

# Freetown: City research brief

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The African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) is a collaborative research programme, seeking to tackle complex urban development challenges in the continent's rapidly changing cities. ACRC aims to generate robust insights and evidence that will help improve the living conditions and urban services for all city residents, especially disadvantaged communities.

Freetown is one of 12 African cities in which ACRC is engaging community organisations, researchers, practitioners, key state actors and non-state agencies, to co-produce knowledge and evidence to advance urban transformation.

## Research highlights

- > A lack of policy commitment among policymakers and city authorities on the management of informal settlements has led to failed policies and planning initiatives in Freetown.
- > The exclusive and expensive character of housing provision in Freetown is generating vicious rather than virtuous circles – particularly for low-income communities.
- > Insecurity is pervasive in Freetown, with gang violence and criminality as the most significant concerns amongst city residents, followed by political violence, police brutality, land conflict, and sexual and gender-based violence.
- > Unhealthy diets pose a greater risk of morbidity and mortality in Freetown compared to unsafe sex and alcohol, drug and tobacco use combined.
- > Young people in Freetown face a myriad of challenges around inadequate education, high youth unemployment, poor healthcare access, weak governance and limited political representation of youth interests.

## Our approach:

- > **Interconnected challenges:** Freetown city authorities face issues across multiple urban development domains, intersecting with political tensions at the community, city and national level, and across various city systems.
- > **Integrated understanding:** addressing challenges requires a comprehensive view of governance and systems failures, with a focus on low-income communities and marginalised residents.
- > **Interdisciplinary and community-based research:** our approach sheds new light on development challenges in Freetown and identifies potential solutions.
- > **Stakeholder engagement and innovative solutions:** our research engages multiple stakeholders, particularly representatives of low-income communities, to generate solutions to improve urban wellbeing in Freetown.
- > **Knowledge exchange and collaboration:** insights from Freetown are shared and shaped by experts from other ACRC focus cities, fostering collaboration.



## Research summaries

### The politics of urban reform and development

Urban reform and development in Freetown are hindered by elite-level factionalism, a lack of effective devolution and an absence of effective structures through which low-income communities can voice their needs to multiple authorities. These problems reinforce each other and directly undermine the effective functioning of the core city systems that should be delivering infrastructure and services.

Our analysis reveals that various groups in Freetown hold different forms of power, ranging from central to local government, civil society, business actors and “informal” groups, such as cliques and gangs. Effective city management involves understanding the different sites of power and working with each while recognising the existing complexity. In summary:

- **Tensions between central government and city authorities:** different political parties control these entities, leading to competing agendas for the city.
- **Limited devolution of powers:** the 2004 Local Government Act has not been fully implemented, limiting policy and financial decisionmaking powers for city residents.
- **Channelling services and benefits:** political actors focus on their party's support base, mainly along ethno-regional lines; the power-sharing deal amongst elites has prevented a return to civil conflict whilst also generating political violence and underdevelopment.
- **Promising pathways:** politically smart programming by donors, empowered community coalitions, stronger links between research and policy and strategic efforts leveraging cross-party elite consensus can lead to more secure, sustainable and inclusive development outcomes.



### City of systems

ACRC investigated the key systems required to deliver goods and services to Freetown residents and identified the following:

- The effective functioning of key city systems in Freetown is undermined primarily by political and governance constraints and the rapid process of urbanisation experienced since the early 2000s.
- Different systems also offer types and levels of political rewards, which shape whether politicians and city authorities are incentivised to engage in long-term reforms or target short-term visibility.
- Most city systems in Freetown are governed by a mixture of informal and formal rules, with the diversity of governance actors and their individual interests complicating and fragmenting the effective operation of core systems.
- Dealing with these challenges requires closer collaboration between Freetown City Council, central government – including the Ministry for Western Area – and multiple non-state actors. The development of a clearer policy on urbanisation may help provide these actors with shared objectives to pursue.



## Domains

### > Informal settlements

A lack of commitment among policymakers and city authorities on the management of informal settlements has led to failed policies and planning initiatives. Insecure tenure hinders informal settlement residents from investing in their neighbourhoods, exacerbating uncertainty. Formal land market constraints and land use rights further drive up land prices in well-located areas. Urbanisation pressures increase risks from multiple hazards such as floods, landslides, and fires, especially in Freetown, where 35% of the population is at risk. **Mitigating climate risks and building resilience is, therefore, critical.**

Residents are important vote banks for politicians but, despite this, they are largely excluded from policy decisions and have limited political voice in development initiatives that affect their communities. **Networks like the Federation of Urban and Rural Poor (FEDURP) and initiatives such as the City Learning Platform are seeking to bridge this gap by bringing and amplifying the voices of slum dwellers into discussions about urban development plans.**

### > Housing

Decent and affordable housing can play an important role in urban and national development, offering investment prospects, employment and income-earning opportunities, personal wealth creation, and safety for vulnerable groups. It can also contribute to crime prevention and generate finance for local government via property taxation.

However, the exclusive and expensive character of housing provision in Freetown is generating vicious circles – particularly for low-income communities, who struggle to afford rents and often dwell in low-quality housing that reduces their quality of life, health and livelihood opportunities.

Housing in the city has consequently become a source of tension, protests and even violence. A key problem is that Freetown's poor governance environment limits collaborative, participatory and intersectoral housing solutions, leaving low-income residents with growing housing insecurity. **Prioritising inclusive and substantial policy development is crucial for both disadvantaged communities and government authorities to establish affordable and high-quality housing conditions.**



### > Safety and security

Insecurity is pervasive in Freetown. Gang violence and criminality are the most significant concerns among residents, followed by political violence, police brutality, land conflict and sexual and gender-based violence. "Natural" disasters are increasingly common, although fires and floods have their roots in man-made problems and are often exacerbated by climate change.

Insecurity is linked to national politics and interests, with politicians managing security groups for political and economic benefits. The problem can be traced back to systemic failures in the legal and educational systems, with gangs presenting a social alternative for marginalised youth and politicians able to exploit youth as "violence entrepreneurs" in pursuit of political goals.

The political significance of both the security sector and of violence to national elites makes it very difficult to secure national-level buy-in for the significant reforms required here. In the short-term, attention should focus instead on solving specific problems at the community level, where some traction can be gained. This could **start with hybrid community security structures through which people protect their community with support from the police.** Post-war institutions for community insecurity – including Local Police Partnerships Boards and Community Service Volunteers – were effective in the past and need to be rehabilitated. Over the longer term, **a dialogue over security and violence across the political divide needs to be established to help set Freetown and Sierra Leone on a path towards increasingly limiting the role of violence and addressing youth marginalisation.**



## > Health, wellbeing and nutrition

Unhealthy diets pose a greater risk of morbidity and mortality in Freetown than unsafe sex and alcohol, drug and tobacco use combined. Driven in part by the challenges of rapid urbanisation, but also by the politics of food provisioning, this quiet crisis exposes the critical links between health, nutrition and wellbeing in urban Africa.

Sierra Leone's agriculture and fishery sectors are undermined by powerful international and national interests, including the refusal to use locally produced content to supply public sector programmes, the failure to protect national fishing resources from international fleets, and large-scale imports of rice. School-aged children are systematically exposed to cheap, imported "junk" foods associated with Western diets. Food safety is a particular challenge in informal settlements, where most residents rely on informal vendors to prepare and serve food, with limited access to safe water and adequate sanitation facilities.

Addressing unhealthy diets requires collective action at multiple levels – from efforts to challenge vested interests at national and international levels, through to local-level initiatives aimed at promoting healthy diets in Freetown. Promising and affordable approaches include **enabling and incentivising informal vendors to produce healthier food, social media campaigns to promote healthier choices and greater investment in domestic food production and distribution, including in urban areas.**

## > Youth and capability development

Sierra Leone's youthful population presents significant opportunities for economic and social development, particularly in Freetown. However, inadequate education, high youth unemployment, poor healthcare access, weak governance and limited political representation of youth interests have thwarted this potential.

**Investing in education, economic development, entrepreneurship and improving access to technology are some of the opportunities for youth and capability development in Freetown.** Initiatives such as Technical and Vocational Education and Training can help address youth unemployment and promote economic development. They require further investment and should be geared towards solving other critical problems, including waste management and the green energy transition. The formal education sector needs to be realigned with job market demands.

**Policy review, building public-private partnerships and providing dependable financing for training institutions** are also important for addressing the challenges faced by young people. A strong collaboration between the public and private sectors can enhance local content and create job opportunities for young people in various sectors of the economy.

## About this brief

This brief was produced by ACRC's Freetown team to outline research findings and potential interventions, in preparation for the final city uptake workshop in the programme's Foundation Phase (2022-23).

**Photo information (by order of appearance):** 1. Panbody housing in Portee Rokupa - Alexandre Apsan Frediani; 2. Construction site - ICLEI Africa; 3. Cockle Bay informal settlement - Alexandre Apsan Frediani; 4. Housing in Kroo Bay - Abenaa / iStock; 5. Freetown market - Abenaa / iStock.



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