

# Factors of Persistent Poverty in Sierra Leone

Written by Sharanya Ravichandran

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Sierra Leone has been a nation plagued with civil wars and poverty since gaining independence in 1961. Despite being one of the few countries in the world that has precious natural resources such as diamonds and rare minerals, this nation continues to suffer from extreme poverty. There are several factors that contribute to the persistent poverty in Sierra Leone. This paper will focus on four key factors: corruption within the government, insufficient infrastructure, lack of education and inadequate civil rights. This paper will first examine broad factors of poverty within Sub-Saharan Africa, and then explore the aforementioned specific factors causing steadfast poverty in Sierra Leone.

There are certain over-arching factors that make sub-Saharan Africa more susceptible than the rest to the continuous problem of poverty. Sachs et al. identify four: "Very high transport costs and small market size; low-productivity agriculture; adverse geopolitics; very slow diffusion of technology from abroad." [1] An examination of Sierra Leone through this particular lens shows that it is victim to most, if not all, of these factors. Sierra Leone's economic market is almost non-existent, despite the fact that it has so many rare minerals and is one of the world's top exporters of diamonds. Because infrastructure is extremely weak, transport costs are very high to get supplies and products from one area to another. This also feeds into the authors' idea of adverse geopolitics as difficulty in transport of goods and services for trade has a detrimental effect on the economy. Finally, slow dissemination of foreign technology has failed to develop this country in modern times.

### Corruption

One of the most basic factors causing poverty within Sierra Leone lies within the government. Since colonial rule departed, the government has been characterised primarily by either a one-party rule or a military rule [2]: a one-dimensional rule that does not allow for opposition, and breeds corruption. The government has been extremely incompetent in providing its citizens with the most basic needs, because these needs have been usurped for government officials themselves. As Riddell points out, Sierra Leoneans "were not just neglected, uninvolved, or would catch up later in the nation's development. They were actively exploited or 'ripped off', and had been for roughly a hundred years – first by colonialism and then by the policies, plans, and programmes of the government of independent Sierra Leone." [3]

Sierra Leoneans lack basic health care, adequate provision of food and drinking water, and structurally sound housing. This corruption is starkly evident in the healthcare sector, where "drugs and other free health-related items find their way on to the shelves of pharmacies and other outlets not fit for such a purpose to be sold." [4] While the Health Minister, Dr. Soccoh Alex Kabia, has verbally recognised this occurrence, he has yet to take any proactive measures to stop this practice. Free medical assistance provided by donor nations do not reach the poor within Sierra Leone; instead, individuals, both within and outside the government, sell these free drugs for profit. Citizens cannot cure illnesses effectively and quickly because they do not have the financial means to afford even basic healthcare. As a result, they can fall fatally ill and pass away; if an individual who is the sole breadwinner of a family passes away, the family is left without an income, which drives them further into poverty. Alternatively, even if an individual is not fatally ill, they cannot go earn money for subsistence until they feel better, which they cannot achieve with expensive medicine. These unnecessary health-care expenses have played a significant role in propelling and

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perpetuating poverty amongst citizens.[5]

Funds, both from within Sierra Leone itself and from assistance given by donor nations, have been taken away from projects that could truly benefit the people to bring them out of poverty. Instead, these funds have been used to serve the specific and inordinate needs of government officials and the urban elite, who happen to be government supporters.[6] While the country's budget is a minimal \$500 million a year, senior officials still usurp both aid money and internal funds for luxuries such as plasma-screen televisions and hunting rifles.[7] Funds that could have been used toward improving daily living conditions for impoverished citizens, such as providing free healthcare, adequate salaries for workers, and free education, have instead disappeared amongst the government and urban elite for personal purposes. One significant example of this can be found within the rule of Siaka Stevens, the first President of Sierra Leone. Stevens' regime was infamous for its inordinate level of corruption; he had appropriated a vast amount of government revenue for his personal gain, and along with fellow government officials, he lived in luxury while his people went hungry. He used up most of the financial resources that were meant for his state and people; as a result, poverty and underdevelopment reigned, and has continued within Sierra Leone.[8] Due to such consistent corruption within the government, Sierra Leone is embroiled in poverty and has one of the lowest GDP figures: as of 2010, it was \$900, even less than previously war-torn countries such as Rwanda.[9]

The diamond industry, one of the main sources of revenue for the Sierra Leonean government, has brought significant income to the country, but the top-down effect is virtually non-existent; lower-class and rural citizens still experience exploitative labour relations and persistent poverty within mining communities.[10] They do not see the money that they worked so hard to bring in, and are still impoverished because the government mismanages the funds. In addition, external factors such as a decreased demand for diamonds worldwide has thrown many Sierra Leoneans out of jobs and into poverty. The diamond industry's slump has slowly picked up in recent years, with a major mine in Koidu rehiring a few hundred workers as the market for diamonds recovers.[11] The government has outwardly taken minimal measures to rehire mine workers. However, the parallel trade of "conflict diamonds" by militiamen and government elites has earned them personal revenues of \$7.5 billion.[12] The loss of such a significant amount of money that could have been allotted toward alleviating poverty within Sierra Leone has instead gone to personal benefit of government officials and militia rebels.

## Infrastructure

The infrastructure within Sierra Leone is anything but sound; the money that is meant to build sturdy roads and bridges to enable facilitated transport of goods and basic services goes into the pockets of government officials. Even in colonial times, railroads that were constructed for the explicit purpose of expediting transportation and enhancing trade were ultimately seen as inefficient, and as a financial drain on the state. When the railroad was dismantled, many of those areas were not replaced with paved roads, which was a big problem considering the "corner on the border with Liberia and Guinea produced over half of the country's export agricultural crops and was the site of a major regional market." [13] The lack of paved roads, and the absence of highways, prevented Sierra Leone from trading with this lucrative sector, which could have aided in lifting this nation out of poverty. Sierra Leone does regard areas like Freetown, a major seaport, as significant to their imports and trade activities. However, this does not take importance away from roads; transport of services into rural areas, as well as trade between areas that do not have seaports, is facilitated by roads, which Sierra Leone lacks. As a result, Sierra Leoneans undersell their products, which results in lesser revenue and perpetuates poverty. Lack of infrastructure also leads to easy movement of rebels and militiamen, such as the RUF, to cause violence over a wider range of areas within Sierra Leone to emphasise their objectives. Citizens displaced by rebels face even more poverty as they are forced to flee from their home and their jobs into areas where nothing is guaranteed. Even outside help, such as foreign troops, cannot get into remote areas to provide emergency aid and stop militiamen if there is no solid infrastructure to help them get there.

Weak infrastructure has also caused a spike in diamond prices, causing poverty within Sierra Leone. Costs to get diamonds from one area to another are high since roads and highways continue to remain in poor shape.[14] Transport costs, including petrol, are very high to move these diamonds from mining areas to port cities for shipping

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and trading purposes. For this reason, Sierra Leone cannot price its diamonds as cheaply as other countries can on an international platform. In comparison, South Africa has ensured stable prices, both for producers and buyers, within its global diamond marketing system[15], partly due to the fact that their infrastructure is far more developed than Sierra Leone's. As a result, internal costs to transport diamonds to trading ports are not high, and their revenue outweighs their costs. In contrast, Sierra Leone's costs to transport diamonds are much higher than the revenue that citizens gain; costs outweigh the benefits, and citizens ultimately remain in poverty.

## Civil Rights

Oppression and marginalization of individuals, both within and outside of tribal groups, have also led to persistent poverty within Sierra Leone. There is a major lack of basic civil rights within Sierra Leone, which plays a key role in promoting impoverished conditions within the region. Many rural residents do not have the access to basic voting, and when they get a chance to vote, the rural electorate is often discounted. Many of the current ethnic issues amongst tribal Sierra Leoneans are "a symptom of the deeper problems of poverty and competition over access to resources." [16] Most tribal members live in rural areas and do not have access to basic resources as it is. Competition over already scarce resources has caused tribal factions to war against one another, which has exacerbated poverty. Moreover, the government has not taken many proactive measures to find resolution to this conflict, so these tribal groups are left to their own devices to figure out a solution. As they cannot reach compromises, basic resources have dwindled and driven these individuals into deeper poverty. There is also a severe lack of rights for women: they are viewed as nothing but either mere homemakers or bush wives who serve rebel militia members' (often sexual) needs.[17] As they cannot go into the workforce, they cannot contribute to pulling the country out of its economic failure; it is a waste of human capital. Moreover, in a world where women are generally viewed as equal to men, this degradation of women keeps Sierra Leone from developing as a nation.

Many Sierra Leoneans get less than minimum wage for the amount of manual labour that they perform; it is often not enough for the workers and their families to subsist on. In economic terms, they earn low rates of return on their earnings because they are unable to save any surplus of money after meeting their immediate needs,[18] which are expensive and take up much of their modest paycheck as is. Furthermore, funds that are provided as humanitarian and development assistance from donor nations are not used for the purposes that they were originally earmarked for. As a result, appeals for aid from this impoverished nation are essentially a waste, as the money is provided but does not reach the individuals that the aid is meant for. So many opportunities for Sierra Leone to lift itself up out of its vicious cycle of persistent poverty are thwarted at first level, which is the government. Ironically, it is the government's responsibility to provide its citizens with good living conditions; in Sierra Leone, it is this same government that plays a key factor in pushing them into deeper poverty.

## Education

Lack of education has also been a contributing factor to the persistent poverty within Sierra Leone. Many schools in the rural areas were built immediately after Sierra Leone was granted independence. As a result, they do not have many well-endowed alumni to help support the schools and fund them.[19] Since the government funding is not adequate, there is a lack of books and equipment needed to provide basic education to children; overall, there is no monetary support to develop and sustain educational facilities. Adults do not have access to education, either; if an adult, especially a woman, desires to take courses and expand her knowledge, it is impossible for her to do so. Of the total population in Sierra Leone, only 40% of individuals were literate as of 2008.[20] A lack of education feeds into lack of knowledge of civic rights and responsibilities. This triggers a civil war among individuals because they do not know other means of bringing about change. This, in turn, causes the government to divert funds away from sectors such as education and towards mitigating civil war, which leads to further poverty within this region.

Many children are recruited into the RUF and the national army, pulled away from education and taught to fight and kill civilians as combatants.[21] In times where children are regarded by various nations as its future, Sierra Leone prevents its youth from obtaining an education and, instead, teaches them to be rogue militiamen and to kill at an early age. Since these children cannot gain an education, they cannot get jobs that pay well. They cannot provide for themselves, nor can they help to lift their families out of poverty. Individuals who are lucky enough to obtain and

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complete their education seldom receive adequate opportunities in the workforce. Unlike citizens of many other Lesser-Developed Countries, Sierra Leoneans do not have the opportunity to go abroad and earn to send money back home to their impoverished families. Many are either recruited to fight by the rebels or government; otherwise, they are sent back home to work in rural areas.

The lack of education with regard to family planning, combined with lack of provision of items such as prophylactics, results in a sharp rise in population within a country already struggling to feed its citizens. The government does not take charge to implement measures at mitigating accelerated population growth. This expansion in population leads to even more of a resource scarcity. Available food resources are not enough for the current population; with newcomers, it is definitely not sufficient enough to feed the rising population. Rural population growth can be attributed to rising birth rates, which is primarily due to a lack of education in family planning. In fact, growth of rural population has gone from 2,727,174 people in 2000 to 3,460,452 in 2008.[22] Furthermore, most farmers are not educated on how to use modern methods and machinery to increase agricultural output, and there are no government policies on these upgrades for better agricultural productivity.[23] Since farmers are still dependent on antiquated technology, there is depletion in agricultural productivity, which causes food scarcity and leads to poverty.

## Conclusion

Release from colonial rule has not benefited Sierra Leone; independence has caused vicious cycles of poverty and corruption, especially through vital sectors such as education, civil rights and infrastructure. While minimal reforms are taking place within these sectors to help Sierra Leone grow and prosper, the process is very slow and inadequate, and will continue to be so until the government takes significant measures to rid itself of corruption within all of these factors and lift its citizens out of poverty.

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