this, in turn, can create conditions of dependency [13].

Very little has been published on institutional issues, such as leadership, within the faith-based arena [15], including on FBDOs. Ironically, while leadership has been well-covered in the literature on organization studies, it remains a contested field and tends to be focused on individuals rather than the notion of ‘leadership’; as a result, “such characteristics of leadership studies hinder its integration into institutionalism with its emphasis on what is beyond the individual” [16] (p. 82). Leadership succession [17], where one leader, maybe the founder of the organization, is replaced with another, has also received little attention regarding faith-based organisations, with the notable exception of the education sector [18–20]. Zurschmitten [21] (p. 138), in her study of the development work undertaken by missionaries of the Catholic congregation Society of the Divine Word, based in Switzerland but supporting projects in Central Manggarai, Eastern Indonesia, notes the following:

“It was striking that, on both sides, in Switzerland and in Manggarai, the idea of “sustainability” is hardly discussed in relation to concrete projects, but in terms of succession planning. “Sustainability” even becomes reduced to sustainable succession. However, the different parties involved do not agree how a “sustainable succession regulation” should look like. What counts as “sustainable” for one side is judged as patronage, nepotism, and corruption by the other.”

A further factor to consider is the competence of those involved in the FBDO and the ability of leaders to manage their resources, especially their people [22]. This itself may be linked to a lack of relevant training and experience in management [23,24], which often places emphasis on “theological and ethical issues to the exclusion of applied social and environmental studies” [25] (p. 158). Olivier et al., in their review of FBDO healthcare providers in Africa, note how “they sometimes have weak governance (such as financial and human resource management) as a result of managers being hired because they are said to be good Christians rather than skilled health-service managers.” [5] (p. 1772). However, of course, there may be differences between what attributes are required for a religious ‘leader’ at the parish and congregational levels, and what is needed when it comes to FBDOs that have to compete to source funds and deliver quality services; however, there are also

overlaps. For example, in their study of the leadership of congregations at the level of the parish (Church of England), Zigan et al. [26] note how the ability to help others to flourish, open-mindedness, spiritual mindedness and relational skills are regarded as important, and it seems reasonable to assume that much of this view would be shared by the leaders of FBDOs and their staff.

A further factor to consider is the influence of gender in leadership, especially when it comes to FBDOs. The latter has received some attention in the literature, including the issue of gender discrimination and how the way in which women learn to lead is often informal and socially situated [27]. Women in the Catholic Church in Africa also continue to face significant issues regarding male dominance [28,29].

As a result of the issues noted above and, indeed, others, there is a paucity of literature focused on the institutional sustainability of FBDOs, and how this interacts with the sustainability of the interventions (i.e., projects) that they help bring about [30]. The need to ‘institutionalise change’ can be a major challenge for both secular and FBDOs that work with poor and marginalized communities, particularly given the nature of the funding they may receive from donors, which can often be limited, short-term and have a measurable impact [31]. The embeddedness of FBDOs and their longer-term commitment to community engagement and empowerment can certainly provide them with an advantage, as indeed can the *“network of structures which FBDOs, particularly those belonging to the same denomination or faith, can easily tap to spread a message, to access beneficiaries and to acquire resources”* [10] (p. 983). However, even so, challenges remain, and much can depend on leadership [32] and the development of capacity and capability [14]. After all, *“sustainability is not the same as mere program survival”* [15] (p. 206). Beyond the obvious issue of securing funding to support ongoing interventions, one aspect that has received very little attention is how the sustainability of interventions can be influenced by stresses and shocks. These have certainly been numerous in Sierra Leone, especially for rural households that are dependent on agriculture [33].

This paper explores the topic of project sustainability through the lens of an initiative involving women’s groups (comprising 150 women in total) that took place in Bo, Sierra Leone. The project began in 2014 and was designed to help empower women to help achieve food security and economic self-reliance. The mediator was a Catholic Missionary Order (CMO), comprising female religious members, with a strong historical presence in Bo. They supported the women in terms of access to start-up funding and training, including the development of a business plan for their farm. Hence, the intention from the very beginning was to ensure sustainability. However, the intervention faced a series of stresses and shocks that challenged its sustainability. One such shock was an outbreak of Ebola virus in Sierra Leone that began in May 2014 [34] and ended in 2016. In more recent times, from March 2020, Sierra Leone has also experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper tells the story of these developments and addresses several important questions, such as how shocks and stresses impacted upon the sustainability of the farm project, how the CMO and the women tried to mitigate the impacts of the shocks, and whether they were successful or not. Finally, this paper sets out some recommendations for these FBDOs and, indeed, secular organisations that seek to achieve project sustainability in challenging environments.

This paper first provides background to Sierra Leone, the farm project in Bo, and the stresses and shocks it faced. As part of this, it sets out the results of a participatory exercise undertaken in 2014 to plan the sustainability of the project and the changes that have occurred since then. This paper then explores the challenges faced by the CMO in terms of sustaining projects of this type.

2. Background and Context

2.1. Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone (Figure 1) has an area of 72,325 km² and is bordered in the northeast by the Republic of Guinea, in the south and southeast by the Republic of Liberia, and in

the west by the North Atlantic Ocean. The country is divided into five main geographical regions: the coast, interior lowland plains, interior plateau, mountains, and Freetown Peninsula. The coastline is part of the general coastline of the West and Central Africa region, which has a low plain, is sandy and surf beaten.



Figure 1. Map of Sierra Leone showing the location of Bo (circled). Source: Composite figure put together using files from Wikimedia Commons.

Sierra Leone became independent from Britain on 27 April 1961 and attained Republic status on 19 April 1971. There are 18 ethnic groups, of which, the Teme, Mende and Limba account for 35%, 31% and 9%, respectively [35]. Sierra Leone has a predominantly Muslim population (77% of the population), with Christians comprising 23% [35]. The state is officially secular but Islamic and Christian FBDOs operate freely in the country as, indeed, they do in much of West Africa [36]. This is even if Christian FBDOs sometimes face significant challenges when promoting ‘holistic development’ within a predominantly Muslim community [37].

The population of Sierra Leone was 4.8 million in 2004 and is predicted to have almost doubled to approximately 8.7 million by 2022, with an estimated population growth rate in 2022 of 2.49% [35]. Approximately 60% of the population is under the age of 25 and approximately 56% of the population lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture for food and income [35]. Sierra Leone is one of the world’s poorest countries [38]. Indeed, 70% of the population lives in absolute poverty, especially in the Kailahun and Bombali districts. Life expectancy at birth is estimated to be 58.76 years, and in 2022, the adult literacy level was 51.6% for men and 39.8% for women [35]. The country also has one of the world’s highest maternal mortality rates during childbirth (1120 deaths/100,000 live births estimated in 2017), and there is much gender inequality, as men typically make the key decisions surrounding the health of their wives and children, including the use of health services [39]. Indeed, the past decade has seen something of an emphasis on women’s empowerment by development agencies, both secular and faith-based, in Sierra Leone [39].

Sierra Leone is no stranger to environmental, social, and economic shocks. As the first sentences of the foreword to the 2019 ‘National Human Development Report’, penned

by Dr. Francis M. Kai-Kai who was, at the time, the Minister of Planning and Economic Development, note:

“The people of Sierra Leone are aware of the consequences of fragility and vulnerability. Our country’s history is riddled with shocks from across sectors, such as the civil war, natural disasters, macroeconomic shocks, and governance shocks. The journey towards resilience and our development aspirations begins with the people.” [40] (p. i)

Sierra Leone experienced five military coups between 1967 and 1991, and an 11-year civil war between 1991 and 2002, which left over 50,000 people dead and devastated many communities [41,42]. A two-decade-long decline in the economy from 1980 to 2000 can be attributed to a combination of factors, including weak internal management policies, the poor performance of economic recovery programs, and weak export prices combined with rising import prices. The Structural Adjustment Program, which was mandated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in June 1986, followed the usual pattern of trade liberalization, the stabilization of the exchange rate, and the removal of subsidies on petroleum products and staple foods [43]; however, this has had mixed results for the overall economy, and the escalating price of staple foods has arguably reversed whatever gains these policies may have achieved [44,45]. Strategies such as the privatization of public enterprises and the restructuring of the civil service are in the planning and implementation stages, but signs of any positive impact are yet to be identified.

More recently, in 2014, the country suffered from an outbreak of Ebola that was caused by the Zaire ebolavirus. The first reported cases of Ebola were in Kenema, and the outbreak lasted until 2016. Sierra Leone was one of the countries most affected by the outbreak, with 14,122 declared cases and 3955 deaths. In addition, healthcare systems, especially in rural areas, were poorly equipped to deal with the crisis [38]. While both men and women in poor communities suffered from the outbreak, the women were especially impacted in terms of their obligation to take care of victims and orphans [34]. The responses of the Sierra Leone national government to the outbreak (quarantine of sick patients, the banning of markets and trade, banning of public gatherings) also impacted women more [34].

Along with much of the world, as of late March 2020, Sierra Leone also experienced the COVID-19 epidemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus [46]. While the Ebola outbreak was geographically restricted, predominantly, to three states in West Africa (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone) and elicited strong support from national and international aid agencies, the COVID-19 outbreak was global and the Sierra Leone government had to fight it largely with its own resources [46]. The two diseases do differ in terms of their mortality rates; the Ebola mortality rate is about 70% of those who catch the disease, while the mortality rate of COVID-19 is estimated to be 1% [46]. However, the experience the country gained during the Ebola epidemic in terms of limiting contact, etc., served it well during COVID-19; inevitably, however, the two outbreaks occurring within a few years of each other exacerbated the shock.

2.2. The Intervention: Women’s Groups and a Communal Farm

Bo is the second largest city in Sierra Leone by population (~240,000 based on an estimate for 2017) and is located in the south of the country, not far from the border with Liberia (Figure 1). The population is equally divided into Muslims and Christians. The CMO at the heart of the research reported here had been based in Bo since 1948. Their first foundation in Sierra Leone was in Bo and they helped establish secondary schools in both Bo and the nearby town of Kenema. Bo is home to a number of international development agencies, including Catholic Relief Services (CRS), CONCERN Worldwide and TROCAIRE.

The CMO leader, a female religious, was approached by women from the Catholic Women’s Association (CWA) in the area to help with the planning and community development of an 8-hectare (approximately 20 acres; ‘acre’ is the unit of area more commonly used in rural areas of Sierra Leone) farm. The proposal was for the farm to be managed by 6 groups of women (linked to parishes) with 25 women per group, 150 women in total. The farm was located on good-quality land, near to a river between Bo town and Kpetime

village and had been handed to the women by the paramount chief of the area. The chief was a scientist who had taught in a secondary school established by the CMO in Bo for many years.

CWAs are popular in almost every parish in Africa and originated in around 1970 as a follow-up to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965), which emphasised the role of the laity in the Catholic Church. Each CWA was typically headed (at parish level) by a woman appointed by a bishop, and initially, these tended to be women religious, as lay women were only beginning to emerge as leaders. In their early days, CWAs were mostly self-supporting, but as time advanced, there was a drive to have meetings at inter-parish or diocesan levels in order to encourage a sharing of ideas and help women to become more aware of their own potential. The involvement of CWAs in agriculture came later and raised all kinds of challenges in the African context. Most notably, women often have little control over agricultural decision making or, indeed, access to agricultural training in much of sub-Saharan Africa [47,48]; however, they do often provide much of the workforce especially for household production and marketing [48–51]. The nature and extent of female involvement in agriculture in West Africa can vary depending upon a range of factors, including cultural differences between ethnic groups, as well as access to finance [47]. Care does need to be taken not to generalize; indeed, the following quotation from Safilios-Rothschild [52] (p. 307) may be nearly 40 years old but still resonates today: *“Despite the role that women play in agriculture in Sierra Leone, agencies still view them primarily as unpaid only for time-consuming and unskilled tasks such as weeding”*. Indeed, one reads repeated calls for the government and others in Sierra Leone to place greater emphasis on women’s engagement in agriculture in the country, especially when it comes to the production of food crops [53].

While the success of farmer groups in Sierra Leone has been questioned [54], the approach of the CWA women’s groups to engage in farming was nonetheless an intriguing opportunity that the CWO was keen to support and encourage as a part of its community, especially women’s, engagement. As noted above, this had become something of a priority for development agencies in Sierra Leone, and as Cornish et al. [39] (p. 33) have noted with their study on health care in the country: *“female respondents frequently described power as relating to women’s income generation and financial independence, as well as in terms of women being listened to generally in their social relationships and by their husbands. Whilst women’s financial independence was reported to ease marital relationship tensions and supported their ability to undertake responsibilities, men remained the authority figures in households, often regarding health care decision-making”*.

However, that is not to say that women’s groups in rural Sierra Leone are without agency. As Dick and Gao [55] (p. 493) conclude according to the results of their study on women’s groups in the Bo and Moyamba districts *“the rural women of Sierra Leone are aggressively transforming themselves from a dormant to dominant force of society”*. Despite the challenges, the CMO agreed to help the women with their farm initiative, and as part of this, they arranged a series of participatory workshops to take place between the 2nd and 12th June 2014, to help the women identify their priorities (i.e., what they wished to achieve with the farm) and develop a business plan. These workshops were followed up with a series of interviews with key personnel in the area and in Freetown to see how they could help support the priorities of the women.

2.3. Participatory Workshops

The first workshop in June 2014 was designed to address the wider group of women and explore their expectations regarding the farm project. Indeed, what was it they were looking to achieve? The women (110 attended the one-day workshop) were divided into seven groups and were first asked to list their expectations in order of their perceived importance. Following this, they were asked to focus on their top four expectations, think about how they could be achieved, and who should take the lead in the process.

The second workshop took place over two days and involved a subset of thirty women from the larger group involved in the first workshop. Each parish was asked to provide five women who would take part in this workshop. Hence, the workshop involved six groups of five women per group. Six women from Kpetime village, where the farm was located, also attended, and each was a member of one of the six groups. This was the first experience of participating in the development process for the thirty women. Based upon the local knowledge of the women from Kpetime village, their wishes expressed in the first workshop, and the input of some local experts in the Ministry of Agriculture and aid agencies, the six groups were allocated a crop to analyse from the perspective of developing a business plan. The crops allocated to the groups were as follows:

1. Plantain
2. Cassava
3. Rice (upland)
4. Groundnut
5. Benniseed (2 groups)

Benniseed was allocated to two groups as there were indications from earlier discussions with local experts that this crop could potentially be a valuable source of income for the women and help them meet one of their stated priorities for income generation. The three phases of the workshop were as follows:

1. Creation of cost sheets for 2014 and 2015. The groups were asked to define a crop area (e.g., an acre) and set out all the costs they thought would be associated with the production of that area of crop. What to include was entirely their own choice and they were also free to consult with others outside of their group, including relatives, farm workers and Ministry of Agriculture extension staff. For 2014, they were asked to imagine that they were executing the business plan before the growing season.
2. Estimation of revenue for both 2014 and 2015. To help them achieve this, they were asked to undertake a market survey.
3. Estimation of gross margin for 2014 and 2015. The gross margin is the revenue minus cost (profit is a positive gross margin).

The figures were converted from the Sierra Leonean Leone (SLL) to the US dollar using the 2014 exchange rate of USD 1 = SLL 4339.68.

2.4. Discussions Following the June 2014 Workshops

Once the women had completed the workshops and come to their conclusions, a series of discussions were held with key informants, such as the Catholic Bishop of Bo Diocese, the Congregational Development Committee of the CMO, personnel at the Ministry of Agriculture and the Sierra Leone Agricultural Research Institute (SLARI), personnel from the country office of the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA) and people working in the private sector, most notably a company called Bennimix Food Co., Ltd. (Freetown, Sierra Leone). These all took place between June and August 2014, and the aim of the discussions was to test the viability of the women's suggestions and help identify any factors that could help to achieve their aims.

2.5. Interviews to Explore Developments since 2014

To explore the developments since 2014, a series of interviews were held in late 2022/early 2023 with four members of the senior management team of the CMO. The leadership team of the CMO in Sierra Leone had undergone changes since 2014, but four of them, holding positions in various periods from 2014 onwards, were available for interview. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and primarily focused on the following:

1. What has happened to the women's groups and farm project in Bo since 2014?
2. In particular, how did the Ebola and other shocks/stresses impact the groups and farm project?

3. Did the benniseed initiative identified by the women in the workshops progress any further?
4. How has the CMO helped to manage the situation since 2014?
5. Have there been any issues regarding leadership in both the CMO and women's groups?

As will be noted below, the leadership and membership of the women's groups had, for various reasons, undergone much change since 2014 and it was not possible to interview them in late 2022/2023. Hence, the perspectives on changes within the CMO presented here are very much internal ones.

3. Results

3.1. Workshops

A summary of the results that arose from the listing of expectations is shown as Figure 2. The columns present the responses from the seven groups, and each cell sets out what they would like to achieve from the farm project, with each of these ranked in terms of importance. The wording is very much that of the women or as close as possible after translation. The related topics are categorized into themes and colour coded in Figure 3; this is a form of content analysis.

Rank	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7
1	good yield	good yield	good yield	good yield and income	good yield	everyone to be devoted	good yield
2	Seeds available and affordable	Income	Income	Seeds for the next cropping season	purchase the land for the women.	Good yield	co-operation amongst the women
3	development for the women	Seeds for the next planting season.	good storage facility and dry floor.	expect the land to be owned by the holy rosary sisters	develop the land for the building of vocational training centres, adult literacy and health centre.	Extended to other parts of the country.	Seeds for the next planting season
4	knowledge which we can share with other women in the community	Profit	Have security to take care of the farm.	empower and build the capacity of all women participating on this project	Women together with MSHR will come together and work harder with unity.	every woman to be self reliant	dry floor
5	income	Create impact in the lives of women.	We expect co-operation among members to do the work.	promote food security in Sierra Leone	Women will now have dignity and prestige.	Investors to feel good and happy about the project.	storage facility
6	to know and unite women from the different communities		community bank	promote team work		we expect unity among the women	new skills
7			crop rotation	tapping the knowledge and skills from one another and using them to develop ourselves		enough food for the homes	Marketing
8			God to guide in the work	vehicle(s) for the day to day running of the project			

Figure 2. Summary of outputs from the first workshop. The women's groups were asked to list (in order of priority) what they would like to see coming out of the farm project. The colour coding highlights related themes.

The results of the analysis suggest that the following four themes (expectations) were commonly expressed across the seven groups. The ranking in the list below is not exact but is intended to illustrate the relative importance of these themes, as ranked by the groups:

1. Good yield (green shading)
2. Income/profit (grey shading)
3. Planting material for next cropping season (blue shading)
4. Unity/cooperation of women (yellow shading)

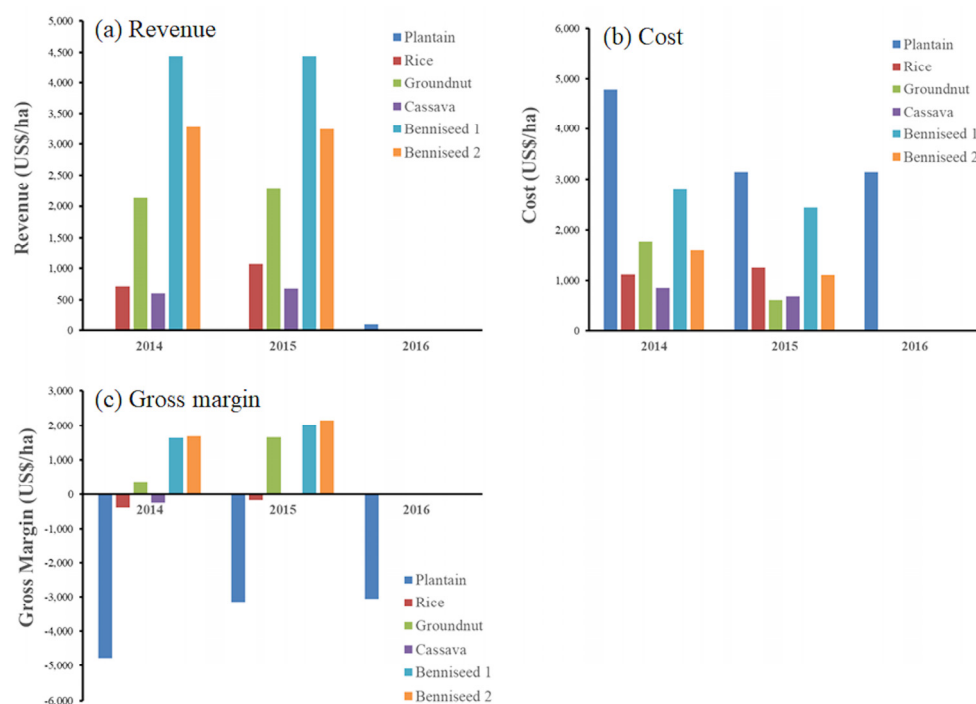


Figure 3. Summary of projected revenue (a), cost (b) and gross margin (c) derived from the participatory business plan development workshop.

The first two in the above list—yield and income—are obviously related, but a high yield of crops does not necessarily translate into a high income. Much can depend on the crop, of course, as well as the quality of the produce and the time of the year it is marketed, and this point will be returned to later. It is interesting that all the groups mentioned some aspect related to their cooperation and unity, and this was seen as something in which they were keen to take the lead. While they did see this as an important issue, the women were less clear about how it could be addressed. There was a mention of ‘workshops’ by one of the groups and, of course, the farm itself was seen as a catalyst for bringing them together.

Of the remaining themes, the need for the women to be trained and educated was expressed (pink shading in Figure 2), but it is interesting to note how this was also expressed in terms of the women learning from each other. Related to this were expectations about the development and empowerment of the women (purple shading), but some of the groups did separate the acquisition of knowledge from personal ‘development’. Feedback during the workshop indicated that the latter was linked more to a sense of empowerment, and of women being able to make their own decisions in order to develop themselves. Finally, there was a call for new infrastructure (storage, drying facility, vehicle) for the farm (orange shading), but in the feedback, it was unclear whether this was a request to the CMO for support or whether the groups envisaged this as an outcome of investing money earned on the farm.

The outputs from the second workshop, which took place over two days, are summarised in Figure 3. The figure comprises three graphs, covering revenue, cost and gross margin (revenue—cost); the groups were free to include whatever they wished to under cost. For the most part, the latter comprised the cost of labour, inputs (primarily seed) and transport. Revenue was estimated by the women based on an anticipated yield combined with the price that the produce may be expected to attract at the time of harvest. For rice and cassava, the two staple crops, the groups anticipated a commercial loss in both years of production. Groundnut was projected to do much better, with an estimated positive gross margin for both years of production. As a legume crop, it provides a useful source of protein as well as income, and can help with the management of soil fertility. However, an interesting point in Figure 3 is the positive gross margins for bennisseed. Indeed, both

groups, working independently, came up with very similar values for the gross margin on a per-hectare basis (USD 1688 and USD 2145). The groups were surprised by this but some of the local experts prior to the workshop had predicted that benniseed would provide a good source of income for the farm.

3.2. Follow-Up to the Workshops; Interviews with Key Informants and Potential Supporters

The results of the interviews with various stakeholders, observations on the farm and economic projections by the groups suggested that the women should consider moving into benniseed production as a means of providing income. One company (Bennimix Food Co., Ltd.) [56] based in Sierra Leone was a major purchaser of benniseed, as they use it to manufacture ‘Bennimix’; this is a complementary porridge made of rice, benniseed, pigeon pea and sugar for children aged 6–24 months. As an interview in 2011 with Dr Joseph Zed Bahsoon, the founding owner of Bennimix, notes:

“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.” [56] (p. 84)

During discussions in the second workshop, it emerged that the groups should approach the Bennimix Food Company to explore the potential of a commercial relationship. This resulted in a series of meetings with personnel from the company, both in Bo, where they had a factory, and in Freetown, where they had their head office, in order to explore the potential of the company collecting and purchasing the produce from the farm. At the time of the workshop (June 2014), the company was purchasing benniseed at around 7000 to 8000 SLL/kg, although the world price was significantly lower than that as the company claimed that it could purchase benniseed at 5000 SLL/kg from Nigeria. However, the company was willing to pay more for the benniseed produced by the women to help support local production in Sierra Leone rather than import and were especially enthused about the prospect of supporting the activities of the women’s groups in Bo. The quality of produce is a key issue, as contamination needs to be low and the moisture content must be less than 10%; however, the company offered to collect the produce from the farm gate, which helped to simplify the logistics. Therefore, growing benniseed on part of the farm would potentially provide a means of providing some significant income, and in addition, would also help provide a product that supports child nutrition. Given that the women were also keen to use the farm as a basis for food security, it would not have been advisable to plant the whole farm with benniseed. Therefore, members also expressed a desire to plant cassava and rice as food crops, and there was an opportunity here, as noted by personnel from SLARI and IITA, to encourage the women to try new crops such as benniseed and new crop varieties of existing crops.

3.3. Developments after 2014; Internal Reflections on Programme Sustainability

The 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak had a major impact on the activities of the women’s groups and development of the farm. The participatory workshops in 2014 were held just as the outbreak was beginning to spread to Sierra Leone. At the time, most reported cases were in Guinea and Liberia. While there was much interest in the farm and, in particular, the possibility of growing benniseed in order to generate income, the spread of the Ebola outbreak to Sierra Leone, especially to places near to the border with Liberia, such as Bo and Kenema, changed everything. The outbreak happened just 12 years after the end of the devastating 11-year civil war that ensued between 1991 and 2002, with all the social and economic upheaval that created. The Ebola outbreak brought the need for food security very much to the fore in people’s minds and considering the impact it had on health, the women decided to prioritise cassava production, as this crop is relatively low-maintenance and cheap to produce; this is largely because the planting material is readily available, and the crop requires less labour than many others do. This can be seen in Figure 3, which

reveals that cassava has the lowest cost per hectare across the two years (USD 857 and USD 694 for 2014 and 2015, respectively). In addition, a machine was donated to the women to allow them to grind the cassava tubers to produce gari, and the CMO helped by providing transport to bring the produce to the village from the farm. In contrast, Benniseed, despite the theorized benefits and support from the company, was perceived by the women to be a risk under the conditions created by the outbreak.

Cohesion amongst the women's groups, an issue that was raised during the first workshop, remained an important issue during and after the Ebola outbreak. It seems that the women did not share the same objectives, and some began to go their own way. One group, for example, moved into pineapple production on the farm. While groups were still seen as being a *"good thing"* (quote from one respondent), the members did not all move at the same pace and at the same time. While a degree of flexibility between and within groups could have been positive, there were dangers here, as the fragmentation of land use and management could have negative impacts on agricultural sustainability; in effect, the more holistic planning that is required for sustainable production became lost as different groups started to do their own thing. Membership of the groups has also changed many times since 2014, and leadership within the CMO has also fluctuated, partly because of illness.

However, perhaps the greatest change since 2014 was the rehabilitation of two schools, one with an enrolment of 800 students and another with 2000, and both growing. The CMO regarded the buildings and facilities as not being fit for purpose. They were overcrowded, lacked security, toilet, and dining facilities, all of which were conducive to the spread of the disease. The schools supported by the CMO had only been partially rehabilitated since the ending of the war in 2002, and in the words of one respondent, their poor state *"lent itself to the spread of Ebola"*. Donors were only too happy to help support the efforts of the CMO with its desire to focus on disease prevention. Indeed, as one of the CMO leaders noted in an interview in 2023 *"Sierra Leone was about education once again, and this is where we have scored"*. Given the limitations regarding human resources in the CMO, projects such as the farm had to take second place, although it does need to be noted that the CMO has recently instigated an outreach programme to the wider community to help promote hygiene and disease prevention, and is also prioritizing a new development that is focused on education for girls that come from very challenging situations as a result of the civil war and Ebola. There have also been discussions about a possible return to a stronger engagement in health care, something that the CMO has been involved in for many years since arriving in the country. The Ebola outbreak and its consequences, followed by the more recent COVID-19 pandemic, has clearly resulted in much reflection within the CMO. Considering the limitations, they have faced in terms of personnel and financial resources, they concluded, in the words of one of the CMO leaders interviewed in February 2023, that both the women's groups and CMO *"were not in any way equipped to run a project that we would envision"*. However, the CMO *"goes for excellence, and this was in display in what happened in the schools and outreach work. Many accolades were accorded to the two school principals and their staff."* Nonetheless, the same respondent acknowledged that *"irreparable damage has been done in many ways to community development projects"* as a result of this reappraisal. In effect, the CMO has decided to re-focus its limited resources on the schools, and the need to make them fit for purpose. Qualified lay people with experience are now managing the schools on a day-by-day basis so that school principals can concentrate on tapping into funds and the investments of donors who are determined to prevent disease rather than treat it. The farm project was simply beyond what the CMO could help support, even if some local donors were willing and keen to provide funding for farm equipment, etc. The awareness of some, especially the women's groups, of the need for greater cohesion was a significant learning point, but for the most part, they were thinking very much in terms of the provision of external funding in order to purchase more gari grinders and a truck to help with the transport of farm produce. Ironically, given the results of the workshops and discussions in 2014, it would seem that no one was thinking about income

generation from the farm or how the maintenance and replacement of the machinery could take place, let alone about issues that may have emerged from the fragmentation of land use. It seems that sustainability was perceived more in terms of accessing funding streams to keep the project operational.

4. Discussion

The women's farm project that the CMO helped establish and manage in Bo certainly resonated with national policies related to agriculture in Sierra Leone at the time and was very much a reflection of a desire to help improve the provision of food [42,57]. Before the civil war, Sierra Leone led the way in Africa regarding agricultural research, and since the end of the war, the government has continuously reiterated the potential of Sierra Leone's agricultural sector [42,57]. It is estimated that only between 11 and 15% of Sierra Leone's arable land is cultivated, and there is a potential for expansion; this would help with domestic food security, export income, and provide a source of employment. The government has a policy goal that aims to encourage the commercialization of agriculture, which involves encouraging small-scale farmers to run their farms as a business [42]. The government has encouraged the private and 'third' sectors to help with this rehabilitation of the country's agricultural sector [42]. The farm project in Bo also aligns with a growing need to support women in the country [39,55], and to encourage women to engage in agriculture. Considering all of this, the support of key leaders in the Bo community, as well as enthusiasm from international donors, it is not hard to see why the CMO agreed to support the women groups.

The participatory exercise undertaken in 2014 to help the women plan what to do with the farm was a positive step. While it did highlight challenges, such as the lack of cohesion amongst the women, it did also point to some suggested improvements (i.e., the growing of benniseed) that would have helped them generate income and thus no longer be reliant on one-off 'gifts' from well-wishers and funds from donors. Given that a local company was willing to pay a good price for the benniseed and to help with transporting the produce from the farm, all seemed to be in place for a sustainable path. However, all of this changed significantly with the outbreak of Ebola between 2014 and 2016, and the disruption has continued to this day following the arrival of COVID-19.

The Ebola outbreak led to several consequences. Firstly, of course, many people became sick and died, and this generated much fear given the low survival rate among those who catch the disease [46]. Secondly, the government introduced various controls to prevent people from interacting and this had significant repercussions in rural areas, especially on women [34,46]. Both had an impact on the farm project in Bo, and understandably, the women's groups decided to prioritise the provision of food over income generation. Their emphasis on cassava production is understandable given that it is an easy and inexpensive crop to grow, it can do well on many types of land and requires little labour. The donation of a grinding machine to help them convert the cassava tubers into gari was of significant help to them, as was the support of the CMO regarding the transport of the produce from the farm to the village. The women regarded income generation via the growth of crops such as benniseed to be an option that was no longer viable; what mattered was survival. Even though the Ebola outbreak ended in 2016, it is understandable that the shock it created, on top of the shock of the civil war and the more recent COVID-19 pandemic, created a mindset that emphasised a need for food production rather than income generation. The Ebola outbreak also had lasting impacts on the already fragile cohesion between the women; the result has been a fragmentation of priorities for the farm, and potentially a decline in the holistic that is management required for agricultural sustainability. The farm is a useful resource for the women in that they have access to land for food production, which is a positive; however, the main problem is that, without an income stream, the groups may find it challenging to maintain the machinery they currently have, let alone invest in new equipment. The latter requires medium to long-term perspectives, but the combined shocks of the civil war, Ebola and COVID-19 have created very short-term thinking.

The CMO was also impacted by the Ebola outbreak. There were changes in leadership as some became sick, but perhaps the biggest impact was in terms of its reflections on what it could achieve given its limited human resources. The Ebola outbreak led them to reappraise the rehabilitation of their schools following the extensive damage caused by the war to infrastructure [57], and they came to the conclusion that this had not been as good as it should have been. In interviews, they felt that they had failed somewhat in this regard and that the poor physical state of the schools had contributed to a worsening of the Ebola outbreak in the communities. The interaction between the successive shocks of war and disease clearly had a profound effect on the CMO. Even if donors were willing to support the farm project, the CMO felt it simply did not have the people in place to help support it. Given that this shift in emphasis took place after the Ebola outbreak, and the rehabilitation of the schools is still underway, it is not possible to assess whether the changes have had a positive impact in the ways that were intended by the CMO.

As noted at the outset of the paper, the sustainability of institutions is different to the sustainability of the interventions they are helping to bring about, although these are related [30]. The activities of the women's groups in Bo and the support of the CMO provides a rich story of that relationship. The participatory work instigated by the CMO did result in a process of reflection and led to the plan of including benniseed as a means of generating income. The CMO also supported the women with advice and by introducing the, to key people, such as the local Ministry of Agriculture teams, researchers at IITA and SLARI, and help with the transport of farm produce. However, sustainability is more than just project survival [15] and the CMO has become acutely aware of its limitations. The result of all these dynamics is, arguably, a farm project that looks increasingly unsustainable at several levels. Not only have the women's groups lost the holistic vision needed to manage the farm, but already it is apparent that they are becoming more reliant on donations from outside to help them and that there is no planning in place to develop their own funding for maintenance and investment. Resilience to shocks and stresses is a central element of sustainability [58], and while the women's groups and indeed the farm have survived the shocks of Ebola and COVID-19, they are facing significant challenges for the future.

There are wider lessons here for FBDOs. There is to be an understandable desire to engage in a wide range of activities, especially if the government and, indeed, international donors encourage this, and FBDOs do often enjoy good connections and trust from local communities [8,9]. Agriculture is an important sector in Sierra Leone, and it would be hard for a FBDO to refuse to help if approached by groups of women from the local CWA wishing to get involved in farming in order to help with their food security and income; these goals speak to so many levels. However, organisations, including FBDOs, have their limits, and despite good intentions, these can be laid bare once there is a series of shocks. Changes in leadership following the Ebola outbreak did occur within the CMO in the study, and in the literature, the quality of leadership has often been raised as important in FBDOs [22]; however, what mattered most was a realisation that its resources had been spread far too thin following the end of the war and that what the CMO perceived as its core missions, namely education and health care, had been neglected. Given all the demands for regeneration that have emerged since the war, it would be far too simplistic to put this perceived 'failing' down to something as simple as poor leadership or training, as important as they undoubtedly are [5,23–25], and the women's farm project is hardly to blame for this. However, sometimes when it comes to the sustainability of interventions, it really is best for any FBDO to be frank about what can be achieved given its constraints, no matter what demands it may face. Good intentions are obviously a pre-requisite, but they are not enough. It is necessary for any organization, those working in the field and donors, to undergo a thorough analysis of what it is possible for them to achieve before they begin to commit their resources or indeed those of others.

5. Conclusions

Various conclusions can be drawn from the research reported here. FBDOs can be heavily influenced by government priorities in terms of the programmes in which they become involved, and it can be hard for an FBDO to ignore requests for help and support from grassroots groups, especially when they mesh with national and, indeed, international priorities. Thus, a call to help women become engaged in agriculture resonates at so many levels. However, even an FBDO can become stretched in terms of its resource allocation and management, and stresses and shocks, with the Ebola outbreak being an example of the latter, can force an FBDO to reconsider its priorities. Indeed, even worthy initiatives, such as women's engagement in agriculture, can potentially lose out as an FBDO re-evaluates its priorities due to shocks. Finally, FBDOs must be frank about what they can achieve given their resources and avoid the temptation to take on too much, even if those projects are very worthy ones that resonate at many levels.

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