

# **FREETOWN: CITY SCOPING STUDY**

The trajectory of Freetown's urban development is at the centre of current political contestations in Sierra Leone. Freetown, a city of over 1 million inhabitants and whose population is expected to double in size in the next 20 years, is responsible for 30% of the nation's GDP. The city's development has been marked by colonial legacies, as well as 11 years of civil war, the Ebola epidemic, the 2017 mudslide, annual flooding and now the Covid-19 pandemic. While Freetown is conditioned by deep social and environmental disparities, it is also a vibrant, dynamic and contested site of narratives and politics. For the national government, Freetown is key for the advancement of the national economy.

The city mayor's vision is promoted through the 'Transform Freetown' agenda, which has become the means through which the Freetown City Council can gain leverage to influence the future trajectory of the city. However, in the middle of the power struggles between national and local governments, local and international civil society actors are forging horizontal networks and experimenting with participatory planning instruments to bring about change on the ground while gaining legitimacy and recognition to influence urban development. As mega projects are being considered for Freetown by local and national governments, it is crucial for research to continue to examine how policy and planning can promote more inclusive and sustainable urban development.

## URBAN CONTEXT

Freetown is the capital and largest city of Sierra Leone, located in the western area of the country, by the Atlantic Ocean. The city has a distinct geographical terrain, with much development having taken place on steep mountainous slopes or on reclaimed land at sea level. Geographical precarity, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, and mountains to the east of the city constrain and impact urban expansion, especially in the southern part of the city.

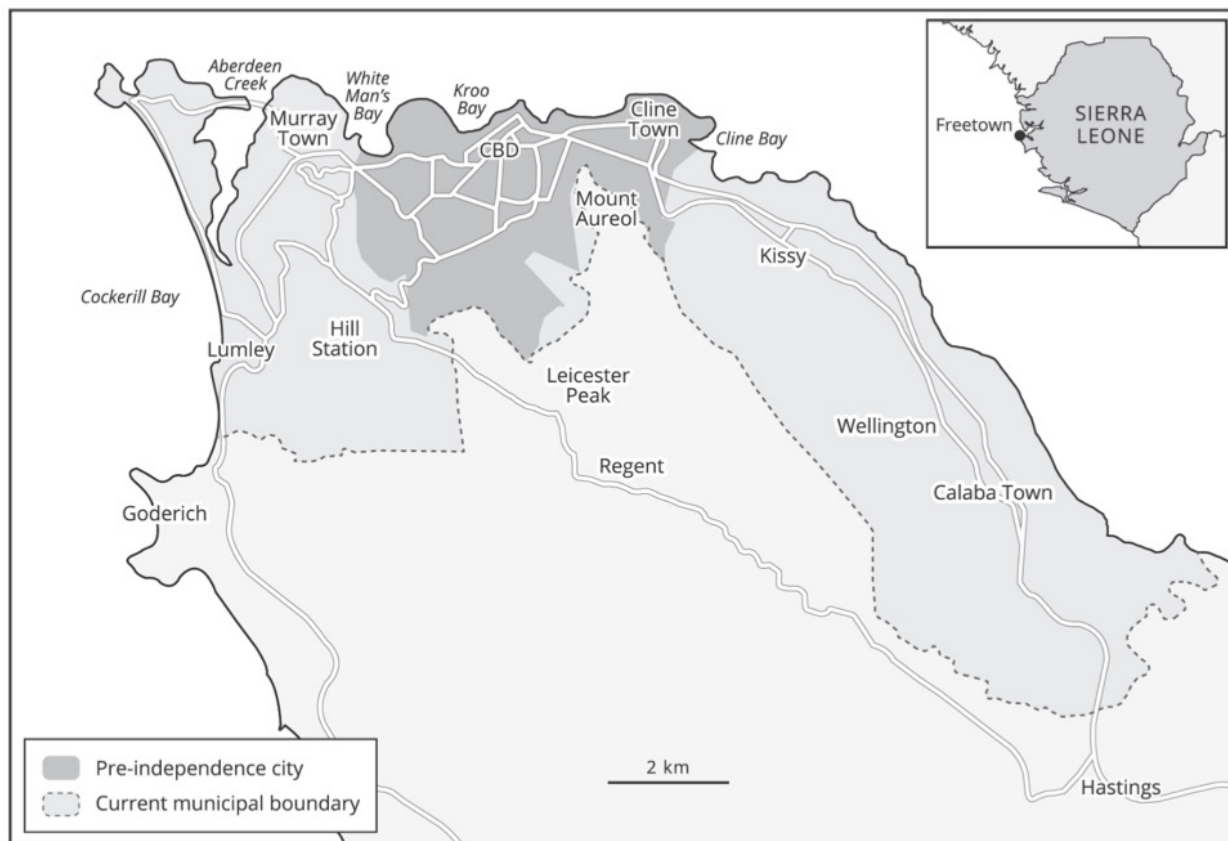
The city was established in 1787 by the Sierra Leone Company to settle 1,600 freed slaves from the West Indies and Nova Scotia (Canada). The area was previously inhabited by local Temne tribes, who were displaced by the British in 1807 and prohibited from settling within an 11 mile radius from the city. In 1808, the British took responsibility of Sierra Leone, establishing a Crown colony in and around Freetown. This social-spatial segregation deepened at the beginning of the 20th century when the colonial government created a "mosquito-free zone for privileged inhabitants".<sup>1</sup> In 1902, construction started for a new residential site only for Europeans, located by the hills six miles out of Freetown.

The boundaries of the city extended after independence in 1961 (see Figure 1), followed by rapid population growth of the city. From 1901 until 1985, the Freetown population grew from 67,782 to nearly 500,000 inhabitants. In the following 30 years, the population doubled, and there are now more than 1 million people living in the city.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Goerg (1998)

<sup>2</sup> Lynch, Nel, and Binns (2020)

**Figure 1: Urban growth of Freetown**

Source: Lynch, Nel, and Binns (2020)

In the post-independence period, the 11-year civil war and the West African Ebola virus epidemic were key milestones in Freetown's development. The civil war started in 1991 and generated an estimated 500,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). Most of them sought refuge in Freetown. When the war ended in 2002, many IDPs remained in the city, as did ex-combatants who experienced challenges returning to home towns, often outside of Freetown. This resulted not only in rapid population growth, but also in a dramatic increase in population density. Drawing on data from Statistics Sierra Leone (2017), Lynch, Nel, and Binns (2020) outline that "in 1985, the population density in Freetown and surrounding rural areas was 769 people per square kilometre, raising to 1,360 in 2004 and 2,154 in 2015". Growth in population numbers and density took place mostly in the low-income informal settlements in the city, located by the coast and in the hillsides.

In 2014, Sierra Leone was affected by the Ebola epidemic. The epidemic had several negative impacts on the living conditions in Freetown, as it constrained urban mobility, compromised local livelihoods, disrupted education and put extra burden on an already fragile health system. The majority of Ebola treatments centres were situated in rural areas external to the city and movement between districts was strictly controlled. Following the epidemic, inward migration to Freetown was triggered, predominantly a result of job losses at the closure of two of Sierra Leone's main iron ore mines.

Since the end of the Ebola epidemic in 2016, Freetown continued to play a key role in Sierra Leonean economic development. Today, the city houses 15% of the country's population while creating 30% of the country's GDP. According to the World Bank, "rapid urbanization is now Sierra Leone's biggest growth narrative for the 21st century."<sup>3</sup>

## POLITICAL CONTEXT

There are two main parties in Sierra Leone shaping its political context: the current ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC). Historically, SLPP has had a stronghold in the south of the country with the Mende ethnic group, whilst APC has relied on the Limba and Temne groups of the north of the country. The 2018 general election resulted in a peaceful transition of power from APC to SLPP, as the SLPP Presidential candidate Julius Maada Bio was elected with a slight margin. However, the parliament was dominated by an APC majority. This APC majority was short lived as the legitimacy of the votes (being "free and fair") was contested for most candidates in the courts of law, leading to victories being overturned for some and re-run elections for a few constituencies. Since mid-2019, the SLPP have had a slim majority in parliament. Freetown has been a swing region, and in 2018 Yvonne Aki-Sawyer from APC party was elected mayor of Freetown municipality.

Within this contested political context, two key and interconnected processes have been affecting the operations of Freetown City Council: decentralisation and tax reform. In 2004 the country embarked on an ambitious programme of decentralisation, which included the enactment of 2004 Local Government Act, re-establishing local councils and requiring them to formulate development plans. The act on paper, which had implications for several ministries, required devolution to take place with the expectation that this would generate more responsive and efficient service delivery in local areas and support local economic development. Freetown was one of the six elected town/city councils established by the act. Councils were divided into wards, with each ward having a ward development committee, with the objective to link grassroots level planning with local government actions. Apart from the political and administrative reforms, the act also aimed to establish fiscal decentralization, by granting local council powers to raise own revenues.<sup>4</sup>

This process triggered efforts to strengthen Freetown's planning system, and led to the development of Freetown structure plan for 2013-2028 and a spatial development strategy. However, in practice various functions have not been devolved to Freetown City Council (FCC), and citizen participation is rarely seen as a priority in the government's activities.<sup>5</sup> Action on the ground continues to be driven by diverse actors, without coordination, "resulting often in chaotic development, diseconomies and negative externalities".<sup>6</sup> FCC lack capacity to take on new functions, due to lack of fiscal decentralisation and lack of incentives to retain qualified human resources at local government posts. Furthermore, Freetown structure plan has still not attained parliamentary assent, limiting the possibility for the City Council to drive the processes of change.

Within this context, reforms to Sierra Leone's tax system has become a central stage for political disputes. After inheriting a declining economy from the stagnation of the mining sector (caused by low prices for iron ore and rutile), the 2018 SLPP elected national government committed to implement a World Bank and IMF supported fiscal adjustment framework. The framework provides a commitment to improve the nation's tax revenue performance, and it is part of a series of World Bank and IMF budgetary support to the Sierra Leone national government. This included US\$325 million funding package from the World Bank agreed in March 2019; and US\$143 million IMF loan approved in June 2020. One of the key features of these initiatives has been the emphasis on property taxation to increase local government revenue.<sup>7</sup>

Even within this wider political context encouraging local authorities to boost revenue collection, national government has pushed-back efforts of Freetown's mayor to establish a more equitable property tax system in the country's capital. However, the mayor managed to get the reform through, and there are estimates that suggest that it could increase the city council's revenue five-fold when fully operational.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Edwards, Yilmaz and Boex (2015)

<sup>5</sup> In 2019, the government devolved all remaining functions in Schedule 2 of the Local Government Act (2004) to the local councils. However, in practice, some these functions are still performed by Ministries, Departments and Agencies.

<sup>6</sup> Macarthy, Frediani, and Kamara (2019)

<sup>7</sup> World Bank (2019a)

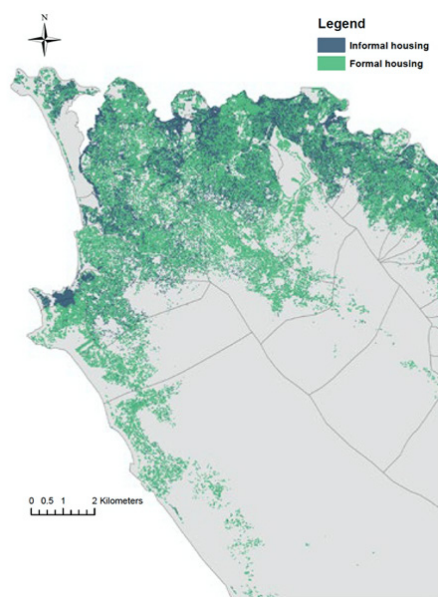
<sup>8</sup> Oxford Analytica (2020) and for more on the Freetown new property tax system see Grieco et al. (2019)

## URBAN CHALLENGES

The increased emphasis on Freetown's role in the country's economic growth has resulted in increased commitment to the city's infrastructure development. This has stimulated the city's high-end real estate market, and increased demand for large scale property development. This has generated rapid pressure to access land to enable property development in inner city areas of Freetown, resulting in increased threat of evictions for residents from coastal informal settlements. The World Bank estimates that "the monetary loss due to very low and stagnant land prices in slum areas could equal almost US\$58 million"<sup>9</sup>. While this figure fails to recognise the economic value and levels of productivity within informal settlements, it illustrates the narrative that fuels the threat of eviction and displacement. At the same time, the formal real estate market continues to be deeply exclusionary, as existing challenges around access to mortgage and high land transaction costs<sup>10</sup> have resulted in insufficient investment in affordable housing developments. These factors contribute to a sharp increase in rent prices, increasing faster than price inflation (rental prices increased at around 650% between 2003 and 2011, while price inflation was approximately 36%). Average monthly rent in the formal market for a three-bedroom apartment in central and western Freetown ranges from US\$3,000 to US\$5,000, affordable to only 3% of Sierra Leone's households.<sup>11</sup>

This emphasis on Freetown as pivotal to economic growth has not translated into a fairer urban development trajectory, as the urban poor have experienced continued threats to security of tenure, as well as deepened exposure to social, environmental and economic risks. Informal settlements (slums) constitute 36% of all settlements in the city.<sup>12</sup> There is not a precise figure for the percentage of the total Freetown population living in informal settlements, but given that informal settlements are some of the most densely populated areas of the city, it is likely that they house around 60% of Freetown's population. To date, the most detailed published profile of Freetown's informal settlements was conducted by the Centre of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation, involving eight communities. The profile demonstrated that residents of informal settlements comprise diverse ethnic identities, but the majority were Temne and 69% of those profiled were Muslim. Most of the residents were tenants living in average household size of seven people per household. Only 51% of households enumerated had access to electricity.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 2: Formal and informal housing in Freetown**



Source: World Bank (2019)

<sup>9</sup> (World Bank (2019b)

<sup>10</sup> According to the World Bank (2019), property transfers in Freetown typically cost almost 11 % of property value, compared to an average of approximately 8% across Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2006, there were only 200 registered property transactions in Freetown.

<sup>11</sup> World Bank (2019b)

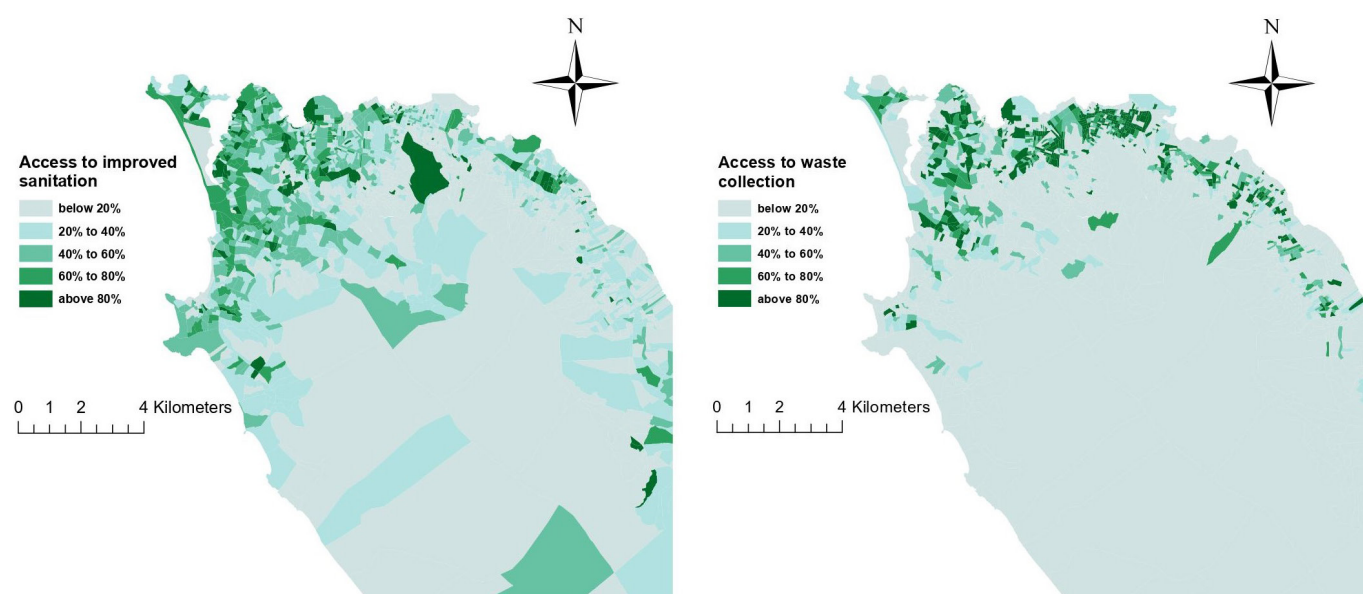
<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> CODOHSAPA (2019)

As informal settlements are located by the coastal area and hillsides, their residents are exposed to the constant threat of environmental risks, such as flooding and landslides. These threats have intensified due to continuous hillside deforestation by unregulated low-income as well as middle- and high-income settlements. The Regent landslide in August 2017 destroyed 400 buildings, affected 5,000 people, and claimed the lives of an estimated 1,100. It highlighted the urgent need for planning to promote urban resilience and risk reduction. Meanwhile, rising sea-level is expected to affect mostly the urban poor, as a scenario for 2050 estimates that 85% of the 2,380 affected will be in informal settlements.<sup>14</sup> Apart from the large-scale disasters, the existing pattern of urbanisation has reproduced 'urban risk traps', exposing the urban poor to cumulative deterioration of lives and assets generated by everyday risks and small disasters.<sup>15</sup>

In 2015, 35% of the population of Freetown was living below the multidimensional poverty line. While the 2018 national statistics shows a slight reduction in income poverty, it is extremely likely that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an adverse impact. The country's GDP shrank by 3.1% in 2020<sup>16</sup>, leading to a loss of more than 15% of projected domestic revenues.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, most of the city is affected by the lack of access to adequate water and sanitation services. Only 22% of residents have access to improved, private sanitation facilities and only 3% of urban households have access to piped indoor drinking water, with 39% of households instead relying on public taps. Only 40% of the city's waste is collected.<sup>18</sup> As a result, lack of access to adequate service is one of the main drivers of health risks for residents of Freetown informal settlements.<sup>19</sup> These risks are particularly experienced by women and girls residing in informal settlements. For example, when water scarcity is great, women and girls can be subjected to worse violence, or coerced into sexual activity in exchange for water.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 3: Access to improved sanitation and waste collection (% of households) in Freetown**



Source: World Bank (2019)

<sup>14</sup> World Bank (2018b)

<sup>15</sup> Allen et al. (2020)

<sup>16</sup> IMF Datamapper (2020)

<sup>17</sup> Oxford Analytica (2020)

<sup>18</sup> World Bank (2018a)

<sup>19</sup> Macarthy et al. (2018)

<sup>20</sup> Freetown Wash Consortium and Liberia Wash Consortium (2015); Conteh, Kamara and Saidu (2020)



Livelihoods in the city are predominantly informal, often precarious, insecure and stigmatised. In the western area, where Freetown is located, more than 60% of the labour force work in the informal sector.<sup>21</sup> In some sectors, the percentage of informal activities are even higher. In the transport sector (the second-highest generator of jobs in Freetown), 85% of jobs generated in Freetown are informal, and in the construction sector 72% work in informal and 8% unpaid. Meanwhile, under the narrative of beautification, government authorities have often criminalised informal activities in the city, by prohibiting and sanctioning them in various ways, such as prohibiting motorcycle taxis or street traders from operating in particular parts of the city.<sup>22</sup> However, informal livelihood activities are an integral part of the functioning of the city's economy, and they play important roles in securing a basic income and social protection for Freetown inhabitants. This is especially the case for 'open access' livelihoods activities, such as cockle picking, trading, sand mining, stone quarrying and fishing, which can be accessed by those with limited assets.<sup>23</sup>

Another key driver of inequality in Freetown is uneven access to transport. Public transport is very limited in the city; in 2019 the city had only 66 public buses.<sup>24</sup> The main form of collective transport is okadas (motorcycle taxis) and kekehs (three-wheelers). These forms of transportation are often preferred by Freetown residents, as they are able to navigate congested roads, and access unpaved hilly areas.<sup>25</sup> However, those living in hilly and peripheral areas of the city are particularly isolated from transport connections. Residents of large parts of the city must spend more than 60 minutes to access inner city areas. Location and gender have a direct impact on costs of services, as providers charge more for those living in hard to reach places and tend to be less willing to negotiate prices with women.<sup>26</sup> These mobility injustices provide some insights on motivations for those living in coastal settlements, closer to inner city areas, even if these are areas high-prone to disasters and everyday risks.



View of Freetown from Lumley Beach towards Wilkinson Road, Sierra Leone by @randominstitute via unsplash.com

21 Koroma et al. (2018)

22 Enria (2018)

23 Rigon, Walker and Koroma (2020); City Learning Platform (2020)

24 World Bank (2019)

25 Koroma et al. (2020)

26 Oviedo Hernandez et al. (Forthcoming)

## POLITICAL FACTORS SHAPING WHETHER URBAN CHALLENGES ARE ADDRESSED

Local urban stakeholders, Freetown city council and national development priorities has recently brought new energy for more inclusive urban development. This has opened up opportunities to reinvigorate urban planning efforts in the city. In response to humanitarian crises (i.e. landslides, flooding, the Ebola and Covid-19 pandemics) community groups from informal settlements have demonstrated great ability to mobilise and coordinate actions, build resilience and have a significant role in responding to and mitigating risks at the community level. The establishment and operations of community disaster management committees across many Freetown informal settlements is evidence of the communities' capabilities to mobilise, plan and act collectively.<sup>27</sup> At city level, there is a dynamic and well networked urban community of practice in Freetown, aiming to improve quality of life of those in informal settlements. This network is a legacy of the Pull Slum Pan Pipul (PSPP) partnership in Freetown, involving various civil society organisations<sup>28</sup> funded by Comic Relief between 2015-2019. Relationships established through the PSPP initiatives continue to collaborate through the City Learning Platform initiative, co-chaired by the FCC and Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), and promoting more collaborative and participatory solutions for improving living conditions in Freetown's informal settlements involving community residents.<sup>29</sup>

The City Learning Platform is connected to the mayor's 'Transform Freetown' initiative launched in 2019 bringing together urban stakeholders to define, coordinate and implement a shared agenda for the city. This initiative has been able to generate a lot of political traction and it has helped to highlight the need for coordinated and planned efforts to address urban development challenges in Freetown.

At the national level, the Ministry of Lands and Country Planning has been leading efforts to develop policies relevant to urban development, such as the National Housing Policy (2006) and National Land Policy (2015). The Ministry of Planning and Development has also co-ordinated the production of the national development plan (2019-2023). Furthermore, a national urban policy is being considered by the national government (with support from UN-Habitat), which could have a substantial impact in increasing the role of national government in directing Freetown's future development.

Nevertheless, political energy seems to currently gravitate around large scale and highly visible urban projects, such as the mayor's mass transit cable car project or the president's US\$2 billion Freetown-Lungi bridge, rather than more comprehensive and coordinated action. Given that in the next 20 years Freetown's size is expected to double, it is crucial that local, municipal and national efforts are galvanised and synergised to respond to this challenge and bring about more equitable and sustainable urban development.

<sup>27</sup> Macarthy et al., 2017; Osuteye et al. (2020).

<sup>28</sup> Organisations funded by Comic Relief include YMCA Sierra Leone and Centre of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation (CODOHSAPA); Restless Development (RD); Youth Development Movement (YDM); Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC); and the Sierra Leone Urban Studies Centre (SLURC).

<sup>29</sup> City Learning Platform (2019)



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