

Freetown: City report

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June 2024

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Acknowledgements

This working paper on Freetown was prepared based on seven reports produced by individual teams recruited by the ACRC. Each report was on one of the following topics: political settlement; city of systems; housing; health, wellbeing and nutrition; informal settlements; youth and capability development; and safety and security.

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Abstract

Freetown's political economy is influenced by local and national-level politics, which is firmly linked with the country's weak systems of governance and decentralisation. This is rooted in Sierra Leone's long history of ethno-regional divisions between the two leading political parties and the rentseeking behaviour of politicians and other elites. This undermines the functioning of city systems responsible for the delivery of services and infrastructure across a range of development domains, thereby making the city less socially inclusive, equitable and productive.

The study uses the ACRC's holistic framework to analyse how power is configured at the national and city levels and how the three components of politics, systems and development domains interact to influence urban development in Freetown. This approach seeks to provide new insights to politicians, city officials and other key decision-makers about the systemic challenges they face, how this is linked with the city's everyday politics, and the implications for development. Analysing Freetown's political economy allows us to fill in important gaps in research on the politics of development in Freetown and address the scarcity of prior studies on core city systems (energy, housing, water, waste management, sanitation, health, education and transport).

Keywords: Politics, insecurity, city systems, domain, informality, development, governance, political tensions, rents, devolution

Cite this paper as:

Macarthy, JM (2024). "Freetown: City report". ACRC Working Paper 2024-16.
Manchester: African Cities Research Consortium, The University of Manchester.
Available online: www.african-cities.org

ISBN: 978-1-915163-15-8

The African Cities Research Consortium is funded by UK International Development.
The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.



Acronyms

ACRC	African Cities Research Consortium
APC	All People's Congress
CA	Chief administrator
CBD	Central Business District
CBO	Community-based organisation
CODOHSAPA	Centre for Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation
CSO	Civil society organisation
CSV	Community Service Volunteer
ENFORAC	Environmental Forum for Africa
FCC	Freetown City Council
FCDO	Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
FGD	Focus group discussion
FEDURP	Federation of the Urban Poor
FQE	Free quality education
GDP	Gross domestic product
IEC	Information, education and communication
IMC	Inter-ministerial committee
IFD	Institution for Development
IS	Informal settlements
LGA	Local Government Act
LPPB	Local Policy Partners Board
MDA	Ministries, departments and agencies
MDU	Mayor's Delivery Unit
MLHCP	Ministry of Lands, Housing and Country Planning
MoYA	Ministry of Youth Affairs
MP	Member of Parliament
MTNDP	Medium-term National Development Plan
NASSIT	National Social Safety and Insurance Trust

NCD	Non-communicable disease
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NYC	National Youth Council
NYS	National Youth Service
PCP	Priority complex problem
PSPP	Pull slum pan pipul
PSRU	Public Sector Reforms Unit
SALHOC	Sierra Leone Housing Corporation
SDI	Slums Dwellers International
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
SLURC	Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre
SUN	Scaling up nutrition
UN	United Nations
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
WAR	Western Area Rural
WARD	Western Area Rural District
WARDC	Western Area Rural District Council
YCD	Youth and capability development

Executive summary

This paper describes the political economy of development in Freetown. It focuses on how politics at both the local and national levels undermines the functioning of the city systems responsible for the delivery of services and infrastructure across a range of urban development domains, thereby making the city less socially inclusive, equitable and environmentally sustainable. Freetown concentrates 15% and 35% of Sierra Leone's total population and entire urban population, respectively. It additionally accounts for 30% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). It remains by far the country's largest city and serves as its main economic and administrative hub. This gives it far greater political and economic importance to the country's ruling elites than any other city in Sierra Leone.

Freetown's political economy is influenced mainly by a long history of ethno-regional divisions in Sierra Leone's politics, in which the two leading political parties are well-rooted. These have become key mobilisers of national political support and identity, directly shaping the way rents and development investments flow in Sierra Leone. Politically, the city is closely embedded in the national political settlement,¹ lacking any real autonomy from ruling elite politics. Freetown is governed by the Freetown City Council (FCC), which has a long history of conflict with the central government. Given the threat posed by council leaders to the political survival of the national government, it has often been the target of central government authorities.

A key challenge to the FCC's authority in Freetown is that successive central governments have always worked to reassert control over the running of the city, despite a decentralisation framework introduced in 2004, which gives direct responsibility to local councils for some devolved functions. This power imbalance between the centre and the city, which devolution efforts aimed to resolve but have exacerbated instead, is among the major obstacles to urban reform in Freetown. Mechanisms for collaborative interventions between the FCC and central government agencies exist but they are complicated by the need for any implementing agency to take "credit" for the service or intervention because of the competing political alliances in control of the centre and city, respectively.

Ten core systems were selected and analysed in Freetown, based on a range of attributes that were identified by the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC). Most of the systems function at the interface between formality and informality, sometimes creating a dichotomy in the way services are provided and distributed within the city. The governance involves a complex structure, comprising several types of actors, catering to different groups of residents. However, despite their interactions, decisions on the systems are often taken in relative isolation and at different scales. This reflects the sectoral nature and fragmented ways in which responsibility for the delivery of services is assigned among a diversity of government stakeholders.

¹ See Section 2 for definition of political settlement.

Regarding service coverage, to date, the city struggles to make adequate provisions for basic services, such as water, healthcare, sanitation, schools, electricity, transportation, and waste management. The situation is much better in some areas in the west and central than in the east, even though this disparity lies more in the city's topography than in the politics.

Most of the infrastructure for water and energy is old and faulty, which makes the extension of the grid network highly problematic. Water and electricity coverage in the city is persistently low, and high prices for electricity and water make illegal connections a serious challenge. Similarly, household access to services is limited by factors such as distance, the lack of grid network, and income. There are also serious issues with the quality of delivery of urban services, which is often far worse among people living in informal settlements.

Five domain studies were carried out in Freetown and each is briefly discussed below.

Housing

Freetown faces an acute housing scarcity, which makes access to decent, affordable housing problematic. Private-sector investment in housing is limited and most houses in the city are provided by private individuals. The sector faces several challenges, including inadequacies in the land market, the high cost of land and building materials, and the lack of affordable serviced land, which has led to the proliferation of informal settlements. Multilevel governance actors and structures are involved in the housing sector, which is often shaped by unequal powers. Several political settlement issues constrain the sector's development. These relate to the disconnect between housing and the broader city development processes, the lack of devolution of housing functions and the unwillingness of the central government to allow the FCC to implement the property tax system, which makes it fully reliant on the central government for funding. Reforms in the domain have focused on liberalising the production and delivery of houses as the state changes its role to that of an enabler rather than a direct producer. However, the government still struggles to attract private businesses to invest in affordable housing, despite the numerous concessions made (for example, provision of cost-free land and duty waivers).

Informal settlements (IS)

Low-income informal settlements make up 36% of Freetown's land area. Population pressure is set to intensify the rapid growth of informal settlements, which are already struggling with high youth unemployment and the delivery of urban services to the residents. Most residents have been exposed to multidimensional shocks, ranging from the 2012 cholera epidemic to the Ebola outbreak in 2014 and, more recently, Covid-19. The settlements continue to grow, as households face difficulty securing land for housing and state institutions are unable to provide adequate access to needed services and infrastructure. The politics of informal settlements in Freetown is characterised by a multilayered governance structure, comprising formal, informal and

traditional (semi-formal) modes of governance that are involved in shaping residents' needs, aspirations and wellbeing, although this is challenged by the lack of coordination and coherence among the actors. In most settlements, the residents and their chiefs struggle to have their voices heard at the city and national levels as they attempt to ensure that basic goods and services are provided in their locations. Politicians sometimes exploit the residents as a client group to build and bolster their political capital, including by employing disaffected urban youth as “violence entrepreneurs” to win political struggles. Nevertheless, several recent reform measures have been put forward in various policy, programme and strategy documents aimed at enhancing the land administration process, which will affect the lives and wellbeing of the residents.

Health, wellbeing and nutrition (HWN)

In Sierra Leone, food is generally accessible, but the cost and quality of the food are problematic. Access to healthy diets involves multiple systems, including food, health, transport, education and trade, which present a serious challenge to many low-income families. Unhealthy diets present a major risk of morbidity and mortality in the population. Nevertheless, the country has made significant progress in several global HWN indicators, including reduced stunting, child mortality and maternal mortality rates.

Agriculture plays a vital role in Sierra Leone, employing approximately 60% of the population and contributing nearly half of the per capita GDP. However, 75% of the country's arable land remains uncultivated and this has led to a heavy reliance on commercial food imports and food aid. The country's fisheries sector is crucial, providing about 80% of the animal protein consumed by the people and contributing over 10% to GDP. However, the artisanal fishing industry has faced longstanding challenges, as a result of unregulated and illegal trawling practices, as well as the destruction of mangroves, which serve as important breeding sites for fish.

Complex networks among the elite in Sierra Leone have compromised transparency and accountability in the HWN domain, leading to programme failures or delays. This includes the lack of an enabling environment requiring public sector programmes to source more of their inputs domestically, inadequate protection of national fishing resources from international fleets, and large-scale rice imports, despite the export of locally grown rice to neighbouring countries. Addressing these challenges and promoting transparency and accountability are crucial for the success of programmes and initiatives aimed at improving nutrition, agriculture, fisheries and urban development in Sierra Leone.

Youth and capability development (YCD)

The youth population in Sierra Leone is large, which presents a significant opportunity for their inclusion in the country's economic and social development. However, a greater proportion of young people live in poverty, which is linked to the multiple shocks

that Sierra Leone has experienced over the years. The high youth concentration in Freetown is triggered by false promises of better life opportunities in the city which tend to attract many young people. A large proportion of young people in Freetown have limited access to educational institutions because of financial constraints, making it difficult for them to reach their full potential.

Youth political participation is constrained by several factors – including a lack of trust in the political processes, and their limited knowledge about formal political processes, which makes it easier for politicians to manipulate them. There are also structural factors, such as the high financial cost of electioneering, which makes it difficult for many to start a political career. Nevertheless, most youths (particularly young men) participate in the political life of the city in diverse ways. Some young people describe their engagements in these political activities as a source of money or a way to secure a job when their candidate/political party wins. Some youths are also card bearers of registered political parties, actively involved in the youth wings of the party. Addressing youth problems through programmes that reduce the rising trend of delinquency and youth violence is crucial for sustainable development for young people in Freetown.

Safety and security

Violence (protests and demonstrations) and criminal activities (robbery, assaults, and so on) are major challenges that are currently undermining the peace and tranquillity of Freetown. Nevertheless, most people are worried about security rather than safety issues. Insecurity in Freetown is rooted in the systemic failure of (at least) two systems in Sierra Leone: the law and order system and the educational system. The law and order system, which was reconstructed soon after the civil war in 2002, has been deteriorating fast. Both the police and army are perceived as being highly politicised, with their loyalty progressively coming under the influence of politicians, rather than the state. This, coupled with young people's very limited prospects in education, working life and social mobility, has led marginalised and vulnerable youths to become trapped in a culture of gang violence and criminality.

Apart from gang violence and criminality, which is the most important problem that people face in Freetown, there are also concerns about political violence, police and military brutality, school-related violence, land conflict, and concerns around sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). There is, however, a substantial difference between the different neighbourhoods regarding safety and security concerns.

Violence and criminality in Freetown are associated with political tensions between the ruling Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) government and the opposition All Peoples Congress (APC) party, and between FCC and the central state, which has resulted in sustained links between the two main political parties and their pro-party militias (usually ex-combatants). These militias, who are normally youths, often offer their services to the political party in exchange for rewards. Gangs are also associated with politicians of either of the two main political parties. Violence is additionally linked with

unsafe neighbourhoods, particularly in some low-income settlements where people are afraid to move about easily, describing such places as unsafe.

Conclusively, the study confirms that many of the challenges faced in Freetown are rooted in the city's political economy, which is firmly linked with the country's weak systems of governance and decentralisation. Freetown provides both rents and political legitimacy for many elites at different levels of state (private/public, national/local/community).

At least four themes emerged from our investigations into how national, city- and domain-level power and politics interact and the implications that this has for solving the intractable development challenges in Freetown. These are: decentralisation; informality; vested interests, rents and factionalism (which hinders collective action and catalyses violence); and inequality.

Organised citizens have been at the frontier to mobilise pressure for change, since many consider that development outcomes are only likely to improve with pressure from local residents.

1. Introduction and overview

Having suffered significant economic deterioration following the 2014 Ebola outbreak, and further decline in the wake of Covid-19 and the ongoing global economic crisis, Sierra Leone is finally projected to see some economic improvement in the near future. But the capital, Freetown, has failed to lay the foundations for future prosperity, and rapid urbanisation in the Western Area of the country is already exerting pressure on

Figure 1: Map showing the geographic location of Freetown



the functioning of the city's systems. With a 2020 population estimate of 1.202 million (UN Population Division, 2018) – which is 35% of Sierra Leone's urban population and 15% of its total population – Freetown accounts for 30% of the country's GDP. However, economic activity in the city is largely informal, particularly in low-income areas.

Freetown's importance to the elite² has always been more political than economic. Since colonial times, ruling elites have been able to generate rents from the provincial areas, rather than in Freetown. This dynamic goes back long before independence, when

² The word "elite" is used here broadly to include the governing and political class, as well as wealthy business owners.

much of the resources used to run the colony as the administrative centre were derived from the interior, thus reducing the incentives to invest in the city economy, promote services delivery and ensure the health and wellbeing of the people.

Furthermore, city governance remains constrained by continued failure to implement the decentralisation framework that was introduced countrywide in 2004. This and other problems reflect tensions between the main political parties and between the central and municipal governments, with elite-level power struggles undermining the capacity to develop and implement a shared vision for urban development in Freetown. Despite its growing influence, political economy research in Sierra Leone has rarely focused attention on urban development at space and scale.

1.1. Purpose and audience

This paper describes the political economy of development in Freetown. It focuses on how politics at both the local and national levels reduces the quality and integration of the city systems required to deliver services and resources across a range of urban development domains, thereby deepening the challenge of making the city more socially inclusive, equitable and environmentally sustainable. The main audience for this paper is politicians and key decisionmakers in urban sector development in Sierra Leone, especially those who have power to influence urban development policies and plans in the city of Freetown. Other audiences include planners and local and international NGOs, who often require evidence to shape the design of their interventions in the city. This study will also provide new insights for city officials elsewhere about the systemic challenges they face, how these are linked with the city's everyday politics, and the implications for development.

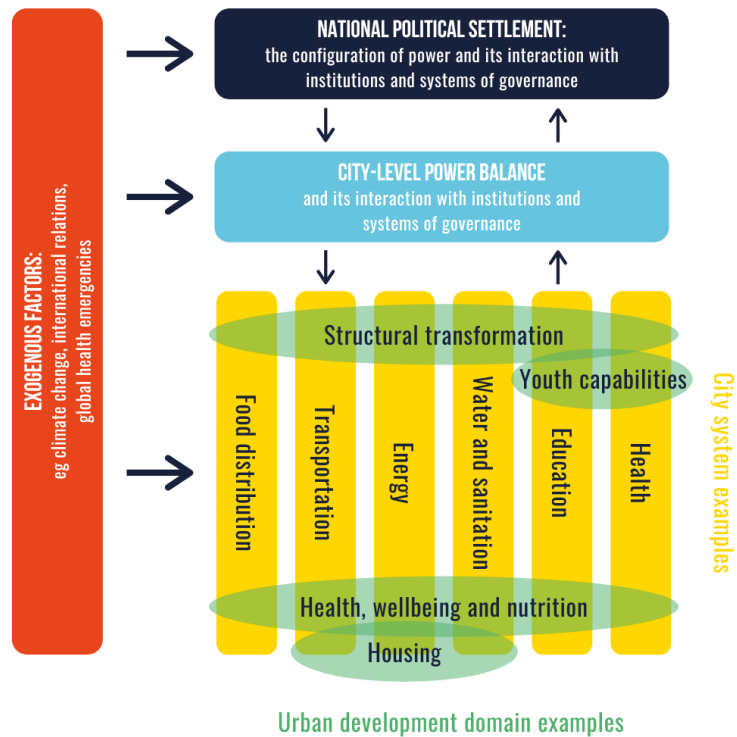
1.2. Approach

This study was conducted by the [African Cities Research Consortium](#) (ACRC) in partnership with the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) and other research partners in Freetown. ACRC is a collaborative research programme seeking to tackle complex urban development challenges in the continent's rapidly changing cities. Freetown is one of 12 African cities in which ACRC is engaging community/neighbourhood organisations, researchers, practitioners, key state actors and non-state agencies to co-produce knowledge and evidence to advance urban transformation.

The ACRC's holistic framework for analysing urban development in Africa has three integrated components – **politics**, **systems** and **development domains**. The politics component uses “political settlements” theory to model how power is configured at the national and city levels, and then analyses how these configurations of power shape (and are shaped by) urban development processes in the given city. The systems component analyses the functioning of the key systems (composed of physical infrastructure and people organised in various ways) that sustain and/or improve urban life in the city. The domains component looks at some of the distinct fields of discourse,

policy and practice that have formed around complex,³ intersystemic development challenges in the city, and analyses how the actors (political, bureaucratic, professional and popular) engaged in these fields collaborate and/or compete for authority. The diagram below gives an indication of how these three components come together.

Figure 2: ACRC’s conceptual framework



In Freetown, we examined five domains: housing; informal settlements; health, wellbeing and nutrition; youth and capability development; and safety and security. The choice of these domains was based on our analysis of the key development problems in the city and the prospects each domain yields to promote economic growth and thereby reduce poverty. The study was primarily qualitative, but supported by quantitative analysis, where relevant. The starting point for data collection was desk research, which collected secondary data from diverse sources relating to the key elements of the research theme/domain. We then proceeded with primary data collection, using a range of methods (shown in Table 1), including interviews (in-depth and key informant), FGDs and a perception survey (the last was used by the safety and security domain study).

Different sampling frames were used, targeting relevant central government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), the Freetown City Council (FCC), private sector workers, civil society (including NGOs), and neighbourhood residents and their groups. Participants for the study were selected purposively, except for some survey work

³ Previous research on systems has been partial/siloed, which limited our own efforts at a more integrated analysis.

where participants were chosen randomly. It is important to clarify that the key selection criterion was individuals who were familiar with urban development challenges in Freetown and available to participate in the study. This criterion allowed more people to participate and secured a diversity of opinions. Data were recorded, transcribed and analysed electronically.⁴

Table 1: Primary data collection methods and number of participants involved per domain

Method and number of participants	Domain types				
	Housing	Informal settlements	Health, wellbeing and nutrition	Youth and capability development	Safety and security
In-depth interviews	x				
<i>Occurrence</i>	22				
<i>Total participants</i>					
FGD	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Occurrence</i>	3	10	8	6	8
<i>Total participants</i>	27	120	40	34	49
KII	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Occurrence</i>	8	15	20	21	51
<i>Total participants</i>					
Perception survey					x
<i>Occurrence</i>					340
<i>Total participants</i>					

Source: Author (2024).

In terms of geographical scope, the study focused primarily on Freetown as defined by the formal limits of the city. However, it sometimes also covered areas beyond these established administrative boundaries, as the urban area has now expanded well into hitherto peripheral areas in the Western Area Rural District Council (WARDC), thereby creating a more complex conurbation.

2. Locating Freetown within the national political settlement and governance structure

To understand urban development and prospects for developmental reform in Freetown, we need to understand who wields power and how they use it. City-level

⁴ No additional ethical clearance was required for the study in Freetown by the Sierra Leone authorities, so the research was guided by the ethical clearance secured for the overall ACRC study by The University of Manchester in the UK, where ACRC is based.

power dynamics do not exist in a vacuum; they are typically influenced by what we call the country's "political settlement". A political settlement is a common understanding among a society's most powerful groups about the basic rules (or institutions) of the political and economic game. Those rules create opportunities or benefits for "insider" groups, often to the exclusion of "outsiders".

Political settlements can be analysed in a variety of ways, but we focus on two main dimensions: *power configuration* and *social foundation*.

The power configuration describes the relative strength of groups loyal to the leader (collectively referred to as the "leader's bloc") vis-a-vis groups that oppose the leader or are only contingently loyal. Crudely, where the leader's bloc is strong, we say that power is "concentrated". Where, by contrast, the leader's bloc is weak, we say that power is "dispersed". Power concentration, interacting with other variables, shapes the ability of the government to make and implement decisive, consistent urban development policy.

The social foundation describes the breadth and depth of groups that are "insiders" to the settlement.⁵ Where a relatively large proportion of the population are insiders, we describe the settlement as "broad". Where, conversely, only a relatively small proportion of the population are "insiders", we describe the settlement as "narrow". The social foundation, interacting with other variables, will shape the degree to which governing elites are committed to "inclusive" urban development policy.⁶

The current political settlement of Sierra Leone can be characterised as "broad-dispersed".⁷ Much political analysis to date has had a focus on the national rather than the subnational scale. In this section, we analyse how this political settlement has historically shaped urban development in Freetown, and how it shapes the city's prospects for reform.

2.1. Characterising Sierra Leone's political economy – the role of Freetown

Since the conclusion of civil conflict in 2002, the unofficial practice by voters of replacing one political party with another (between the two main political parties) every ten years, via multi-party elections, has helped maintain political stability. Within this broad deal, ethno-regional political divisions have hardened, becoming key mobilisers of national political support and identity, and directly shaping the way rents and

5 To be an "insider", a group has to satisfy two criteria: 1) it is potentially powerful enough, acting alone or with others, to make significant trouble for the leadership and/or significantly affect struggles between political blocs; and 2) the leadership chooses to manage this potential threat predominantly by "co-opting" the group, and thereby incorporate it into the settlement, by channelling benefits of some description to it. Groups that either lack the power to affect struggles in this way, or that are predominantly repressed by the leadership, are "outsiders" to the settlement.

6 For further details see Kelsall et al. (2021).

7 This is described in the ACRC inception report as a situation where elites are inspired to deliver broad-based social development benefits but struggle to maintain stability and consensus, causing them to fall back on clientelism and populism.

development investments flow in Sierra Leone. The two leading parties have strong and well-rooted ethno-regional support bases – south-east and Mende for the SLPP and north-west and Temne and Limba for APC – that were birthed in the British colonial era (Kandeh, 1992; Conteh and Harris, 2014). These are reflected in the country’s voting patterns and approaches to governing. There is widespread acceptance that parties will prioritise development in their ethno-regional bases, offer key party supporters formal positions in government or other state agencies and investigate the corrupt actions of previous occupants when holding power at the centre (Kandeh, 1992; Kormoh, 2020; Institute for Peace and Security Studies, 2019). These “rules of the game” have become more accepted following decentralisation reforms in 2004 that (re)created elected local councils and enabled local as well as national-level elites to benefit from access to state resources. This helped establish a semi-stable political settlement, where power and resources lost by party elites at the centre can be (re)gained through popular elections at the periphery. It is a deal that has proven better at delivering stability than either development or the absence of violence, particularly in Freetown (see Section 5.5 on safety and security).

Co-optation also sustains the elite consensus, with former President Koroma a particularly prominent user of this approach during his time in office to bring political adversaries on side.⁸ But President Bio’s more hardline approach towards the former administration has strained this elite consensus in ways that could lead to even greater contestation for power in the future, given that the losers will fear being increasingly ostracised and attacked. For now, the fact that elections have brought two changes of ruling party since the end of the civil war in 2002 has generated a degree of acceptance that political parties are central to building a more democratic society through which people’s realities can be changed.

The political, economic and social importance and role of Freetown in the national political settlement is unrivalled⁹ by any other city in Sierra Leone. Politically, the city is deeply embedded in the national political settlement, lacking any real autonomy from ruling elite politics. Until 2018, no president or party got elected without winning Freetown, where around a fifth of all voters live, making it one of two swing electoral areas, with the other being Kono district (Conteh and Harris, 2014). However, while Freetown remains key to the electoral chances of the APC, the fact that Bio won the 2018 presidential election with only 39% of the city’s vote may have made him less reliant on it for success in the June 2023 elections.

Nevertheless, the SLPP appears worried that it has not made significant inroads within Freetown to increase its vote, and that its 2018 presidential vote share has not been

8 Interview with APC activist, August 2022.

9 We define a political settlement as “*An ongoing agreement among a society’s most powerful groups over a set of political and economic institutions expected to generate for them a minimally acceptable level of benefits, which thereby ends or prevents generalised civil war and/or political and economic disorder*” (Kelsall et al., 2021). Thinking in these terms helps us to focus on the forms of politics and power relations that underlie formal institutions and shapes how they actually function in practice.

reflected in increased representation in parliament and the FCC, which are dominated by the APC. This is seen, by political opponents, as the reason why the SLPP has been keen to return to a district bloc proportional representation (PR) system for electing legislators, first used in 2002 (since 1961, when Sierra Leone gained independence). The Supreme Court ruling on 27 January 2023 in support of the PR district bloc system would likely increase the SLPP's share of parliamentary and local council seats in Freetown.

Whilst there are small-scale industries and increased investment capital in the city, Freetown's importance to the elite has always been more political than economic (Hitchen, 2022), since winning elections allows political elites to exert more influence over the distribution of resources¹⁰ and to cow the opposition into submission. This stems from the colonial period, when most of the resources used to run the colony were derived from the interior. In the 1970s and 1980s, Siaka Steven's control of the diamond trade – the government's share in the national diamond mining company was almost 50% – gave him significant access to rents. But with the privatisation of national assets, including the mines and state enterprises, the mode of accumulation used by elites has evolved. Nowadays, they predominantly accumulate rents¹¹ from priority and flagship government programmes – Koroma prioritised roads and free healthcare; Bio prioritised free education and electricity – with the knowledge that elites will reap the benefits of commissions from highly inflated contracts. Freetown is thus of greater political than economic importance to the country's ruling elites, which reduces their incentives to invest in improving the city's economic productivity.

Nonetheless, smaller-scale revenues can also be raised in Freetown by the elite – both political and business – but often in ways that stymie the possibility for urban reform.¹² Take urban transportation, for example. The private sector supplies about 85% of the passenger transport services in Freetown, filling gaps left by an inefficiently run public provider (World Bank, 2019). The majority of taxi, *poda poda* or *okada* operators do not own the vehicles they operate but rent them on a daily basis from often wealthy businessowners, some of whom are closely connected to political elites. This not only provides these elites with a stable and daily income, but also prevents low-income residents from being able to earn an income that will enable them to improve their quality of life (for more, see SLURC, 2021).

10 This influence may extend beyond Freetown, particularly when the same political party is in government at the national level.

11 "Rents" refer to the mechanisms by which the city creates opportunities for politicians, businesses and individual elites. In Freetown, the process of rent accumulation includes the awarding of contracts, procurement, land acquisition, outsourcing, and so on. In each case, benefits are accrued over the cost of the services provided and they can either be held entirely by the individual or shared in diverse ways, which may have negative development outcomes for people and the city.

12 Urban reform is used here to refer to all actions geared towards improving the lives of urban residents often deemed to be excluded from economic growth, political representation, decisionmaking processes and whose lives are rarely touched by state-led poverty reduction programmes.

Significant rents, illegally obtained, are moved outside the country to avoid being recaptured when the ruling elite returns to opposition. Casinos, high-end hotels and petrol filling stations, predominantly based in Freetown, are suspected of being used to launder illegal wealth in a regulatory environment that remains underdeveloped and underfunded (Global Initiative, 2021). The Basel Anti-Money Laundering Index (Basel Institute on Governance, 2021) gave Sierra Leone a score of 7.58, making it one of the African countries with the highest risks of money laundering and terrorist financing in the world. For revenues that are retained in the country, the bulk are spent or invested in Freetown, often in acquiring property, or channelled to “home” areas of the person acquiring the wealth through neopatrimonial networks, which shift, depending on which political party controls the centre. This in turn inflates land and property prices in Freetown in ways that increase livelihood insecurities for low-income neighbourhoods (see Section 5.0 on informal settlements).

2.2. Key relationships between the national and local government in Freetown

Freetown hosts the headquarters of all government MDAs and, despite 18 years of decentralisation, services including passport issuance, driver licensing and approval of teachers and nurses are all only accessible in the capital. It remains by far the largest city and serves as the country’s main economic hub. Freetown’s per capita GDP is estimated to be around \$1,079, almost double the national average (DI, 2020: 1).

Freetown City Council, which was established in 1893 under British rule, has a long history of conflict with central government authority, with the colonial government frequently accusing council leaders of being behind anticolonial campaigns, including the 1919 anti-Syrian riot (Kilson, 1966; Wyse, 1987). Given the threat posed by council leaders to the political survival of both colonial and postcolonial rulers, the council has often been the target of central government machinations, including its 1926 dissolution by the colonial government and Siaka Stevens’s disbandment of elected councils in 1972, as part of his centralisation agenda (Kilson, 1966; Wyse, 1987; Conteh, 2014). In both instances, the government cited corruption to justify its actions.

The APC’s dominance of Freetown politics goes back to the latter part of the colonial period, when the party won the FCC municipal elections, two months after it was formed in September 1960 (Harris, 2013; Kilson, 1966). With the then leader of the APC, Siaka Stevens, challenging the conservatism of the SLPP and promising Freetown’s residents better opportunities, the party won all subsequent elections in Freetown, until elected councils were disbanded in 1972.

Popularly elected municipal councils were reintroduced in 2004, and the APC has controlled the FCC ever since, due to the dominance of the Temne¹³ and Krios¹⁴ in Freetown, whose ethnic loyalty is usually to this party. The current configuration of local councils is the result of an ambitious World Bank-supported decentralisation programme, launched by President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah in 2004. Under the framework, central government MDAs would retain overall policy formulation and standard-setting powers and functions, while local councils directly supervise the delivery of local services in a range of sectors, including education, health and agriculture. Section 20 of the Local Government Act (LGA)(2004) specifies the functions meant to be devolved to local councils, and the resulting statutory instrument of November 2004 required that all such functions be devolved in the transitional period 2004-08.

To drive decentralisation, a high-level inter-ministerial committee (IMC) chaired by the vice president, and comprising key sector ministers, was set up in 2004. Intended to be the highest national organ in the decentralisation programme, the IMC's key function is to oversee the implementation of the LGA (2004); ensure the development and implementation of local government and decentralisation policies; promote and protect local democracy and participatory development; and, most importantly, arbitrate disputes among provincial administration, MDAs, local councils and chiefdoms (Gaima, 2009: 9). However, the IMC has been highly ineffective, owing to the lack of political will¹⁵ (see also Gaima, 2009; Fanthorpe et al., 2011), reflecting government's overall lack of meaningful political will to devolve powers and functions to local councils. Political economy reasons related to rentseeking behaviour in the awarding of contracts are a factor in the central government's resistance to devolution (Conteh, 2014; 2016; Workman, 2012). In practice, "deconcentration" exists and, in some instances, even functions devolved during the transitional period have been recentralised in law and practice (Conteh, 2014; 2016).

The importance of Freetown to the country's political settlement, and the common perception that the SLPP sees it as a threat, have been further confirmed by the outcome of the 2021 Mid-Term Population and Housing Census. Results published by Statistics Sierra Leone in May 2022, and validated in September 2022, revealed, somewhat implausibly, that the city's population had decreased by 42.5%, from 1,055,964 in 2015 to 606,701 in 2021 (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2022). A letter from the mayor of Freetown, which challenged the results, highlighted the significant negative impact that this official population decrease would have on central government funding

13 Temne is one of the largest ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, found mostly in the north and northeastern part of the country, where the APC party is very popular. It is also the largest ethnic group in Freetown, with a significant share of the tribesmen involved in small-scale businesses.

14 The Krios are among the minority ethnic groups in Sierra Leone. They are descendants of freed enslaved people who were resettled to Sierra Leone between 1787 and 1850. They live primarily in the Western Area, where Freetown is located. Many are civil servants with strong links to the APC party.

15 Interview, director of Decentralisation Secretariat, Freetown, 7 June 2022.

for infrastructure and service delivery in Freetown, and therefore on people's lives and wellbeing.

The following section examines the power balance in Freetown, to provide an understanding of how the current decisionmaking processes and city politics are shaped by national politics. It also explores the implications of these dynamics for promoting development and ensuring security in the city.

3. City-level power balance and governance

3.1. The city power balance

Given its longstanding advantage in Freetown's politics, the APC easily won the mayoral contest in 2018, with 60% of the vote, as well as all but one of the local council seats, although not all the councillors are loyal supporters of the incumbent mayor, Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr. However, the SLPP-led central government has sought to undermine the mayor and weaken APC's popularity in Freetown after initial efforts at co-option failed to bear fruit. Some key actors within central government – including the Minister of Local Government, Tamba Lamina – have sought, unsuccessfully, to oust (through investigations) and derail the mayor and her agenda in the last two years.¹⁶

The reasons for the breakdown in official relations are complex, and interviews revealed contested narratives, with each side blaming the other. Council officials loyal to the mayor alleged that the core administrative staff of FCC lack capacity and are unable to drive the mayor's ambitious programme of transforming Freetown. They also alleged that a series of operational initiatives, including those related to revenue generation introduced by Aki-Sawyerr, unsettled council officials who benefited from the old and corrupt APC government.¹⁷ On the other hand, the chief administrator (CA) and supporters also accused the mayor of being divisive and prioritising the Mayor's Delivery Unit (MDU) that she put in place to lead the implementation of the flagship Transform Freetown agenda (FCC, 2018). The MDU consists mostly of the mayor's professional colleagues, friends and political supporters, who are well qualified, paid better than their council counterparts and loyal primarily to her.

Although there is currently no agreed settlement as to the scope of each group's power over governance and development in Freetown, and contestation has been very public, the balance of power is complicated by the fact that both Aki-Sawyerr and the CA can draw on personal support from powerful actors within central government. This suggests that whilst politics has become increasingly polarised following the 2018 elections, informal relationships within the political class, such as intermarriages and being alumni of the same university, continue to influence and shape the country, and Freetown's post-war political settlement (Conteh, 2017).

¹⁶ Interview with selected officials from the FCC, Freetown, 8 June 2022; and with the director of the Decentralisation Secretariat, Freetown, 7 June 2022.

¹⁷ Interviews with staff of the Mayor's Delivery Unit, Freetown, 6 January 2022.

The mayor is well respected in the donor community, a result of her background working in the UK for PricewaterhouseCoopers and on the Ebola response, for which she received an Order of the British Empire (OBE) from the UK. She has been able to attract significant donor support, most notably from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the World Bank, to implement her Transform Freetown agenda.

This increasing donor interest in the operations of council (despite central government overreach and control) is due to the mayor's clearly articulated agenda, and it has driven a major change in the relations between central and local governments. The mayor has succeeded in attracting substantial donor support, with the FCDO funding some of her key reforms related to property tax and waste management. The FCC is also an implementing agency for a US\$56.73 million World Bank-funded Resilient Urban Sierra Leone project; and support for climate change mitigation has been provided by other organisations, including the Global Environment Fund, C40 Cities and Bloomberg Philanthropies. Donor funding and support for the mayor has to some extent mitigated the impact of infrequent and unreliable intergovernmental transfers (see Table 2). It also makes it more politically difficult for the SLPP to oust her from office, given they also need to cultivate positive donor and multilateral relations to maintain the national settlement.

Table 2: FCC funding by source in 2020

Source	Amount in SL Leones	Amount in US Dollars
Donor	SLL 147.9 bn	(USD 14.5m)
Private sector	SLL 72.3 bn	(USD 7.1m)
Central government ¹⁸	SLL 8.7 bn	(USD 8.5m)
FCC own source	SLL 3.4 bn	(USD 0.3 m)
Diaspora	SLL 0.02 bn	(USD 0.002m)

Source: Freetown City Council (2018).

Whilst short-term strategies for frustrating the mayor do not seem to be having the desired effect, in part given the lack of a unified approach by key officials, the government's long-term strategy may pose the biggest threat to her and the viability and sustainability of the FCC. One senior official noted that the government intends to divide Freetown into four administrative units to enhance revenue generation and service delivery.¹⁹ (But this might make revenue generation and service delivery more challenging for the city, especially for the three new administrative units that will be created. Ironically, one of the justifications Siaka Stevens used to disband elected local

¹⁸ Fiscal transfers from the central government were SLL 20.5 bn less than stated in the 2020 budget.

¹⁹ Interview with the director of the Decentralisation Secretariat, Freetown, 7 June 2022.

councils in 1972 was that many of them were economically unsustainable (Conteh, 2014).

With the central government seemingly set on reasserting its control over the management of Freetown, even a change of leadership of FCC is unlikely to alter Freetown's politics of development. As one civil society organisation (CSO) activist stated:

Successive central government administrations now tend to see Freetown as a threat to their own progress and political space; I think this is not just about APC or SLPP, I think any government now has the tendency to limit, obstruct or control the work of the FCC.²⁰

3.2. Impact of city power and governance on the development of Freetown

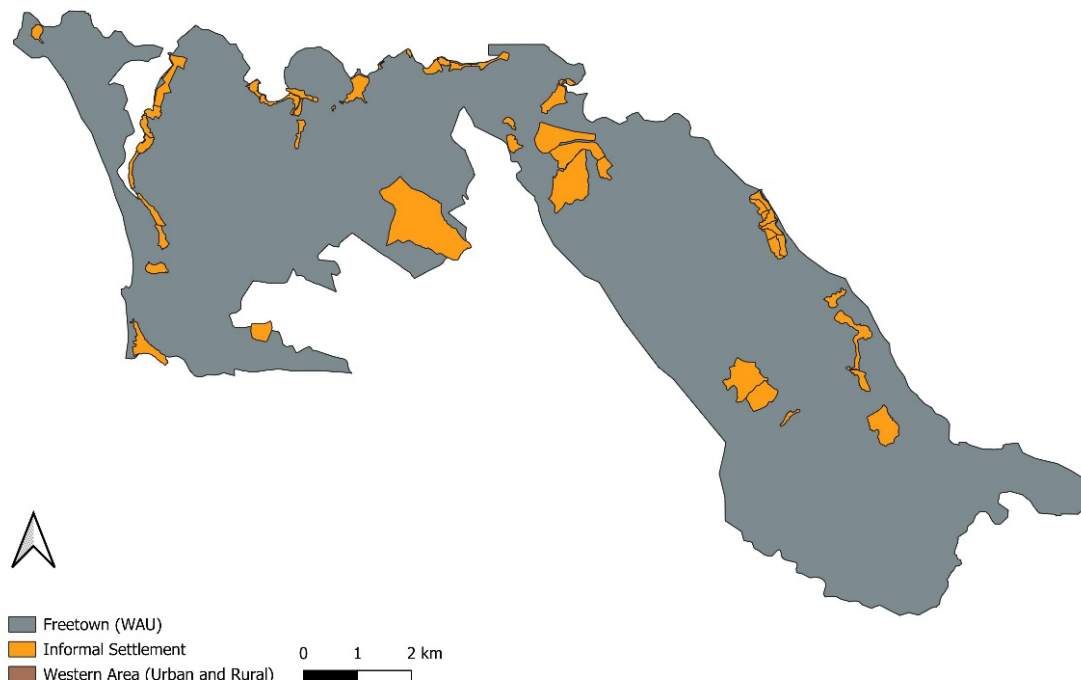
The election of APC mayoral candidate Aki-Sawyerr in 2018 ushered in the most politically challenging period for the FCC since 2004. In theory, local councils have legislative, financial and administrative powers. However, while the LGA of 2004 designated the local council “the highest political authority in the locality” (LGA 2004: 16), this was changed to “the highest development authority in the locality” in the 2010 Decentralisation Policy, reflecting the central government's resistance to functional devolution; and, in some instances, even functions devolved during the transitional period have been recentralised in law and practice (Conteh, 2014; 2016). Central government ministries have retained control over the formulation of national policy, planning and procurement (Fanthorpe et al., 2011); and only social-service-related functions have been devolved to councils.

A key issue is that the FCC continues to exercise little to no authority over “devolved” sector staff, as the devolution of human resource functions, planned before 2016, is yet to take place. Technical sector staff continue to report and be accountable to central government ministries, and not FCC – a situation that undermines the council's power and legitimacy. Significant revenue generation functions, such as building and parking permits, have either been recentralised, or continue to be retained by the centre, despite legal requirements to devolve them. Despite central government officials' resistance to functional devolution, until recently, intergovernmental transfers to local councils were prioritised, ensuring the delivery of basic services. However, in the last year of the study, the FCC, like other local councils, did not receive all the allocated funds from the Ministry of Finance, reflecting the fiscally constrained space within which the government is operating. With limited prospects to increase its own revenue sources, the central government continues to be the main source of revenue for the FCC, thereby undermining its autonomy. Koroma et al. (2020) and Frediani (2021) found that inadequate revenue by the FCC is leading to not only poor service delivery but also the rise in inequality in Freetown. There are also claims that the lack of clarity in the reporting system by public officers is leading to lesser accountability in the public sector.

²⁰ Interview with CSO activist, December 2021.

Overlapping and interconnected actors, each with varying degrees of influence and authority over how the city functions and develops, present significant obstacles to the achievement of a coherent vision for a way forward for Freetown and the wider Western Area region. The city's residents – particularly those in the 73 informal settlements across the city – are left to deal with the consequences of poor urban planning and patchy service provision. Informal settlements are fairly dispersed across the city (see Figure 3) and provide important labour for the functioning of the informal economy that prevails in much of Freetown. However, many exist in precarious geographic locations of the city and the vast majority lack essential services, as well as being susceptible to disasters (Frediani, 2021; Allen et al., 2020; Cui et al., 2019; Conteh, 2022).

Figure 3: Map of Freetown showing its political and administrative boundaries



Source: Prepared by SLURC, 2023.

Our research within informal settlements such as Susan's Bay suggests that the neglect or abandonment of those living in informal settlements by government and national politicians is more evident than either the clientelism (Bardhan and Mookherjee (2020); Kusche (2014) or populism (Resnick, 2013) often noted in the literature. Political loyalty is seldom rewarded by the reciprocal distribution of resources to those living in Susan's Bay or by the clientelist deals with local leaders (for example, local chiefs who get rents), who presumably influence the voting preferences of local residents. Votes seem to be commanded instead on the basis of ethnic loyalty, as per Nathan's (2016) work on low-income groups in Accra, and going against many others who argue that the salience of ethnic ties declines amongst city dwellers. In this context, the more "programmatic" form of politics that some local councillors have tried

to promote as part of the mayor's Transform Freetown agenda has yielded little amidst the lack of finance and the deadlock between FCC and the national government.

Mechanisms for collaborative interventions between the FCC and central government agencies do exist but are complicated by the need for any implementing agency to take "credit" for the service or intervention because of the competing political alliances in control of the centre and city, respectively. Although this is further heightened and exacerbated when the city and centre are controlled by different political parties, it can still be an issue when the same party controls both the centre and the city, as the party will want to bolster its legitimacy in the city to retain control of it. In the view of one respondent, this is because the centre, in giving up authority over the city, would essentially become "a tenant" in it.²¹ This would leave the government with limited control or ability to influence and shape the direction of the most important economic centre in the country. In short, the fundamental obstacle to reform of Freetown is the power imbalance between the centre and the city, which devolution efforts were meant to resolve, but have exacerbated instead.

As a result, across Freetown it is often elected officials – councillors and MPs – who provide services or manage facilities provided by NGOs in poor communities, such as private toilets and water access points, which residents have to pay to use. Through a network of informal operators, revenue from these facilities is subsequently returned to the same elites that constructed them, although some are divided with local elites.²² This illustrates the ways in which elites, and their networks, benefit from the status quo, and explains why they lack economic incentives to push for change in the way these goods are delivered. This stands in contrast to areas such as power generation, where there has been more significant state investment and support to improve generation capacity and transmission, because it benefits business elites by reducing the operational costs for their enterprises, whilst fortunately benefiting the urban poor as well.

4. City of systems

4.1. City of systems overview

In the last section, we examined how the distribution of power in Sierra Leone influences development and the prospects for developmental reform in Freetown; in this section, we add a more material dimension, analysing the systems by which various actors and agencies attempt to sustain and/or improve urban life. All of these "urban systems" depend on both physical infrastructure and human actors (but in more "social" systems, such as healthcare and education, humans play a more pivotal role in system functioning).

²¹ Interview with diplomatic representative, August 2022.

²² Interview with journalist, Freetown, August 2022.

The partial dependence of all urban systems on physical infrastructure creates powerful constraints and path dependencies, and produces unintended (negative) externalities. We analyse how the externalities of systems (compounded by intersystem interaction²³) and the scale of system failures/fragmentations add to the challenges that residents and enterprises face.

Since systems are also governed and resourced by numerous human actors (formal or informal, public or private actors – but usually a combination of these), their functioning is impacted by the political settlement described above, as well as by ideas deriving from developmental paradigms like modernism and neoliberalism. This means that systems tend to unevenly allocate goods and services, and may be used to extract benefits and secure political advantage.

The main systems operating in Freetown are:

- water
- energy
- waste management
- sanitation
- education
- healthcare
- food distribution
- transportation
- finance
- law and order

We examine how they function, how they support or hinder urban development, and how they may be improved. We focus on water, energy, waste management, food distribution and transportation in particular, because these are most salient to our work in Freetown.

4.2. History of contestation

System functioning in Freetown is characterised by contestations around their management and a crisis of resistance. In the last decade, some systems have experienced resistance in the form of strike actions and demonstrations by their employees, who either want better conditions of service or a voice in decisions relating to their employment. Sectors such as health and education face a history of worker retention challenges, owing to the low pay, which is often not commensurate with the cost of living. Contestations in the health sector are also linked with the recruitment

²³ Complex problems in African cities often involve multiple city systems that interact with each other; we will capture intersystem interaction in our third concept of “urban development domains”.

process, which is too centralised, leading to excessive delays, political interference and corrupt practices.

The rise in contention around systems such as energy and food supplies is related to the way politicians perceive them as politically useful, with the city residents perceiving the systems as politicised, considering the way people react whenever food and fuel prices rise or when there is a shortage in supply. In Freetown, the lack of an adequate power supply has been a major cause of frustration among most households, who need it for lighting and powering their numerous home devices. High fuel costs, which lead to rising transport costs, impose a huge financial burden on poor families and owners of small-scale businesses. Fuel shortages usually generate tensions, leading to strikes or violence by transport operators and users. High food prices, especially of rice, not only determine who gains or loses power, but also the income of all those involved in the food supply chain; thus, governments have been continually faced with the challenge of how to effectively manage food supplies. In Freetown, tensions have also occurred regarding the negative attitude of city officials towards informal sector food providers. The food system is also linked to the energy system: inadequate electricity supply makes food processing (freezing, canning, drying, and so on) and storage highly challenging, leading to social tension.

System management also provokes tensions between central and local governments. Since 2018, when leadership changed at the central government level, the city has faced ceaseless contestations in the management of waste. The “cleaning Saturday”²⁴ initiative, in particular, saw frequent clashes between the central government officials, who reasserted their role in managing the city’s waste, and the FCC officials, who were insistent on protecting their own role. The persistent intrusion into the FCC’s autonomy frequently triggers conflict between the two levels. Moreover, because water and energy availability and access play an important role in election outcomes, the two main political parties have always tried to outdo each other in demonstrating commitments to improve the delivery of these services. This has often provoked hostility among some of their supporters, resulting in sabotage, such as the deliberate cutting of water pipes and the destruction of transformers to prevent the ruling government from scoring political points.

4.3. Ownership and governance

The study reveals a hybrid of formal and informal systems of service delivery, involving a complex structure, comprising several types of actors (national and local government delivery, state-NGO delivery, private sector and community), catering to different

24 Initially introduced by the NPRC regime (of which President Bio was a member) in 1992, this initiative was re-introduced in 2018 when he became president. The initiative makes cleaning of homes and neighbourhoods compulsory on the last Saturday of every month (from 6am to 12 noon) in Sierra Leone. Cleaning is supervised by responsible MDAs, local councils (in their respective jurisdictions), and security forces (police and military). During this time, no unauthorised movement (humans and vehicles) is allowed until after midday. The re-introduction was only for a period of one year.

groups of residents. In Freetown, MDAs have primary responsibility for the provision of most of the urban services, despite some of the roles being outsourced to the private sector or NGOs. Only a few responsibilities rest with FCC, including dealing with waste management and sanitation in the city. The existing structure reflects the continuing centralisation of functions, despite the country's remarkable shift towards decentralisation in 2004.

Official organisation of the services is often sectoral, with responsibility for the delivery fragmented among a diversity of government departments, who often have limited capacities and different agendas, which complicates the process of addressing the issue. The lack of attention to the crosscutting nature of the problems, including the dependencies and interactions between the city systems, is connected to the lack of progress in the delivery of vital services. Some of the mandates and responsibilities of the different MDAs overlap or conflict with those of the FCC. This occasionally creates tension, thwarting the cooperative and collaborative relationships needed for the effective delivery of the services. Other actors include private operators, unions and neighbourhood service providers. Some government MDAs resist working cooperatively to develop and implement initiatives that would represent a broad range of interests and meet varied needs. This reflects not only the power imbalances among the different actors but also the often conflicting rationales which make some unwilling to participate. The government has introduced several measures to strengthen the coordination mechanisms of the different sectors and to set up systems of governance for the range of sectoral actors, but these have been weakened by the limited role of the FCC in some of the activities (for example, energy, water, transportation and health) and the lack of consideration of neighbourhood-based groups in policy decisions relating to the sectors.

4.4. Coverage

Improving service coverage is critical in ensuring that more households in Freetown get access to basic services. However, to date, the city struggles to make adequate provisions for basic services, such as water, healthcare, sanitation, schools, electricity, transportation and waste management, although the situation is much better in some areas in the West End and Central than in the East End. The most obvious explanation for this pattern lies more in the city's topography than in the politics. For services such as water, electricity, transportation and waste management, coverage is concentrated in the more accessible, low-lying areas of the city, where the utility grid networks are easily connected, even though being connected to the grid does not usually mean better service for households. Service extension towards the hillside areas, where housing construction is now rapidly expanding, is constrained by the unplanned growth of the city, with considerations of service connections coming only as an afterthought. Regarding sanitation, the potential to expand public delivery of the service to other parts of the city is almost non-existent. While low-income households in both low-lying and hillside areas usually struggle with poor services, wealthy residents can easily overcome such constraints to ensure better services for themselves.

Most of the infrastructure for water is already old, which makes the extension of the network highly problematic. While a large section of the city still lacks the needed infrastructure, it is costlier to expand the grid to unserved areas. The city's main dam at Mile 13 supplies around half of Freetown's water and is riddled with pressure issues, theft and damage of surface-level rubber pipes, and leakages. Safe water is a major challenge, especially in the dry season.

Since grid-connected energy is the main source of power for most homes, electricity coverage in the city is persistently low (SLL, 2019) and supply is intermittent, with frequent blackouts in some places. The key challenge is the old and faulty transmission and distribution lines. The high prices for electricity make illegal connections²⁵ a serious challenge. Although some households may be in places where grid networks exist, they may not be able to afford the cost. Other households, who can afford the cost, may live too far away from the grid network, and so may not be able to connect to it.

Transportation coverage is similarly affected by the lack of adequate and suitable transport infrastructure in the city. This forces commercial transporters to run along fixed routes, leaving out several low-income neighbourhoods which are not well connected by road. A 2019 study showed that 25% of the population in Freetown lacked access to commercial transport services because they lived far away (about 500 metres) from the nearest bus stop (World Bank, 2019b).

Owing to the deficient coverage of publicly provided systems, informal infrastructures and actors fill the gap to a considerable extent, which provides many households with a means to secure their living. For example, some informal sector activities, such as commercial public transport and door-to-door collection of solid waste by local private agencies and individuals with tricycles, have been allowed to disguise the inadequacies of the public sector provider, particularly when the government as yet has no clear solutions. Several of the public services are barely extended to informal settlements, either because the formal providers are not required to do so, or because they do not have a clear mandate to serve such places. However, central government is already making significant efforts to improve coverage of some of the services to unserved communities. For example, it has been extending the electricity supply to most places in the Western Area by extending the main transmission lines, including the provision of transformers in several new locations.

4.5. Access

Access to urban services in Freetown is not only affected by coverage, but also by a range of other factors, such as distance, the lack of grid network, income, official decisions (or the lack of them) and topography. For example, access to water

²⁵ Illegal connection is sometimes construed as acts of survival by urban poor families or as their means of resisting elite capture of profits accruing to the service agencies.

decreases with increasing distance from the main supply source at Mile 13,²⁶ leaving several places in the east of the city and the hillside areas unserved. Moreover, most informal settlements and hillside areas that are not connected to grid water and electricity lack access to these services; and even where electricity or water connection is available, it is either done illegally or poorly, thereby posing issues of safety and security. In some cases, some public providers are unwilling or legally unable to extend the delivery of services to informal settlements. Access challenges are exacerbated by encroachments into the right-of-way access streets, which limits the connection of grid networks (for example, for water) to whole communities.

For services such as transportation, food distribution and finance, the concentration of qualified employment and businesses in the city centre has implications for access; and it means most of the transport routes connect places in the far east and far west to the Central Business District (Koroma et al., 2020). The unplanned and sporadic spatial growth of the city leads to sociospatial inequalities and traffic congestion and means that many residents dwelling far away from the city centre or the main transport routes struggle to have access to services.

Access to health and educational facilities is particularly affected by seasonality, especially during the rainy season, when heavy rain causes floods which may render some roads impassable (World Bank, 2019b). Since healthcare expenses in Freetown are mostly out-of-pocket, high healthcare costs often result in poor utilisation of health services, especially in informal settlements. Therefore, self-administered treatment is widely practised. Household income also determines the ability to obtain nutritious food in adequate quantities for a healthy life. Many communities in Freetown have no functional food markets and even where they exist, the variety may be either limited or sold at higher prices. Households must travel long distances to the Central Business District (CBD) and its immediate neighbourhood, where the main food markets exist. Inflation is already having a significant impact on households' access to food. Food inflation is hitting the city's low-income earners hardest, since they spend a high proportion of their income on food.

Access to waste collection services in most parts of the city is affected by road accessibility, especially by the big trucks which do the collection. Road access also determines where waste collection points are situated, with the CBD and the more affluent western part of the city having more official collection points than the eastern part. Besides, only a small share (5.2%) of Freetown's population has access to the grid reticulated sewerage system. Public toilets are rare and have to be paid for. The lack of public toilet results in poor sanitation in some neighbourhoods, increasing the risks of infection for the city.

²⁶ Location of the Guma Dam and the main water treatment plant. The Guma dam supplies about 90% of the total water supply need in Freetown.

4.6. Quality

Freetown faces severe challenges regarding the quality of urban services and the issue is often far worse among people living in informal settlements. Regarding transportation, the quality of service is frequently poor, because the vehicles are mostly old and in poor condition (World Bank, 2019b). Generally, owners and operators of the services do not generate enough revenue to invest in improving their quality and many struggle with access to finance because the banks and other financial institutions do not often consider them to be creditworthy. Other quality issues include dangerous driving, which results in injuries and deaths, and insufficient seating spaces, which create discomfort and danger for the passengers.

Besides, the generation capacity of services such as water, energy and sanitation delivered through the city's distribution networks is negatively affected by the inadequacy of the networks. For example, nearly 1,000 km of the electricity low voltage lines/cables are dilapidated, resulting in high technical losses and low reliability. Supply in many areas is intermittent, with fluctuating voltage. Sparks on public transmitters sometimes occur, and power surges cause damage to appliances. Irregular electricity supply affects the quality of foodstuffs and the ability to preserve food in the city, compounding the problems arising from a lack of dry storage and cooling facilities.

Quality of healthcare is also limited by other factors, including limited resources, an overstretched workforce, ill-equipped health centres and the lack of a diagnostic and response capacity. Accommodation facilities in most Public Health Units (PHUs) is inadequate and several lack basic amenities like transportation and robust supplies of electricity and water.

Moreover, despite the introduction of free quality education (FQE), most schools in Freetown lack basic resources such as libraries and laboratories, or IT infrastructure. Some schools lack trained teachers with sufficient professional experience. This undermines the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Nishimuko, 2007; UNESCO, 2020). However, in the last decade, a range of measures have been taken to improve not only access but also the quality of delivery of services. In the education sector, this has involved the introduction of the FQE programme, which is similar to the Free Health Care Initiative that is being run in the health sector. Significant improvements are already ongoing in the main electricity transmission lines, including the installation of more transformers to combat the frequency of power interruptions and outages.

4.7. Risks and vulnerability

The location of Freetown near a long and hilly peninsula adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean makes many places and the available services vulnerable to the impacts of extreme weather and climate change. Inadequate and poorly maintained grid networks and the services they provide are sometimes disrupted by extreme events (strong wind, flooding) which limit their functioning. Such risks in most of the city are aggravated by the lack of incentives for the government (local and national) to invest in protecting people and places against disasters and the lack of collective action in some

neighbourhoods. Although not evenly distributed, vulnerability in Freetown is high. Much of the vulnerability is socially created by extreme poverty, deprivation, marginalisation and the lack of quality services, which continues to place more people in harm's way. Climate change is likely to increase the frequency and intensity of flooding and landslides, which will cause severe disruptions to urban mobility and transport, with implications for the functioning of the city. This will also cause disruptions to the city's economy (particularly petty trade and the operation of small-scale businesses) and the overall living conditions of people. Several road networks in Freetown are already susceptible to flooding and this can have adverse effects on the efficiency and reliability of food delivery. Other vulnerabilities and risks to systems functioning include:

- **Health epidemics**, which are also set to worsen the macroeconomic indicators of the country, despite the government's ongoing efforts in health policy reform. The government's finances were severely weakened by Covid-19, making healthcare delivery problematic and causing the sector to be highly donor reliant. As the country's financial situation has started to improve post Covid-19, significant steps are now being taken by the government to deliver on some of its healthcare priorities, such as reducing maternal and child mortality and improving access to quality health services at all levels.
- **Climate change**, which threatens existing sanitation systems, is likely to undermine ongoing efforts to increase access in many parts of the city where people still struggle with services. For most homes, the lack of safe and hygienic sanitation facilities will cause physical discomfort and shame, particularly for women, who constantly grapple with the issue of fear and insecurity to get to wherever they can feel comfortable to defecate in privacy.
- **Extreme temperature**, which is likely to increase the frequency and intensity of water scarcity. The available projections show that temperature will continue to rise, suggesting that practical measures will need to be taken now to mitigate the effects on the water sector.
- **Improper waste disposal**, leading to the accumulation of waste and garbage in drainage channels. Recent disaster events show that when solid waste is not managed properly, it can pose many environmental and human health risks. For instance, refuse blocking storm drains and landfill sites close to watercourses usually causes flooding, with serious implications in terms of malaria and other diseases.

5. Domain summaries

We have examined the political settlement and city systems; now, we analyse how these shape some of the development domains in Freetown. A development domain is a distinct field of discourse, policy and practice that has formed around a complex, intersystemic development challenge in a city, in which various actors (political, bureaucratic, professional and popular) collaborate and/or compete for authority.

These development challenges usually fall under the remit of specific central and/or local government departments. In most cases, affected residents and civil society groups become involved in addressing them; experts (often constituting an "epistemic

community”) also get involved; and ruling elites may or may not get involved, depending on the opportunities that these domains offer for asset accumulation, rent extraction and electoral success (through the representation of ideologies, demonstration of state capability, or manipulation of voters).

In each development domain, particular ideas, practices and systems interoperate in ways that either sustain or reshape the power configuration in the city and country. If we wish to change the way a domain’s problems are framed and addressed, we need to understand its key actors and interoperating ideas, practices and systems. In this section, we generate such an understanding for the following domains in Freetown: housing; informal settlements; health, wellbeing and nutrition; youth and capability; and safety and security.

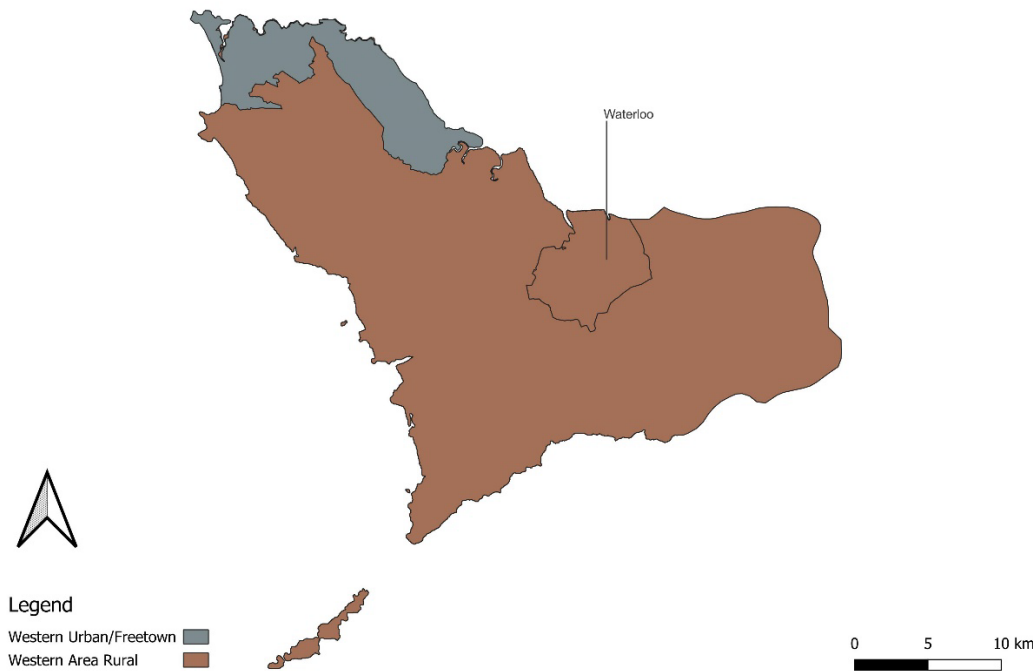
5.1. Housing domain report summary

5.1.1. *Introduction*

Freetown faces an acute housing challenge,²⁷ which is linked directly to the city’s rapid urbanisation. The city has already expanded beyond its initial boundaries to exert growing pressure for land and housing within Western Area Rural District (WARD), which, with Freetown (Western Area Rural), makes up the Western Area of Sierra Leone (see Figure 4). Most of the spatial expansion has occurred without any proper guidance from land use planning.

²⁷ ACRC’s research on housing in Freetown was carried out by the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC). Data collection was initially through a desk review, which was supplemented by 18 key informant interviews and three focus group discussions. Three housing typologies, which represent the different housing types in Freetown, were selected as cases for the study.

Figure 4: Map of the Western Area, showing Freetown and WARD



Source: Prepared by SLURC, 2023.

As the population of WARD continually expands, recent evidence shows that the per annum rate of growth of Freetown's built-up area is decreasing compared to the rate between 1990 and 2000 (1.7%), as more and more people shift outwards to settle in the nearby rapidly growing satellite towns of Regent, Grafton, Gloucester and Jui. Freetown's actual population number is still lost in the political controversy over the national census noted above. However, according to the World Bank (2019a), Freetown's population will reach 1,605,000 by 2030, and this will have serious implications for housing demand.

5.1.2. Access to decent, affordable housing in Freetown

For most people in Freetown (particularly those who are disabled, elderly, as well as women-headed households and other low-income families), access to decent, affordable housing is a key challenge. According to the 2015 National Population and Housing Census, 16.1% of all houses in Freetown need repairs (due to defective plumbing, wiring, and so on) and this may have increased as the rising cost of building materials caused by the global economic crisis prohibits residents from carrying out repairs. There is, however, no information on the proportion of people renting in such low-quality housing. While owner-occupier households are common, most people in Freetown access housing via the informal rental market. Private-sector investment in housing is limited and most houses in the city are provided by private individuals. However, due to the high cost of land, many low- and middle-income households are priced out of the formal land market. The high cost of building materials as well as other inadequacies in the housing market, together with a lack of affordable serviced

land, has led to the proliferation of informal settlements in many parts of the city. Yet, until early 2021, housing was not a key development priority of the government. This is despite its huge ambitions to drive the urban economy and reduce poverty through offering investment prospects, employment and income-earning opportunities, personal wealth creation, and safety for vulnerable groups (Rodríguez-Pose and Storper, 2020; Tang Zhigang, 2006).

Shortages in the supply of housing in Freetown are directly linked to inefficiencies in the land administration system. Cadastral mapping of the land is rare, and only 40% of titles are recorded. The land records are generally out of date, which hinders enforcement of development control, including maintaining an efficient property tax register. The main system of land tenure in the Western Area (including Freetown) is the freehold system but because the land registration scheme is based on deed (actual legal documents used as evidence of transfer of the ownership of a property) rather than title (which specifies who is the ultimate holder of the property), it has often led to competing claims of ownership. The entire registration system is mired in corrupt land adjudication processes, leading to systemic weakness. Besides, serviced sites are rare and nearly all the available land parcels utilities provision at the time of acquisition. Access to housing finance is also limited, which impedes housing supply.

5.1.3. Actors and governance

Multilevel governance actors and structures are involved in the housing sector, which is often shaped by unequal powers. While formal responsibility for housing is fragmented across different MDAs, financial institutions (such as banks), social security schemes and local government, principal responsibility to manage and control the sector (including the control and regulation of land use) rests with the Ministry of Lands, Housing, and Country Planning (MLHCP). There is also the Sierra Leone Housing Corporation (SALHOC), set up by the government as a real estate agency to increase access to homes through investing in housing and providing loan schemes to low-income households, although it has not been able to deliver on its mandates.

Other actors include Home Leone, a non-profit organisation involved in the provision of low-cost homes for rental/sale; the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), which leads on the housing component of a consortium of five NGOs involved in the Transforming Lives Initiative; CODOHSAPA (a local NGO which is an affiliate of Slum Dwellers International – SDI) and its subsidiary, the Federation of the Urban and Rural Poor (FEDURP). The Freetown City Council, a few utility companies (such as the Guma Valley Water Company), homeowners, landlords, tenants, construction industry artisans, property rental agencies and local neighbourhood residents also constitute this space. The different powers wielded by the range of actors, their still significant lack of access to capital for housing investment, and their diverse and fragmented nature, make it hard to devise a holistic approach to the sector in support of affordable housing.

5.1.4. Challenges and opportunities for housing development

Despite the range of actions proposed by government to reform the sector, with a view to making housing work for all (by ensuring that it meets the affordability threshold of different households), the housing domain remains fraught with challenges. Several factors account for this, including:

- limited fiscal and technical capacities of the government (national and local) to plan for and accommodate the city's rapid urbanisation, leading to chaotic growth in the form of densification, informality and the expansion of Freetown beyond its geographic limits, blending with WARD in a form of sprawl development;
- high cost of housing construction;
- limited access by low- and medium-income families (especially those who are informally employed) to housing finance;
- limited serviced land (and social services more generally) for low- and middle-income households;
- lack of incentives for the private sector to deliver large-scale mixed-income housing incorporating affordable housing;
- weak governance system of the housing domain;
- lack of prioritisation of the housing sector by the government as part of its development agenda;
- lack of support to many small-scale housing developers, who account for most of the housing needs of the city; and
- incessant speculation on land by property owners, which is a major cause of land scarcity, resulting in high land prices.

Other systemic challenges faced by the sector include the rapid urbanisation that was intensified by the civil war and the associated political and economic challenges that were worsened by other major events, such as the Ebola outbreak (2014-15), the 2017 mudslide, the 2015 and 2017 floods, and the current Covid-19 pandemic. In Freetown, housing poverty is real, and is currently being intensified by the high cost of living and rental costs caused by rapid increases in the cost of building materials and utilities (water, energy, and so on). While the lack of access to housing finance makes the situation worse for many low- and middle-income families, the effects are disproportionately felt by women, children and other vulnerable groups. With climate change-induced disaster becoming more common in the last decade, causing the displacement of whole areas (particularly homes located in at-risk areas), the challenges faced in the sector are likely to deepen.

Housing has lots of potential to contribute to urban and national development, in terms of investment prospects, employment opportunities and personal wealth creation (Gunter and Manuel, 2016). The sector has the prospect to be a major contributor to local government finance through property taxes (Uwatt, 2019). However, for several decades, the economic potential of housing has not been recognised in Freetown.

Beyond the economic logic, adequate housing can contribute to crime prevention and the lessening of tensions in deprived slum communities. Housing is also critical to ensuring the safety and health outcomes of children and other vulnerable groups (Kiduanga, 2015). Politically, housing is important because it affects the health and wellbeing of residents and, in some cities, political support for the municipal government can wane when people's housing needs are not satisfactorily met. Apart from being a major source of construction-based employment for most low- and middle-income groups (particularly artisans, such as masons, carpenters, plumbers and electricians), housing is a major source of rental income, especially for private homeowners.

Housing in Freetown is a site of contestation, as it reflects the constantly changing relations between different stakeholders – including property owners, tenants, traders, service providers and the state – all with different motives for engagement in the sector, with some “winners” and others “losers”. Tensions and disagreements can result in different forms of contestation, from ordinary protests and marches to sometimes violent attacks on public officials, leading to injuries and the loss of life (see, for example, The Guardian (2022)).

5.1.5. Political settlement issues influencing housing

The current state of affairs in Freetown's housing domain reflects the contentious relations between the municipal and central government and the elite-level power struggles shaping the way functions are devolved and rents derived in the city.

Housing in Freetown is political, with several political settlement issues constraining its development. One of these relates to the disconnect between housing, urban development and the country's decentralisation processes. To date, no housing function has been devolved to the local councils. The FCC also faces major impediments from the central government in mobilising financial resources through the property tax system, which makes it fully reliant on the central government for funding. Besides, the diverging interests of the many built environment organisations and the state makes coordinating the sector problematic. The discretionary granting of tax concessions or waivers to some importers of building materials renders the housing market inefficient. There is also the widespread practice of politicians and elites acting together with unscrupulous headmen to illegally grab and sometimes sell huge parcels of state land.

5.1.6. Reforms in the housing domain

Since 2002, when the civil war ended, reforms in the housing sector have focused on liberalising the production and delivery of houses, as the state pushes away from being a direct producer to that of an enabler. However, the government has struggled to attract private businesses to invest in affordable housing. The few that have shown interest require the state to provide the land free of charge and with duty waivers on the

infrastructure, but the government considers the latter to be too expensive to undertake.

Nevertheless, the government has been making significant efforts to improve the urban form and to revive the city's derelict infrastructure to make it more effective and functional. A National Land Policy was launched in 2015, seeking to improve efficiency in the land market by making it more accessible and equitable. The Land Commission Bill (2022) and its associate, the Customary Land Rights Bill (2022), were launched to bolster the land sector, particularly in the areas of tenure security, responsible investment, gender equality and women's rights.

Other recent reforms in the MLHCP include the unbundling of the Directorate of Housing and Planning into two separate directorates (Directorate of Country Planning and Directorate of Housing), with the functions clearly split between the two. Plans are currently ongoing to digitise all operations in the ministry, particularly to update the land title register and to deter corruption in the land registration system. The government is making frantic efforts to attract private developers and large-scale investors in local building materials. The financial sector has also been urged to expand access to housing finance. While the government is keen to promote affordable housing through the lowering of standards and the cost of construction materials, a key challenge has been its failure to provide direct subsidies to the sector and the inability to introduce legal and economic frameworks to support the affordable housing plan.

Many of the reforms correspond with some key policy approaches that have been mapped out by the government to address the urban housing challenge for low- and middle-income households. These include: working collaboratively with the private sector and built environment professionals to develop a shared road map to advance housing development in the country; commitment by the government to develop an inclusive housing policy; and modernisation of the existing land registration system, including taking concrete steps to revise both the land and housing laws to ensure efficient land management and to promote equity in the land and housing sectors. The lack of financial support from the government implies that the private sector will have to be the main driver of housing delivery in Freetown for a long time.

5.1.7. Housing and the effects of systems functioning

Housing is affected by the functioning and flows of many systems in Freetown. These affect both the housing delivery mechanisms and the many demand and supply issue challenges. We identified five systems that are critical to the housing domain in Freetown, namely: health; transportation; sanitation; water; and energy. The effects of systems functioning on housing is evidenced by the potential health risks and environmental concerns of improper waste disposal and the lack of connection of housing to safe water and sanitation systems. Similarly, poor transportation systems can lead to strenuous commutes by households. The lack of access or the insufficient provision of services partly accounts for the difference in the quality of housing units provided across the city.

5.1.8. Policy recommendations

The foregoing discussion shows that the lack of committed support by decisionmakers is at the heart of the acute housing problems faced in Freetown. However, there are prospects for city leaders to address the challenges. This would require multistakeholder cooperation across scales and sub-domains. Four main recommendations are proposed:

1. The government, through the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Country Planning, should review and streamline the legal frameworks on housing to clarify institutional roles and responsibilities at the different levels of government. Particular attention should be paid to the conflicting roles of MDAS in the housing sector. Introducing legislation that addresses harassment and the exploitative tendencies of landlords can also help to address the huge problem of access to housing faced by many low-income households in the city.
2. The government should review/introduce a new policy that sets out the specific rules or guidelines for housing in Sierra Leone. The policy should aim to address the structural barriers that impede the operation of the housing market and the constraints on the delivery of affordable housing in Sierra Leone. Apart from prioritising affordable housing, the policy should focus beyond reacting to the current challenges and needs of the sector, to set out clear long-term goals and strategies for achieving them.
3. The government should work to strengthen the role of housing finance as a critical part of the investment functions of commercial banks. Urging the banks to develop initiatives that focus on stimulating housing supply and using varied financial mechanisms will be critical in improving housing delivery and building confidence in the mortgage market. Measures to engage private sector actors, and recognising and supporting the role of small-scale providers who dominate the affordable housing delivery landscape in Freetown, should be part of the solution.
4. There is an urgent need to strengthen the FCC and devolve more power and responsibilities for housing at the local level, given the huge housing backlog in Freetown. However, this will require significant capacity support – both financial and technical. Ensuring the recognition of local councils by the national regulatory systems, building their technical capacity, and providing the needed financial resources will help to substantially increase housing supply in ways that meet the needs of poor urban households. Extending capacity-building support to neighbourhood residents and other local artisans and prioritising innovative, community-led housing solutions will lead to improved housing outcomes and opportunities for low-income families and other vulnerable groups.

5.2. Informal settlement domain report summary

5.2.1. Introduction

This section explores the political economy and the politics of informal settlement development in Freetown through the perspectives of low-income communities,

government officials and local-level politicians who engage with these communities.²⁸ While the analysis uses the word “informal” to describe the settlements studied, it recognises that formality and informality do not only coexist, but are mostly intertwined in terms of the flows and interactions taking place between them in the urban space. It demonstrates that merely describing a place as “formal” does not exclude informal practices within such spaces. Likewise, a reference to an “informal” settlement does not suggest a total lack of formal arrangements and procedures in the way the settlement is run. Similar to Smart and Koster (2024), “formal” and “informal” are viewed as entwined and mutually dependent.

5.2.2. *The informal settlement situation in Freetown*

In Freetown, low-income informal settlements make up 36% of all settlements in the city. It is predicted that 432,253 more people will be added to the city’s current population by 2030 (Togoh et al., 2017), representing a 41% increase since 2015. This rapid growth in a region already grappling with high youth unemployment and inadequate urban service delivery will further intensify informality, making it a key spatial development challenge for decades.

A 2019 study by CODOHSAPA shows that 68 informal settlements exist in Freetown, with most of the settlements located in either coastal areas or on the hillslopes, where they are continuously exposed to disaster risks, such as flooding and landslides (CODOHSAPA, 2019). Most of the residents are tenants living in overcrowded conditions. Housing is generally poor and the average household size is seven persons. The average annual rent for a two-bedroom apartment in informal settlements within central and western Freetown ranges from \$180 for houses made of zinc walls and roofs to \$350 for brick houses. The settlements usually lack formal recognition because of their insecure tenure, which means that they are poorly served by services such as water, waste, transport, sanitation and healthcare – all of which come at extra cost, thereby intensifying their vulnerabilities. Solid waste management is particularly problematic in most areas, and improper management contributes to much of the flash flooding, owing mainly to blocked drainage ways. Most informal settlement dwellers have been exposed to multidimensional shocks (epidemic, economic and climatic) between 2012 and 2020: cholera in 2012; Ebola epidemic (2014-15) and Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Since a large proportion of them perform informal jobs, earning subsistence wages, they are more economically vulnerable to external shocks in the economy than the general population.

28 ACRC’s research on informal settlements in Freetown was jointly carried out by the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), Centre of Dialogue for Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation (CODOHSAPA), and the Federation of Urban and Rural Poor (FEDURP), an affiliate of Slum Dwellers International (SDI) in Freetown. A few neighbourhood residents from the study areas were also recruited in the data collection process as co-researchers. Their roles included helping to shape the research questions, taking part in data collection, mobilising research focus group discussion participants and helping to facilitate the discussions, and taking part in the data analysis process and the interpretation of findings.

A major challenge to the governance of informal settlement is the absence of urban policy. There is also difficulty in securing land for housing, and providing adequate public utilities (especially water, sanitation and electricity). Weak and ineffective policies and laws and the dysfunctional land and housing markets have led to the deepening of poverty.

Multiple city systems were found to be directly relevant to development in Freetown's informal settlements, often in ways that are closely interlinked. This implies that addressing these core systems will help significantly in solving problems specifically related to the informal settlement domain. For example, improving healthcare services is interlinked with water, sanitation, housing and broader spatial planning systems. However, a number of issues have undermined effective system functioning in informal settlements. These include challenges related to devolution of functions to local councils (as already noted); challenges around regularisation of informal settlements because of the lack of formal recognition of the spaces for service delivery by national government MDAs; the lack of clearly defined national urban policy; and the implications of rapid urbanisation for land rights for low-income households.

5.2.3. Map of authority within Freetown's informal settlements

There are multiple actors who are actively involved in shaping the needs, aspirations and wellbeing of residents in informal settlements in Freetown. At the city level, the most prominent actors that have power and influence are the city council and the national government, who wield significant authority over development processes that affect informal settlements. Other actors include a range of NGOs, local neighbourhood networks, professional bodies, development partners and agencies, researchers/academics, private sector actors, traditional leaders, and so on. However, the management of informal settlements is challenged by the lack of recognition, poor coordination, and coherence among actors. Often, residents of informal settlements are treated as vote banks by national politicians: Our engagement with politicians and other state officials is limited. They only come around during elections.²⁹

They therefore struggle to gain meaningful levels of political representation through either formal or informal routes. However, the Federation of the Urban and Rural Poor (FEDURP), which operates similarly to the Slum Dwellers International (SDI), draws its membership from across the different low-income informal settlements to drive a bottom-up transformative agenda for the residents. Despite having limited power and influence, FEDURP has become an important and vocal actor that is contributing to reshaping how local politics responds to societal problems in some of Freetown's deprived communities.

5.2.4. The politics of informal settlements in Freetown

Informal settlements in Freetown are characterised by a multilayered governance structure, comprising formal, informal and traditional (semi-formal) modes of

²⁹ Interview with a youth leader in Susan's Bay, July 2022.

governance, with all responding to different needs and with varying capacities of the members/organisations to do so. In some informal settlements, local networks and organisations are often the only functioning governance structure. These include local chiefs, who usually have a great deal of influence at the neighbourhood level, with the power to arbitrate cases and maintain the peace. While members of parliament (MPs) who function at the national level can sometimes provide oversight functions, they are not responsible for service provision in their constituencies. This responsibility rests with councillors, who operate at the municipal level and are, therefore, responsible for development within their respective localities.

Chiefs and elected councillors are particularly trusted, since they are usually viewed as “insiders”, unlike the parliamentarians, who usually live elsewhere and may, therefore, not be fully aware of and responsive to their needs. Despite their lack of formal influence over resource allocations for driving change in the city, most residents consider the chiefs and councillors to be more influential in improving conditions in the informal settlements. A key challenge faced by the residents and their chiefs is that they often struggle to have their voices heard at the city and national levels in ensuring that basic goods and services are provided in their settlement:

There has been minimal state investment in this neighbourhood. The community centre you see over there was constructed by an NGO called Concern Worldwide, Sierra Leone. The state only provides temporary relief during disasters but we doubt if it has any sustainable solutions to the many neighbourhood problems faced.³⁰

One would expect that residents of informal settlements in Freetown could exert significant political agency on account of their population and size as an electoral constituency. However, voting patterns in the city are strongly linked to ethnic identity at the ward and constituency levels, which reduces the scope for claim-making from below. Given the prevailing political dynamics in the informal settlements – where one party dominates³¹ – there is no significant need for political actors to deliver basic services as part of a vote-winning election promise. Politicians³² exploit the residents as a client group to build and bolster their political capital, including through employing disaffected urban youth as “violence entrepreneurs”³³ to win political struggles (see Section 5.5.3.2 on safety and security). Some residents pointed out that politicians are only visible within their settlements at election times or in the immediate aftermath of a disaster (such as flooding or fires), and even then, any assistance tends to arrive via

30 FGD 2 participant, IS study in Dwarzark, July 2022.

31 The APC has predominant political support in Freetown’s informal settlements, which are mostly occupied by immigrants from the nearby northern districts.

32 Both the SLPP and APC politicians always make desperate appeals to their ethnic groups and other supporters in the informal settlements. This includes practices of vote buying and giving them related incentives.

33 A strategy used by politicians and other powerful elites (such as businessowners) to use violence and coercion by hiring and or retaining criminal groups, such as youth gangs, cliques, informally assembled protection guards, party marshalls, and so on, to outsmart their opponents and wield political power or favour. In return, the criminal group members gain economic favours from their clients in the form of money, jobs, and so on.

non-governmental actors or through external assistance (donor organisations), rather than from the government. The disconnect between residents of informal settlements and their representatives has often led to disaffection among the former, especially youths, who feel that they do not have political voice. This dynamic is, however, slowly changing, as CODOHSAPA/FEDURP continues to mobilise and empower the residents to transform their communities. This includes working with other organisations, such as SLURC, to build their capacity and to give them a voice to push for reforms in the planning and governance of the city.

5.2.5. Significance of informal settlements to urban development

Despite the negative connotations associated with informal settlement dwellers amongst some elite actors in Freetown, and the myriad of challenges confronting them, they contribute significantly to the formal urban economy, which demonstrates their significance to the wellbeing of the city. Informal settlement dwellers provide an important labour force for the functioning of the city economy. They are not only a source of self-employment and cheap labour (both skilled and unskilled) but they also contribute in diverse ways to the revenue generation of the city, either through payments of market dues, local tax and property tax or in the payment of water and electricity bills.

5.2.6. Recent reforms and implications for ACRC research

Several recent reform measures targeted at informal settlements in Freetown have been put forward in various policy, programme and strategy documents. Foremost is the identification of effective land administration and management and the promotion of equitable access to and control over land – which were two key strategic objectives of the Medium-Term National Development Plan (2019-23). The MTNDP also indicates that improving the quality of life for those living in informal settlements must be complementary to the efforts to ensure equitable land management. The plan re-commits the government to ensuring equitable access to and control over land through a decentralised land governance structure, along with a national cadastral records management system through the newly established National Land Commission. The preparation of a national spatial development framework that will give effect to the MTNDP implementation is already well advanced.

Both the national spatial development framework and the national urban policy are intended to guide the government in managing the rapid urbanisation of the country by controlling sprawling and fragmented urban development, while ensuring the effective delivery of basic services and infrastructure, economic growth and the sustainable development of urban settlements. In alignment with the MTNDP, the mayor's Transform Freetown Initiative (2019-22) aims to transform the city into a productive, liveable and resilient city by improving urban governance, spatial planning and development control, and investing in resilient infrastructure, basic services and urban greening interventions.

The National Land Policy that was developed in 2015 with insights from the Spatial Development Plan proposed by the Freetown Structure Plan (2014), provides a framework for safeguarding tenure rights for informal settlement residents, including streamlining and modernising³⁴ the delivery and sustainable use of the plan. To showcase its commitment, the government has developed an implementation plan for attaining land reform objectives in recognition that land management and urban planning ensure the inclusive, equitable and sustainable development of cities. The aim of the National Land Policy 2015 (Section 9.4: “improving and relocating informal settlements”) is to secure formal and informal land tenure for people living in informal settlements, and provide safe, affordable and well-connected land in Freetown. This provision represents a significant shift from the use of evictions to the recognition of such spaces as places for improvement through increasing the tenure security of the homes, even though this may not lead to housing investment by tenants, who are usually not the legal owners.

Recent efforts by MLHCP to automate and digitalise land reform as well as restructure the sector could reduce irregularities and other related crimes associated with land allocation and ownership. This could potentially lead to significant changes in the current situation, especially for actors who benefit from the considerable bureaucratic red tape to obtain a land title and building permits (IGR, 2022).

Nevertheless, despite all the reforms, the implementation has so far been unable to make the necessary impacts. Notwithstanding the myriad of challenges, working closely with urban stakeholders through the ACRC research will likely open up new opportunities for an integrated approach towards strengthening urban institutions, while providing a wider package of policy options to improve tenure security for informal settlers, and governance frameworks at national and local levels.

5.2.7. Policy recommendations

Based on the analysis, two main policy recommendations are proposed to address the intractable informal settlement challenges in Freetown: (i) improving security of tenure and basic services; (ii) mitigating disaster risk and building resilience in informal settlements. The first recommendation focuses on insecure tenure, which hinders residents from investing in their neighbourhoods and exacerbates uncertainty in their living conditions. The preferred approach to addressing this PCP is for the government to formulate clear policies and strategies to promote incremental slum upgrading and guarantee affordable tenure security options for low-income families. The government should also promote reforms in housing regulations that address tenancy issues in the city, including flexible and innovative actions to encourage the growth and accessibility of housing finance to low-income households.

³⁴ This is a progressive and ambitious policy that recognises the importance of informal settlement upgrading. A framework for spatial improvement developed by SLURC, entitled “Community Area Action Plan (CAAP)”, is currently being piloted by an NGO – Catholic Relief Services – in partnership with the FCC to improve the living conditions of the residents.

The second recommendation will address the issues of community vulnerability and disconnection arising from the rapid growth of informal settlements. In Freetown, more than 35% of the population presently face multiple hazard risks – recurring localised floods, landslides, coastal erosion, windstorms, fires and water source pollution, sea-level rise hazards, epidemics and extreme weather and climate-related events. The preferred approach to addressing this challenge is to promote neighbourhood-led processes of data collection, profiling and mapping to increase knowledge of the scale of deprivations underlying disaster risks in the localities, and to drive actions for neighbourhood upgrading and resilience. The FCC should also work with relevant organisations (public and private) to strengthen and build the capacity of poor and most marginalised urban residents to initiate and lead locally conceived adaptation practices and innovation, while at the same time supporting citywide planning and climate action.

5.3. Health, wellbeing and nutrition domain³⁵ report summary

5.3.1. *Introduction*

Healthy diets in Freetown should be considered in the context of the national situation, where food production has been insufficient for decades and is not on a trajectory to reach the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Access to healthy diets involves multiple systems, including food, health, transport, education and trade, the poor functioning/inaccessibility of which presents serious challenges to many low-income families. Unhealthy diets pose a greater risk of morbidity and mortality in Freetown than unsafe sex, alcohol, drug and tobacco use combined. However, research evidence on the health effects of unhealthy diets in Freetown and the critical interlinkages of health and nutrition is still limited (Bockarie et al., 2021). A scaling up nutrition (SUN) initiative launched by the government in 2012, as part of its commitment to a global movement for action against malnutrition, is already actively engaged with local communities across the country to implement and roll out its strategies to address hunger and malnutrition. For example, in 2020, the Sierra Leone SUN civil society network³⁶ partnered with some NGOs and relevant local community actors, such as the Sierra Leone market women's association, community chiefs, religious leaders and traditional healers, to discuss and advocate for actions around the goal of ending hunger and malnutrition in Sierra Leone.

5.3.2. *Current situation, challenges and opportunities*

Sierra Leone has made exemplary progress in reducing stunting, with rates falling from 40% in 2010 to 26% in 2021, surpassing projected expectations based on GDP.

35 ACRC'S health, wellbeing, and nutrition study in Freetown was led by Professor Mary Hughes and carried out jointly with the Institute for Development (IFD) based in Freetown. Data for this study were collected through a desk review of relevant reports and publications, which were merged with data from eight focus group discussions with three informal settlement dwellers and 20 key informant interviews comprising public officials, health development partners, NGO workers, private sector workers and one person with a disability.

36 See their [National Nutritional Plan Review brief](#) (accessed 20 May 2024).

National child mortality rates have also halved since 2010, decreasing from 225 to 108 per 1,000 live births. Similarly, maternal mortality has shown a significant decline, from 1,778 to 541 per 100,000 live births since the end of the war. However, challenges persist, such as obesity among women and high levels of anaemia.

Urban agriculture is an important element in allowing many households in Freetown to eke out their living and to ensure their own food futures. However, access to land by the farmers (who are mostly women) is limited, forcing most residents into reliance on food supplies both from within and outside the country. Agriculture in Sierra Leone plays a vital role, employing approximately 60% of the population and contributing nearly half of the per capita GDP. Despite Sierra Leone having an estimated 5.4 million hectares of fertile arable land, 75% of it remains uncultivated. This underutilisation of rural agriculture has led to a heavy reliance on commercial food imports and food aid. The recent increase in fuel prices following the war in Ukraine has further exacerbated the cost of living crisis, intensifying the dependency on imports. As subsistence agricultural practices transition to more efficient commercial production, less labour is required, leading to increased urban migration, particularly among youth seeking quicker rewards.

The fisheries sector in Sierra Leone is crucial, providing about 80% of the animal protein consumed in the country and contributing over 10% to GDP. However, the artisanal fishing industry has faced longstanding challenges caused by unregulated and illegal trawling practices, as well as the destruction of mangroves, which serve as important breeding sites for fish. Additionally, the development of aquaculture, particularly for tilapia and catfish, has struggled, thanks to poorly selected sites and a lack of necessary inputs such as fingerlings and fish food. These factors have put significant pressure on fish stocks and hinder the development of a sustainable fishing industry.

As noted, the rapid urbanisation in Sierra Leone has placed a strain on infrastructure for water, sanitation, and waste management. The Transform Freetown Agenda has identified these key challenges and initiated appropriate solutions as part of its healthy cities cluster. Despite facing slow cooperation from the national administration, the current APC mayor has successfully mobilised donors, implementing partners and stakeholders to achieve several successes. However, there is still a need for more effective social behaviour change communication, particularly through social media channels, to promote initiatives such as optimal infant and young child feeding, family planning, rainwater harvesting, personal hygiene, waste management, promotion of local content,³⁷ backyard gardening, and access to affordable microfinance through collaboration with local banks.

Complex networks among the elite in Sierra Leone have compromised transparency and accountability, leading to programme failures or delays. This includes the lack of

37 The Sierra Leone Local Content Agency Act (2016) seeks to promote the use of local skills and materials in production activities to ensure job creation. The main objective of the Act is to support the country's domestic industry and the supplier network.

an enabling environment for local content to supply public sector programmes, inadequate protection of national fishing resources from international fleets, and large-scale rice imports, despite the export of locally grown rice to neighbouring countries. The dominance of foreign fishing fleets not only creates barriers for local actors but also intensifies the depletion of fishing resources and the export of catches to other markets. Addressing these challenges and promoting transparency and accountability is crucial for the success of programmes and initiatives aimed at improving nutrition, agriculture, fisheries and urban development in Sierra Leone.

5.3.3. *Issues to be addressed in the HWN domain*

The key development challenges are considered in three interlinked areas: food distribution and accessibility (by low-income families, older people, and so on); food safety (of major concern for those in informal settlements); and affordability of healthier diets (school-aged children and those transitioning to Western diets).

Food is generally accessible, but the cost and quality of the food is problematic. The main markets for bulk buying of local foodstuffs are few and more outlets would need to be provided outside of the city centre, which is where they are currently concentrated. Providing storage and preservation facilities in the markets will reduce spoilage of the products, which is already a major cause of serious financial loss for the sellers. Some traders source their goods from the Western Area Rural (WAR) and elsewhere in the provinces, or from the neighbouring countries of Guinea and Liberia, but the sale prices are mostly high. From April to June 2022, the price of imported rice, cassava and palm oil rose by between 42% and 53% and the purchasing power of unskilled labourers for imported rice reduced from 1.8 kg to 1.3 kg per week compared to 2021. This increasing price is having disproportionate effects on poor households. From 2010 to 2021, there was disparity between food security trends at national level versus the Western Area slums, with food security for the nation increasing from 45% to 57%, and for the WAR decreasing from 40% to 23%.

Food delivery from the provincial areas can be improved by cutting down on delays at the multiple security checkpoints manned by the police/army, who often ask truck drivers for money for permission to proceed. The amounts paid at the checkpoints, together with the high transportation costs owing to rising fuel prices, make the foodstuffs very expensive, as the cost is often passed onto the final consumers. Fresh fish stock is usually bought from artisanal fishermen operating in the many wharves along the coast of Freetown and the WAR. However, recent rises in fuel cost are having negative effects on the fishing sector. For example, fuel costs more than doubled from March to July 2022 (from SSL 10,000 to SLL 22,000), leading to increases in transportation and food prices. While value addition of local produce is limited, it presents an opportunity for innovation and employment for women and youths. However, despite the many initiatives undertaken by the government to increase food access, several challenges still remain.

5.3.4. Areas of policy action

While the Sierra Leone government and its development partners (for example, UNICEF and WFP) have made progress in improving the food and nutrition situation in the country, some HWN priorities are still not being adequately addressed through the country's approved guidelines for healthy eating. The following policy recommendations are therefore proposed:

- Policy interventions that promote the production and distribution of healthy and inexpensive food are needed to tackle the country's nutritional challenge. However, to date, many food producers targeting the urban market are either self-financed (self-funded) or are funded by NGOs and the government. Likewise, most retailers of food commodities usually rely on self-financing to start their businesses or rely on credit from market women or a few microcredit organisations for the purchase of input. Limited access to credit and finance is therefore a key source of inefficiency that hampers trade and productivity enhancement.
- Informal vendors represent a network with deep and far reach, with which the development community has not yet fully engaged. For many, the only source of secure credit is through informal arrangements (usually relatives, friends, and so on), which are often not only uncertain but also unsafe. Increasing financial incentives for food production and distribution could encourage this sector to expand. Policies to encourage credit unions and financial NGOs to consider giving special attention to small-scale farmers and informal food vendors will need to be introduced, to ensure that they make food production and distribution their preferred choice for micro funds. This will involve strengthening the measures used by lenders to reduce the risks of default, which include screening borrowers to exclude likely defaulters, creating incentives that enhance the ability of the borrowers to repay, and creating enforcement regimes to ensure compliance with repayment. Access to affordable microfinancing should be promoted in collaboration with a community bank and, possibly, start-up support. Training of would-be borrowers to ensure high repayment should be prioritised, with modules focusing on the modes of credit, repayment plans and money transfer operations.
- To supplement its other sources of food supply, the government (both national and the FCC) should prioritise land for food production in and around Freetown. While backyard gardening is widely practised, which allows households to eat fresh, locally grown food, promoting urban agriculture in dedicated vacant lands will be critical to expanding food production, so long as consumers and retailers of food commodities view it favourably and city residents accept it as part of their daily life. Urban agriculture is already being practised in some places, and it can grow to become a major segment of the SLPP-led government's Feed Salone flagship programme³⁸ if it is successfully integrated into the strategy. Moreover, because seeds are critical for increasing farm productivity, the government should consider giving special attention to improved seeds, by making them available to farmers.
- The government can further promote urban agriculture by linking it up with the school feeding programme, which will require the schools to use some part of

38 See: feedsalone.gov.sl (accessed 9 April 2024).

the budget to purchase fresh vegetables and other slightly processed food (such as smoked fish) from small-scale farms and backyard gardens, fishponds and the wharves. To increase the consumption of locally grown food to improve health, the government should consider limiting the importation of food that is widely available domestically, and set up food management boards. These would support producers with storage facilities for processing excess foodstuff or food harvests that are affected by the seasons, and set specified thresholds for conserving the calories per produce.

- The majority of the low-income urban residents are dependent upon informal vendors for cooked meals (“cookri”), mostly based upon traditional diets. While awareness of the importance of reduced salt content has increased during a recent campaign, leading to consumer demand for less salt in local recipes (Government of Sierra Leone, 2020; Republic of Sierra Leone Ministry of Health and Sanitation, 2020), the government should intensify its health nutrition campaign across the life course. This should comprise a range of health and nutrition promotion activities, such as health education, nutrition awareness and dietary change practices. Promoting a healthy food environment should, however, involve a range of stakeholders across the different sectors, including both public and private sector actors. The ideal locations for promoting healthy diets would be public spaces, such as open fields or community centres that serve entire neighbourhoods, including the urban poor and vulnerable populations.
- Revitalising the “Scaling up Nutrition” movement is recommended to consider urban food systems, with the participation of the Freetown City Council and effective engagement with the private sector and promotion of the enabling environment, as recommended in the Lancet Series, 2008.³⁹ The National Agricultural Transition Strategy (2019-2023) advocates for local content to be procured for supplementary feeding programmes by government institutions. Helping informal vendors to provide healthier options, especially targeting school-aged children (or commercially viable school feeding), is recommended as a priority (with access to low-interest loans to initiate value addition). Small-scale urban agriculture for growing tubers and promoting value addition to diversify livelihoods and aquaculture training programmes are also recommended.
- A gradual transition to Western diets is evident in Freetown. However, the availability of imported products with high fat and salt content is currently a default option for school children in the urban setting. Local schoolchildren should be engaged to produce information, education and communication (IEC) materials on healthy diets. The goal is to increase both supply and demand for healthier food (cookri/snacks) provided by trained vendors as the default option outside schools. More effective social and behaviour change communication campaigns should make use of the multitude of social media channels, explaining minimal labelling and “champions”⁴⁰ could help reduce the long-term risks of nutrition-related non-communicable diseases.
- Affordability of food in Freetown will continue to be problematic whilst rural agriculture underperforms (Bah, 2013; Sheriff and Massaquoi, 2012). Urban

39 See: www.thelancet.com/series/maternal-and-child-undernutrition (accessed 20 May 2024).

40 These are individuals and/or groups motivated to take on more responsibility (for example, through advocacy on social media and other platforms) to support the safe nutrition initiative by the government.

and peri-urban agriculture and/or backyard gardening could help alleviate shortages, reduce prices and diversify livelihoods. In addition, the “Freetown the Tree Town” campaign⁴¹ instigated by the FCC to address the extensive deforestation and risks of landslides and floods could contribute towards food diversity where fruit crops are promoted. A few individuals and small businesses are successfully adopting urban aquaculture for domestic consumption or livelihoods.

- Also, because Freetown runs the risk of hidden food insecurity as a result of a lack of monitoring and the limited actions taken when insecurity manifests, the need to improve early warning information to inform early actions on food insecurity issues is urgent.
- Finally, the government should make deliberate efforts to harmonise existing policies on trade, nutrition and agriculture with its health promotion interventions.

5.4. Youth and capability development (YCD) in Freetown

5.4.1. Introduction

The youth population in Sierra Leone is large, which presents a significant opportunity for their inclusion in the economic and social development of the country. More than one-third (41.3%) of Sierra Leone’s population are youth, as defined by the internationally accepted age bracket of 15-35 years. This is similarly the case in Freetown, with 46.6% of its total population comprising youths (Beresford Weekes and Bah, 2017), making it an important case study for exploring how youth citizenship is conceptualised to maximise their inclusion in the city’s overall development agenda. Our research recognises the strategic importance of this demographic dividend and the pivotal role that urban youth will play in pushing forward development outcomes across African cities. This section of the study was carried out by the Institute for Development (IFD), based in Freetown.

5.4.2. Present situation of the YCD domain

The majority of youths in Freetown live in poverty, which is linked to the multiple shocks which Sierra Leone has experienced, ranging from the civil war between 1991 to 2002 to the Ebola outbreak in 2014 to 2016 and the more recent Covid-19 pandemic, all of which had negative consequences for the country, with young people as the major victims. Freetown’s high youth concentration and its rapid spatial growth are triggered by expectations of better life opportunities. The challenge of adequately providing services for the residents of these expanding (sometimes high-density) areas is heightened by shrinking formal employment opportunities. The majority of livelihoods in the city are tied to “making ends meet” in an informal and economically insecure world, with youths in their socioeconomically productive years being disproportionately affected. The most common jobs are petty trading (males and females) and

⁴¹ See: www.shiftcities.org/post/freetown-treetown-campaign-using-digital-tools-encourage-tree-cultivation-cities (accessed 9 April 2024).

commercial transport, with most youths (particularly males) operating as drivers in the informal transport sector, which comprises shared taxis, minibuses, tricycles and commercial motor bikes.

The city suffers from a lack of adequate funds at the local and central government levels to run and maintain an effective education system. This leads to high dropout rates, high unemployment rates attributed to limited job opportunities and/employable skills set, and rising health problems. There is also a high rate of teenage pregnancies and gender-based sexual violence (including rape) against female youths. Most youths suffer from a lack of social cohesion, lack of interest/disenfranchisement in civic engagement/participation and high poverty levels, which limit their access to services. One key driver for the latter relates to the prevalence of cultural barriers (for example, conventional role definitions, lack of participatory culture in decision-making) which reduces opportunities for youths to fully participate in society, with women and girls disproportionately affected because of harmful gender norms. These challenges also create a negative ripple effect on other social factors, which potentially impedes youths' development in their socioeconomically productive years, as well as their overall health and psychosocial wellbeing (for example, gang violence and drug abuse).

5.4.3. Political role of the domain

Youths in Freetown are generally marginalised from political processes, with little or no voice to influence decisions affecting them. The only time they are politically active is during elections, when they are mobilised and hired by politicians to attend their rallies or do their bidding. These are often unemployed youths and “areas boys”, whose lives are a daily struggle, with many living in precarious living conditions that are rarely serviced. Perhaps the only place where young people can be more politically active is in the university but upon graduation, many easily become disillusioned with national politics and the associated political institutions, thereby narrowing the space for youth political activism.

Youth political participation is obstructed by several factors, notably youths' lack of trust in political processes and institutions, and their limited knowledge about formal political processes and how to participate. Lack of knowledge about political processes not only makes it easier for politicians to manipulate young people, but it also makes it difficult for them to see elections as channels to express their grievances, call for change and hold governments accountable. There are also structural factors, including the high financial cost of campaigning, which makes it difficult for many young people to start a political career, and the widely practised idea of limiting politics to wealthier, older male residents. Often, female youths, who face the double discrimination of age and gender, are disproportionately affected.

District Youth Councils were established to provide a platform for young people to participate in decision-making processes at the district level. However, their effectiveness has been mixed, owing to the aforementioned underlying societal norms deterring effective youth (and especially female) participation in decision-making

spaces. Developing and implementing gender transformative policies is a challenge. However, district youth councils remain an important platform for engaging young people in decision-making processes and advocating for their rights and interests.

5.4.4. Links to political settlements

Youth and capability development in Freetown is inextricably linked to the city's political settlement, which directly influences the degree of opportunities available to young people and their ability to access resources and services. Its youthful population provides a reservoir of cheap human capital, which can help to improve productivity in the entire Western Area and beyond. The city has an opportunity to make the most of a demographic dividend by harnessing the economic growth potential of its large workforce (including young people) to support a relatively smaller dependent population (children and the elderly) while freeing up resources for development. This requires creating a supportive political environment that will enable young people to access resources and services necessary for their growth and development. The consequence of not taking full advantage of its youthful population is far-reaching. Apart from continuing to limit the city's productivity and growth, as evidenced in the rise in poverty and inequality levels, the recent chain of youth violence demonstrates how the city's political settlement is also producing hostilities and political tensions in Freetown.

In Sierra Leone, youths are often described as potential change agents, but they are not usually included in making decisions that affect their lives or in finding solutions to their problems. They are widely described as the "future of tomorrow", despite their exclusion from meaningful participation in the country's governance systems. The daily life of the average youth in Freetown is characterised by "hustling" modelled on survival to resist the system (Mitton, 2022). Nevertheless, youths are commonly considered an important political force, as demonstrated by their active participation in the 10 August (2022) political unrest in Freetown and elsewhere.

Youths participate in the political life of the city in diverse ways: as supporters of political parties or as campaigners, "foot soldiers", ordinary voters, or activists. Some young people describe their engagements in these political activities (particularly as foot soldiers) as a job/source of money or a way to secure a job when their candidate /political party wins. Some youths are also party cardbearers of registered political parties and actively involved in the youth wings, which play an important role as platforms for recruiting, retaining and mentoring young members. Nevertheless, some youths, mostly from marginal (poor and disadvantaged) backgrounds, do not take active part in elections. Some do not even have the capacity to participate in political processes. Marginal youths tend to be easily frustrated because they lack jobs, and many do not have the specialised employable skills and knowledge (for example, skills in finance, information technology, marketing), which causes some to lose faith in the political system and become less interested in politics. The persistent rise in the cost of living in Freetown is increasingly forcing more youths to become politically disengaged.

Some greedy and opportunistic politicians exploit these resentments by inducing these frustrated youths to commit violence, just to create instability in the city.

Often, the employment aspirations of marginal youth shape their decisions to take part in violence to demonstrate loyalty to a political patron. However, using violence to get a job establishes an exploitative relationship between the client and the political patron (Enria, 2015). Many other youths with pre-existing social ties to politicians are also mobilised for violence through social media platforms, where false rumours are easily spread and the image of political opponents smeared. Social media is also used to propagate tribal hatred and dissent. Recently, youth political participation has also been shaped by political misinformation and intolerance widely promoted by paid social media bloggers, who continually resist prohibitions from the police, as the latter currently lack capacity to identify and apprehend them.

5.4.5. City power balance

Freetown is a city with a rapidly growing population and an ever-changing power balance. The youth of Freetown are at the centre of this power shift, and will shape the future of the city. The power balance for youths in Freetown can be complex and multifaceted. However, some factors that clearly impact this power balance are: limited political representation and voice; inadequate access to quality education, employable skills and job opportunities; and inadequate absorptive capacity of the job market, leading to unemployment, poverty and inequality (Manning, 2009; Chadwick, 2019). Other factors include the lack of self-organisation among youths to advocate for their own interests and to hold leaders accountable, poor enabling environment for innovation and the inability to initiate youth-specific activities to promote youth agendas and visions.

It is important to note that the power balance for youths can also be influenced by gender and societal norms and larger political and economic factors, such as government policies, which can have a negative impact on youth development and limit young people's opportunities to participate in the political process.

5.4.6. Formal and informal governance

Formal and informal governance plays an important role in youth and capability development in Freetown. Formal governance structures, such as the Ministry of Youth Affairs (MoYA), National Youth Commission (NYC) and the National Youth Service (NYS) are the official structures and processes established by the government to represent and serve the needs of young people. MoYA has primary responsibility for all youth matters in Sierra Leone, including the development, welfare and empowerment of young people in the country. MoYA works directly with the NYC, which is the policymaking and coordinating body of all youth-related institutions in Sierra Leone. NYC initiates all youth development programmes, projects and activities of the government (which includes providing youth skills training and other initiatives to empower the youths), while NYS, a national programme that promotes youth

participation in governance, addresses problems of social exclusion. The NYS is jointly supervised by MoYA and NYC to provide newly qualified graduates with opportunities to acquire practical job experience in both the public and private sectors. Nevertheless, a recent management and functional review of the MoYA by the Public Sector Reform Unit (PSRU) in 2021 revealed that the ministry currently has only one professional unit (led by the Director of Youths). It has a very broad mandate and functions, which cannot be effectively carried out by a single body, given the level of importance the country attaches to issues of youth employment and capability development. Other salient observations were that the human resource capacity of the ministry is weak (both in quality and quantity) and it has no effective communication strategy.

Other formal governance structures include linked government ministries, such as the Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Employment, Labour and Social Security and Ministry of Technical and Higher Education. However, while decentralisation was rolled out in 2004 to ensure participatory governance in Sierra Leone, the Freetown City Council (FCC) – a key government institution at the local level – has no clear responsibility for youth matters. This is despite the setting up of District Youth Councils⁴² by the government in 2003, which are generally yet to function, due to capacity and resource constraints. It is also not clear exactly how the FCC brings young people into its decisionmaking processes.

On the other hand, informal governance structures include the many youth-led organisations and community-based groups that provide mentorship programmes, job training and other forms of support to youths. These initiatives are often led by local leaders or neighbourhood residents who have a vested interest in the development of their communities. It is important to note that formal and informal governance structures can complement each other and that both can be important for ensuring that the needs and interests of young people are represented and served in Freetown. However, as the PSRU pointed out, this is likely not be the case because MoYA's relationship (collaboration and coordination) with the constituent youth agencies it supervises is fairly weak.

5.4.7. Key systems and systemic issues

The key systems and systemic issues within the youth and capability domain in Freetown are primarily related to the lack of access to education, employment opportunities, and resources. The majority of young people in Freetown have limited access to educational institutions, due to financial constraints and a lack of infrastructure. This has resulted in a large number of young people who are unable to pursue higher education or gain the necessary skills for employment. Additionally, there are limited job opportunities available to young people, owing to the lack of economic development in the city. These systemic issues have had a detrimental

⁴² District Youth Councils were established to enable youths to participate in local and national issues through articulating the voices and aspirations of young people in each district.

impact on the capability domain of Freetown's youth, making it difficult for them to reach their full potential. Addressing these systems and systemic issues is crucial for the sustainable development of young people in Freetown. This can be achieved through a comprehensive and inclusive approach that involves the participation of different stakeholders, including youth themselves, as discussed in the next section.

5.4.8. Policy recommendations

The challenges faced by youths in Freetown can be mitigated through:

- programmes that reduce the rising trend of delinquency and youth violence,
- initiatives directed at youth (for example, counselling, awareness raising, leadership skills) who are in danger of dropping out of the education system,
- funds to support alternative career options (such as masonry, plumbing and carpentry) for at-risk youths,
- school-based initiatives and higher education programmes that make neighbourhood service an integral part of the education system,
- systems of mentoring youths, which will involve regular contacts between an individual or youth group and an older and more experienced person over a sustained period of time, with the intention of building their character and competence.

Other interventions should include:

- increasing access to finance (capital and grants) for the growth of youth entrepreneurs;
- providing a conducive trade and business environment (hassle-free) for young people;
- promoting peer learning schemes (for example, in livestock management),
- promoting performing arts, music and sport within the curriculum of school and tertiary institutions, with clearly enforceable copyright laws.

Increasing investment in education and training programmes can help more young people develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the workforce. Since 2018, the government has invested heavily in education and training programmes to ensure that young people have access to the skills vital for success in a rapidly changing world. The government has also introduced a range of policies aimed at promoting youth entrepreneurship and economic development. Building on these initiatives will create more opportunities for young people to be innovative and become self-sufficient.

Investment in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), an already important aspect of education in Freetown, will create more windows of opportunity for young people to acquire practical and employable skills. In Freetown, TVET is provided through formal education at vocational schools and technical colleges, as well as through non-formal training provided by NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs), and private training institutions. While the government of Sierra Leone

recognises the importance of TVET in addressing the high youth unemployment rate, the TVET system in Freetown is faced with some practical challenges, which include inadequate funding, lack of qualified trainers, and limited access to equipment and facilities. Jobs would also need to be created to absorb youths being trained either formally or informally.

Moreover, creating more platforms to increase youth participation in politics will enable young people to become more engaged in politics and take on leadership roles in their communities and within political parties. Besides, promoting civic engagement will allow more young people to be aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens, which encourages them to participate in civic activities such as voting and neighbourhood service.

While these opportunities can have a positive impact on politics in Freetown, the extent to which this can be assured depends so much on the commitment of the government to invest in youth development and the willingness to create an enabling environment for their participation in politics.

5.5. Safety and security in Freetown

5.5.1. Introduction

Violence (protests and demonstrations⁴³) and criminal activities (robbery, assaults, and so on) are major challenges, which are currently undermining the peace and tranquillity of Freetown. The scale and frequency of these events is worrying, as they often overwhelm the capacity of the state to respond. Our research sought to understand people's perceptions and city politics around safety and security in Freetown.⁴⁴ It used "people's perceptions" to explore what residents in Freetown consider to be their prime safety and security challenges. The objective was to investigate how the political settlement of the city influences systems of governance and the perceived challenges that people face. Our research stands in a tradition of political economy analysis but furthers its understanding by integrating system analysis with political settlement thinking (in accordance with the ACRC conceptual framework).

The guiding question was: "To what extent and in what ways is the safety and security domain in Freetown informed and/or controlled by the country's political settlement and what are the effects on the perceptions of the Freetown populations?". The question was broken down into three sub-questions: a) What are the main insights into the safety and security experiences/perceptions of populations in Freetown? b) Who are the most relevant state and non-state actors involved in producing (in)security and (un)safety in Freetown and how have they have formed and become socially

43 Many protests and demonstrations in Freetown involve aggressive behaviours in the form of violence involving serious injuries and death.

44 This section is a result of a collaborative study by two researchers – Ibrahim Bangura, lecturer in the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, and Kars de Bruijne, a Senior Research Fellow with the Clingendael's Conflict and Research Unit in the Netherlands.

embedded? c) How do the main producers of insecurity and unsafety link to political elites and what role do these (in)formal actors play in sustaining and producing the political settlement? Specific attention was also given to the factors accounting for systems failure and the consequences for the wellbeing of people in Freetown. The analysis led to the identification of complex problems that stand in the way of development in Freetown.

5.5.2. *Scope of the research*

The boundaries of the safety and security domain are important to clearly define. There is overlap with other domains, such as youth and capability, housing, health and wellbeing, and informal settlements. For example, people's feelings of insecurity might stem from contests over land in informal settlements as youth groups exist to enforce boundaries. Moreover, security and safety refers to a wide variety of phenomena (Boholm et al., 2016). To account for this, we set conceptual boundaries between 'safety' and 'security' concerns (Burns et al., 1992; Jore, 2019):

- Safety is defined as “the state of being away from hazards caused by natural forces or human errors randomly”.
- Security is defined as “the state of being away from hazards caused by deliberate intention of humans to cause harm.”

Underpinning the two issues is structural disadvantage experienced by some individuals or communities, as a result of inequalities in power and resources, owing to the way society functions.

5.5.3. *Main findings*

> *Safety and security concerns of people in Freetown*

The findings and conclusion of our research provide a clear picture of the main safety and security concerns in local communities in Freetown. The primary challenges for people in Freetown revolve around security rather than safety issues. The most important problem that people face is gang violence and criminality, with over 50% identifying this as a concern. Multiple interviewees also identified insecurity as a daily reality. Other concerns were political violence, police and military brutality, school-related violence, land conflict and concerns around sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Safety concerns were particularly around natural disasters, such as flooding and traffic incidents.

A key insight from both the survey and the interviews is the substantial variation between Freetown neighbourhoods. Studying the variation between Aberdeen, Portee and Kroo Bay highlights how safety and security concerns strongly vary across these areas. Kroo Bay, for example, saw, in addition to gang violence and criminality, also flooding as one of their prime safety/security concerns. As such, it is important to analyse the Freetown safety and security domain not at a general level but at neighbourhood levels. Moreover, though less significant, there were also clear gender differences; women generally experience higher levels of insecurity than men.

> *Link between law and order, political settlement and city power balance*

The law and order system and the security domain are tightly linked to national politics and national (economic) interests. Because of the political tensions in Sierra Leone between the ruling government and opposition and between Freetown City Council and the central state, there are sustained links between the two main political parties and their pro-party militias (usually ex-combatants), who often offer their services to the political party in exchange for rewards. For state security forces and various types of party militias, these links are extensive and relatively stable. Gangs are also very active, often associated with politicians of either of the two main political parties. However, unlike with ex-combatants, links between politicians and gangs are subject to greater variation. Gangs not only affect electioneering processes but also the transparency and outcome of the result. A key problem for Freetown is that it is the centre of power and that all (strong) security outfits are in the town. Political players therefore have to manage these groups, and can also benefit from linkages with them, as they can leverage them for political capital and (sometimes) economic benefits.

> *Key systems and systemic issues*

Insecurity in Freetown (primarily produced by gang violence and criminality) is rooted in systemic failure of (at least) two systems constructed after the civil war (1991-2002): the law and order system and the educational system (including a disconnect with livelihood prospects). The law and order system in particular bears a distinct post-war signature. The whole institutional arrangement of the security field and disaster management was set up in just two years after the war. Yet, 20 years later and in a different political context, most of the law and order system is becoming increasingly ineffective. The police force – which had a clear community policing hallmark after the war – is strongly politicised; post-war hybrid neighbourhood solutions – for example, the Local Policing Partnership Boards (LPPBs) and Community Service Volunteers (CSVs) – remain popular but have also collapsed under the influence of national and city-level politics; the army – previously a somewhat republican outfit, with loyalty to the state rather than politicians – is increasingly coming under the influence of politicians.

One problem is that gang violence is an important commodity in political competition, whereby gang members are hired by politicians to cause harm to their opponents, in order to reach a political objective. This ensures a constant demand for their services, with the members, who are mostly young men (and few women) with limited prospects, lured into “selling” violence to those who need it, often in schemes that put gangs and providers on retainers until they are of use. A second problem is that young people’s very limited prospects in education, working life and social mobility lead to them being trapped in marginality and vulnerable to exploitation. Gangs have become one of the important social alternatives for young people in Freetown, where youth find a sense of recognition and a world of their own making.

Violence in unsafe neighbourhoods was also highlighted, particularly in some low-income settlements where people are afraid to move about. This usually affects

households that lack safe water and/or sanitation connections at home, forcing women and girls to travel long distances at night for solutions, which puts them at risk. Gangs offer “protection” in their neighbourhoods (for example, against robbery or assault) in exchange for money from the residents. Normally, monies made from such acts are not used for the collective purposes of the gang, but are shared among individual members who carry out the service. While the amount of money can sometimes be high, much of it is spent impulsively, since the members rarely have any savings mindset. Besides, gang members barely have any cohesive link with the local political leaders, whom they describe as unfair in the distribution of the monies they make.

The problem is that nearly all of these issues are so fundamental and intractable and beyond the scope of non-state actors (donor community, CSOs) that they can only be addressed with sustained national political buy-in. With the June 2023 elections already held, such buy-in is increasingly becoming unlikely. Nevertheless, we focus on identifying some specific problems where some traction can be expected.

5.5.4. Policy recommendations

In finding solutions to complex safety and security issues, we recognise that the most fundamental problems are too large to tackle. Even though addressing the political economy of violence in Freetown will be required to unlock Sierra Leone’s economic potential and unblock development, we believe that none of this is feasible. Instead, we propose two specific interventions that should be prioritised in the neighbourhoods to address violence: 1) hybrid neighbourhood security structures; and 2) addressing tensions around land governance and violence. These solutions, it is hoped, will set Freetown on a path to a reduction in violence and youth marginalisation.

The first recommendation is to address neighbourhood security structures through hybrid arrangements, where people themselves protect their neighbourhoods with the permission of and support from the police.

As a solution, this research proposes actions to reconfigure the defunct hybrid security arrangements in communities (mainly LPPBs and CSVs). Unlike post-war initiatives, this has to move beyond the state and be more firmly rooted in the neighbourhood level – given the strongly varying local political settlements. People already support these structures, the security establishment seeks reinstatement and some donors seek to make a contribution to security but are concerned about sensitivities. A local and neighbourhood-driven security approach is likely to get support. Solutions cannot only improve security directly, but have to also recognise the underlying problem of youth marginalisation and the lack of opportunities. Collaboration with other domains is therefore advisable.

The second recommendation focuses on addressing violence over land use and ownership in the Freetown peninsula (which again varies greatly from neighbourhood to neighbourhood). Such violence has been on the rise.

Land conflicts in Freetown interact with multiple complex problems, spanning across domains. For example, land tenure in the Western Area involves a clash between a formal state system and a customary system of inheritance that is yet to be resolved. The formal regulatory framework, moreover, is only partly enforced and is internally inconsistent. Land problems overlap with domains such as informal settlements, wherein land access and control – particularly “banking” – are key features. Furthermore, land control has clear development implications, as building, housing and economic development are all highly contingent on the ownership of land. Finally, land remains one key source of income and clientelism for elites in Freetown.

However, underlying all of these is a political economy that seeks to limit change. Because large projects are often captured and exploited for elite rent-seeking, a set of solutions that speaks to the underlying drivers of violence (for example, political instigation of violence, elite interests, land conflict, unemployment, high cost of living, inadequate services, and so on) should be prioritised, rather than the violence itself. A few nascent neighbourhood solutions – for example, people constructing feeder roads or clear drainage ways to improve their life situation and better connect their settlement with citywide processes – might be a promising direction. But to address the violence, this research suggests that people look to state authorities to intervene. The key problem there is how to set up a state force that can act outside of political patronage and how to manage the key rift in Freetown (opposition controlled).

6. Overarching and crosscutting issues

This report has shown how national and city-level politics, urban systems and particular configurations of actors, agencies, ideas and practices have shaped development in Freetown in the domains of housing; informal settlements; health, wellbeing and nutrition; youth and capability; and safety and security. It has also shown that developmental problems persist, affecting the wellbeing and life prospects of urban dwellers – particularly marginalised groups – and damaging the environment. A holistic analysis enables us to identify the most pressing developmental problems in Freetown, and the challenges that will likely be encountered in efforts to solve them in an equitable and (environmentally and fiscally) sustainable way. In these concluding sections, we sum up the main developmental problems, and propose suitable ways of addressing them in light of the described challenges.

6.1. Introduction

At least four themes emerged from our investigations into how national, city and domain-level power and politics interact and the implications that this has for solving the intractable development challenges in Freetown. These are: decentralisation; informality; vested interests, rents and factionalism (which hinders collective action and catalyses violence); and inequality.

6.1.1. *Thwarted devolution*

Freetown demonstrates a profound disconnect between the promise and reality of decentralisation. Official sources frame decentralisation as a means of bringing the government closer to the people, enhancing their inclusion in decisionmaking, improving democratic accountability and improving service delivery, which is critical to poverty reduction in the country (Srivastava and Larizza, 2013, 2011). Yet, nearly two decades after the LGA was passed, there is very little to suggest that this promise has been realised. Rather, the decentralisation process has been used increasingly to legitimise central government actions to limit local-level decisions and powers, particularly when it serves the political interest of the ruling party. Critically, the way in which politicians have chosen to devolve responsibilities, oftentimes without the needed resources and authority, or even, in some instances, to recentralise powers that had been devolved to local councils, clearly contradicts the real intent of the decentralisation process.

Since 2018, the city has grappled with strong competition between the two leading political parties (SLPP and APC), with each party trying to outdo the other at every given opportunity. However, the fact that Freetown has always been an APC party stronghold now presents serious governance issues that threaten the power and authority of the ruling SLPP government, which occasionally causes it to use its power of incumbency to influence FCC-planned activities and decisions it considers to be hostile. Contestations of power between the FCC and the national government are both institutional and political. The institutional constraints relate to the limits posed to devolution in terms of budget flows and unclear role clarifications (in relation to relevant MDAs), while the political tensions relate to the tendency by the central government officials and MPs to view the FCC as a threat or as wanting to take credit for some interventions in the city. There is also the tendency to view the FCC as making itself very independent by attracting foreign donor funds, which makes the Mayor's Delivery Unit (MDU) suppose that it can fully deliver, even without funding from the central government.

Contestations are real, because many of the choices about how systems should operate in Freetown are determined by the central government. These include decisions relating to transport flows, traffic management and the provision of services such as water, energy, healthcare and schools, which the FCC barely has control over. The decisions are constantly retained at the national level, because the different MDAs responsible for them do not want to lose the accompanying authority and resources. The FCC only has power over the functioning of a few city systems, such as waste management and sanitation, but with limited financial allocations, which are constantly transferred late, rendering the responses ineffective. Health and education are key among the central government's stated manifesto priorities but many low-income households still encounter a range of barriers which deprive them of accessing good quality education and health services. Political competition and the urge to gain political capital from delivering public services play important roles in determining the

effectiveness of these services. Often, politicians are more attracted to activities that can bring easy wins, rather than bothering themselves with larger and more expensive initiatives (Srivastava and Larizza, 2013). Even within the FCC, there is a real difference and tension between the MDU and the mainstream council administration which led to the dissolution of MDU in 2022.

Contestations are common because decentralisation reforms in Sierra Leone have never been fully implemented, as a result of the competing and clientelist politics that characterises the country's political settlement (Srivastava and Larizza, 2011). Political leaders at the national level are unwilling to commit themselves to long-term reforms involving devolution of power to local councils, since doing so will strengthen the local councils and threaten the political dominance of the central government. Apart from limiting opportunities for rentseeking, the highly competitive nature of politics between the ruling and main opposition party forces ruling elites to focus more on reforms that promote short-term political benefits. A National Decentralisation Policy that was introduced in 2010 reverses local council roles, from being the “highest political authority” in their localities – as pointed out in the LGA (2004) – to being the “highest development and service delivery authority”, which weakens their political authority.

6.1.2. Informality

Informality is pervasive in Freetown, across politics, city systems and domains, and in the income- and livelihood-generating activities of most residents. Informality intersects with the formal sector in many ways and at different levels, including individual relations, sub-sector and commercial networks (Koroma et al., 2018). Indeed, without the varied forms of informal activity and hybrid arrangements that meld the formal and informal together, people's lives and wellbeing would be worse off. The lack of efforts to coproduce solutions that merge the “formal” and “informal” in the city has forced the government to use a range of coercive measures to control the latter, which has only worked to push more activities underground (such as those of traditional birth attendants). Informality is systemic in Freetown, because of the clientelistic nature of the political settlement and because government has been unable and/or unwilling to bridge the gap between the limited reach of formal city systems (many of which were originally established for a small colonial elite) and the now huge demand generated by rapid urbanisation in the past two decades.

Informal employment is expanding fast, and extensive informal trading activity is intensifying congestion in the city, whilst making little or no significant contribution to the city's revenue,⁴⁵ given the low productivity and low wages associated with the sector. More women are engaged in informal work (mainly as petty traders and maids), suggesting there are persistent gaps in earnings between men and women. Some informal trades (for example, maids, plumbers, drivers) are encouraged by the city's wealthier groups, but many others, such as petty traders and commercial motorbike

45 Those working informally do contribute revenue through indirect taxation, market dues, and so on.

riders, face constant threats of eviction from the city centre and other road intersections. Seizure of their wares (including motor bikes), arrest and other forms of harassment are a daily encounter for many. Several of these events are isolated and small-scale, but some, such as the January 2014 clearance of traders off the main streets of Freetown by the then FCC mayor, Franklyn Bode Gibson, may be large-scale too. Eviction of petty traders is usually framed by the government as an attempt to free up streets for vehicular movement. However, most people attribute the latter to suspicion by the ruling government that the petty traders may have actively participated in the riots, given their unwavering support for the opposition APC party. Petty traders and market women are also alleged to be encouraged by the city mayor, who allows them to continue trading on the Freetown streets as a “vote banking” strategy for the local and general elections.

Likewise, informal settlements are now a consistent feature of Freetown's spatial development, as they expand to fill recurrent gaps in housing supply (Macarthy and Koroma, 2016; Johnson, nd). The rapid expansion and spread in Freetown are demonstrative of gross inconsistencies in the government's approach to housing low-income families. The city is mostly unplanned, with individual households left to make decisions on where to settle and work, and this has significantly influenced the spatial form of the city. The weak planning system is worsened by the application of obsolete regulations and standards in the sector, which mostly date back to the colonial era. Based mainly on European visions of an ideal city, the planning and housing rules generally require strict adherence to building and planning codes which either ignore the presence of informal settlements and trades or insist on removing them. This has had a negative impact on families who cannot access what is officially described as “affordable housing”. Unsurprisingly, slum-like informal settlements in Freetown have endured persistent threats of eviction. Nevertheless, people and a few organisations in most of the informal settlements are making life much more pleasant for the residents than are local and central government.

Since 2017, the government has been applying strategies to embed the informal sector into the mainstream economy. These include the recent actions by NASSIT to bring traders under their legal coverage and protection through compliance with their social insurance scheme, but the approach has been too slow and too tepid.

6.1.3. Vested interests, rents and factionalism

Urban development in Freetown is closely linked with politics, which in Sierra Leone is more about retaining power than the delivery of public goods. Resources are the main means by which political elites advance their political agendas. During elections, political parties use money to seduce their supporters and to overcome their opponents. Closely linked to this belligerent political landscape is the dominance of clientelist politics with political parties wanting to provide benefits to their constituents in exchange for political loyalty (IGR 2021)⁴⁶. As noted above, this requires central

⁴⁶ See: [igr-sl.org/media-and-communication/release/18/](https://www.igr-sl.org/media-and-communication/release/18/) (accessed 20 May 2024).

government to undermine local government by maintaining a firm grip over budgetary transfers and some hitherto devolved functions. In Freetown, an APC stronghold, this takes on a further dimension when the central government is run by the SLPP party, which perceives the mayor and councillors to be serving as channels to action their party's agenda, allowing it to exert control over the city's everyday politics and development. This toxic relationship also incentivises the opposition party to sabotage the implementation of central government policies at the local level, even if this undermines service delivery in the city.

The winner-takes-all character of politics in Sierra Leone, and the tendency for voters to identify with political parties with strong links to their ethnic identities or regions, are critical to the pattern of politics. This makes governments "strong",⁴⁷ leading to patronage-based appointments and the politicisation of public institutions, with control of the state viewed primarily as a means to amass wealth and gain control over the people. There are few incentives for governing elites to provide more enduring public goods/services with impacts running into the long term, compared to the short-term targeting of highly visible goods, infrastructure and services, for which they can easily be credited. Our domain studies show how elite interests are holding back human development in numerous ways. This is a result of both elite strategies for accumulating power and wealth – including the governance of food systems, the instrumentalisation of youth and systemic generation of insecurity in informal settlements – and neglect, as with the failure to engage with the representatives of low-income communities to discuss problems and co-design solutions.

6.1.4. Inequality

Income, gender, age and disability are the key inequalities, which intersect to shape opportunities, disadvantages and vulnerabilities in Freetown.

Income inequalities are key in shaping opportunities and challenges for Freetown's population. People with low incomes are particularly excluded from access to affordable, decent housing, with female-headed households disproportionately affected. Low-income households face multiple challenges, including low access to water, sanitation and waste management infrastructure, and limited access to quality healthcare services, all of which lead to poor health and wellbeing outcomes. Children living in poverty in informal settlements are particularly vulnerable to ill health, including diarrhoeal diseases, malaria and malnutrition. Elderly people, those with disabilities and persons living in poverty in informal settlements particularly lack access to healthcare, as they are ineligible for the free healthcare initiative, despite the challenges they face in reaching health facilities due to transport costs. Residents of informal settlements are also particularly vulnerable to disasters such as flooding, landslides and fires.

⁴⁷ A democratically elected governing party that holds significant power to implement its plan/vision regardless of who may disagree with it.

Unemployment and underemployment in Freetown are high, especially among young adults. Access to quality education is limited, particularly in informal settlements. Costs of good quality education are prohibitive for people with low incomes, leading to earlier school dropouts. This creates a vicious cycle, with less educated youth unable to secure steady livelihoods and consequently living in poverty. Youth with disabilities are particularly excluded from educational and occupational opportunities. Despite up to 60% of the electorate being young people, they have limited representation in decisionmaking. Youth feel invisible and are frustrated about their limited economic opportunities and social mobility. This has multiple impacts, which are gendered.

One of these impacts is violence and insecurity. Whilst social and political violence has historical roots, disenfranchisement, particularly among male youth, drives participation in “gangs”, which are involved in criminal activities and receive political patronage. Gang members are both perpetrators and victims of violence, particularly in informal settlements. High rates of drug and alcohol use by both young men and women both result from, and further contribute to, poverty, mental distress, despair and alienation. The majority of employed youths (most of whom are male) are drivers in the informal transport sector (motorbikes and tricycles), where they are vulnerable to road traffic accidents, with resulting deaths and disabilities.

Intersections between poverty, violent masculinities and gendered disadvantages in accessing employment (including exclusion from finance) create particular challenges and insecurities for young women. Sex work and transactional sex are among the limited income-generating opportunities for low-income young women, making them particularly vulnerable to adolescent pregnancies, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Limited sex education and lack of free contraception further increase risks of adolescent pregnancies. Pregnant adolescents often drop out of school, further limiting their future opportunities, and face challenges supporting their children alone. This increases their own and their children’s health and wellbeing vulnerabilities (including risks of malnutrition and stunting for infants). Young women also face a high risk of female genital mutilation (FGM), which is often tacitly accepted or even encouraged by politicians.

Experiences of violence are more likely in informal settlements and for women and children. Violence against women includes SGBV within and outside of the home. Young women are particularly likely to experience sexual violence. Children, particularly those living in poverty, and on the street are also subject to violence, including within the family, and exploitation by gangs. The police are among the perpetrators of violence towards women and children, including sex workers and street traders. Trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation and slavery is also a significant problem. The police lack the human and financial resources to address SGBV.

Food insecurity is an increasing problem, particularly among city residents on low incomes, for whom the costs of even basic foodstuffs such as rice, cassava and palm oil are rapidly increasing beyond their incomes. Low-income residents are largely

dependent on informal vendors of cooked food (*cookri*) for their meals. Whilst nutritionally adequate, this food is prepared under unhygienic conditions, presenting risks of infectious diseases, and is also high in saturated fats, contributing to future non-communicable disease (NCD) risks. There is a lack of healthy school meals, and imported products with high fat and salt content are currently a default option for schoolchildren in the urban setting, with potential long-term health implications.

7. Conclusion, potentials for reform and implications for future research and interventions

7.1. Conclusion

This study has examined Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, to illustrate how the city's political settlement affects systems and domain functioning and the effect this has on urban development. Sierra Leone is urbanising fast and a significant proportion of this urban population already lives in Freetown, with more people expected to reside in the nearby Western Area Rural, which relies heavily on Freetown for most of its services. Rapid urbanisation amidst limited growth in the city economy is already putting considerable strain on city authorities in providing the needed services for people.

Many of the challenges faced are rooted in the city's political economy, which is firmly linked with the country's weak systems of governance and decentralisation. Freetown provides both rents and political legitimacy for many elites at different levels of state (private/public, national/local/community). Its double role as the seat of government, which is led by the ruling SLPP party, and as a municipality, which is led by the opposition APC party, has often led to tensions between the two and their supporters. Organised citizens have been at the frontier to mobilise pressure for change, since many consider that development outcomes are only likely to improve with pressure from local residents.

7.2. Potential reform and interventions

As a city with a long history of social movements, Freetown has a vibrant civil society, which is linked to the new democratic openings soon after the civil war that created space for civil society organisations to flourish (Thomson, 2007). The city has witnessed a great deal of advocacy activity, which has led to significant citizen mobilisation on local and national issues. Advocacy activities have generally focused on calls for greater citizen participation in development activities and decisions affecting the city. For example, the activities of organisations such as "Health for All Coalition" and "Environmental Forum for Action" (ENFORAC) illustrate how the engagement of networks has worked to deepen public interest and participation in health and environmental issues. However, several of these organisations have rarely focused on strengthening citizen engagement to influence policy change at a higher level. It was only recently that activists moved towards advocating for more fundamental changes in state power and politics, knowing full well that urban

transformation can only occur when there are changes in national policies. Some of these new efforts, which have been pursued through coalitions, provide strong insights into the context of reform in Freetown to help city authorities make more informed decisions in the future.

Although Freetown has an array of coalitions to address the various development problems (health, environment, poverty, youth, gender, and so on) that it faces, the cases presented below provide clear examples of initiatives that have been building momentum towards urban reform, focusing on addressing some specific challenges faced in the city. These two cases illustrate how coalition networks have worked to open up the policy space for inclusive decisionmaking, a vital element of improved service delivery and the overall development of Freetown.

The first case is the “Pull slum pan pipul” (PSPP) consortium that was formed in 2014 through funding from Comic Relief (UK). Its core agenda was to address the growing challenges in the expansion of slum-like informal settlements and the services deficits. Central to its work was the shared notion that the lack of reliable data on rapidly increasing low-income areas underpins the government’s lack of attention to improving the settlements. By working collectively to generate knowledge about the slums, the members became more empowered citizens, which allowed them to engage with city authorities and to advocate for improvement in their communities. Similarly, working with the neighbourhood residents was pioneering, as it encouraged members to later organise themselves into a grouping (FEDURP⁴⁸) with the representatives drawn from most of the city’s informal settlements. The capacity-building component of the coalition was empowering, as it helped the residents to work collectively to develop their own information base to help drive community initiatives. Through their continuous engagement with SLURC and CODOHSAPA, the residents are becoming more skilled in data collection, which makes them more informed about their localities and the kinds of actions to take in addressing the challenges.

The second case concerns the Community Learning Platform (CoLP) and City Learning Platform (CiLP), led jointly by SLURC, CODOHSAPA and FCC. Both platforms are designed as curative spaces for democratic engagement in urban reform, prioritising Freetown’s informal settlements. While the CoLP is held at the neighbourhood level, with the meetings attended by the residents and their groups, the CiLP brings together a variety of city actors, consisting of central government MDAs, civil society, the private sector, academic institutions and neighbourhood representatives. The CiLP provides a valuable model for driving urban reform at scale, as it allows genuine policy dialogue on Freetown’s urban development problems and the pathways towards urban equality and inclusive city-making. The platforms have created awareness about the complexity of Freetown’s development challenges and the risks associated with the siloed approaches to addressing them. While the impact of these two dynamic learning platforms in promoting urban transformation in Freetown is still limited in size, it has helped to put informal settlement issues at the forefront of

48 FEDURP was set up by CODOHSAPA, one of the founding PSPP members.

urban development discourses. It has also generated debates on the best ways to drive change in thinking and practice for reform in urban planning and management of the city.

Another, more recent reform coalition of note is the “Transforming Lives” consortium. This is led by the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), comprising a number of INGOs unified to support the FCC in rolling out a comprehensive slum upgrading programme in two informal settlements in Freetown.

Nurturing and expanding these innovative and locally rooted reform coalitions is critical to addressing Freetown’s intractable development problems. However, leveraging this policy space and exploiting its full potential will require substantial change in local governance and institutional relations, in addition to sustained investment in research and coalition functioning. Reform coalitions matter for a more prosperous Freetown and several activists are now pushing for policy change, even though many of their activities are taking place at the local level, with limited influence on policy change. The need for the government to act in consolidating gains from past and ongoing coalitions and related initiatives is imperative to creating impact at scale across the city.

Indeed, the prospects for urban reform in Freetown depend in large measure on how local councils (especially the FCC) are empowered (functionally and financially) to act as a sub-national government. They also depend on the extent of central government’s commitment to provide financial and capacity support to expand and strengthen ongoing and prospective reform initiatives in the city. Several political opportunities already exist that civil society and neighbourhood actors can explore to effect change in the national and local policy space. These include the recent progressive legislative reforms to protect, empower and increase female representation in governance, the right to free press, and the Free Quality Education programme. The latter is more empowering, as it seeks to equip children and youths with relevant skills and tools to take an active part in carving out the future of Sierra Leone. The pioneering action of appointing more young people and women to governance roles places them at the centre of critical decisionmaking which affects their lives and the lives of others. The country’s significant progress in the fight against corruption, and the widening of the political space by appointing more civil society actors with progressive tendencies into cabinet positions, also makes it easier for the central government to engage with the public and ensure their participation in policy debates, and to partner with coalitions in a process of collaborative policy reform.

In Freetown, the central government can enhance governance outcomes in service delivery by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the different MDAs and the FCC. MDAs are best placed to manage policy, regulatory and coordination matters, while FCC, which is regarded as “the highest development authority” in Freetown, is given responsibility for implementation. This will help to reduce tensions and ensure the effectiveness and accountability of the service delivery system.

7.3. Implications for future research and interventions

Against the context of an awful legacy of civil war, and the recent epidemic and floods, Freetown is rebuilding fast, despite its limited resources and an antagonistic development milieu. Official responses to urban problems illustrate the different interests of the ruling SLPP party and the main opposition APC party. Solving intractable development challenges in the city, such as poverty and inequality, requires collective actions between the central and local government and among the different development actors. A coordinated development plan is certainly the best way to articulate and respond to the city's development deficits. MDAs should, therefore, consider shifting away from their current sectoral and siloed approaches to more collective ways of dealing with the issues. But while there have been several attempts by international organisations to promote a cooperative relationship between MDAs and the FCC, these have usually failed because of political pressure.

This analysis of the political economy of Freetown highlights the importance of three enablers (see Section 7.2) for promoting more inclusive and sustainable forms of urban development. The FCC is a critical actor in promoting the city's economic growth, yet, as this study points out, there are huge challenges associated with the decentralisation process (despite the FCC still having administrative and fiscal authority over Freetown). But while it may be necessary to develop policies tailored to the local context, metropolitan governance mechanisms are also needed, especially to coordinate policies on systems that extend into WARDC. This should be based on integrated planning, with a view to developing coherent policy packages across systems and measures for achieving the objectives. Already, the existing local council jurisdictions create coordination gaps, which makes it difficult to have a shared policy strategy to develop the region. There is also the challenge of the central government always ignoring the importance of the FCC and other local councils in the design and implementation of national economic policies. Given the limited capacity within the FCC and other MDAs, the need for building capacity is clear. Institutional building and the alignment of financing to meet relevant tasks/responsibilities are crucial.

Dealing with the city's development challenges requires closer collaboration, not only between the FCC and the central government MDAs, but also with WARDC (since some problems extend beyond Freetown) and other relevant stakeholders from civil society, the private sector, academia and donor organisations. However, a key challenge is that responsibility for most systems functioning is fragmented among several government MDAs with limited capacities and conflicting interests. Building the cooperative governance capacity of the FCC and MDAs will allow both to collaborate more closely with relevant non-state actors and to co-learn and develop joint initiatives to transform the city. This will involve building relationships and drawing from the diverse expertise of other actors (including the local residents) to ensure that the solutions decided on are not only aligned with the priorities and needs of the people but build on their collective agency as well. Maintaining clear and well defined roles and

responsibilities among the MDAs and building the technical expertise of neighbourhood actors to deliver will also be important (Peters et al., 2022; Shannon et al., 2023).

The challenge of collaboration raises a number of important questions for running the city. How do we get the different city stakeholders to commit to a future in which working towards a shared city vision will mean working cooperatively to analyse and understand urban challenges, including ensuring that the city's development is based on a "win-win" agenda?

Mechanisms for collaborative interventions do exist, but are complicated by the need for any implementing agency to take credit for the service or intervention, because of the competing political alliances in control of the centre and city, respectively. Although this is further heightened and exacerbated when the city and centre are controlled by different political parties, it can still be an issue when the same party controls both the centre and the city. There remains scope for strategic and ad hoc interventions across the domains covered by the ACRC project, providing they can offer a "win-win" for the various competing agendas, including those that see urban development as a national, rather than a Freetown-only project. But fostering a much needed clear and strategic vision for the future of Freetown will be much more difficult not only to develop, but also to adhere to, and fulfil.

An approach that looks at urban challenges as national, rather than city-specific issues, could lessen the perception of its favouring the incumbent government's main political opponents. The same sort of approach could be considered within the city as well, when it comes to interventions that would benefit certain geographical areas. Understanding not just the challenges facing a domain, but the communities where interventions are needed and the political identity of those communities to be targeted, should be a consideration which could help in more successfully navigating the politics.

Notably, the city domain and systems functioning show that the formal productive sector alone cannot ensure the supply of goods and services to households in Freetown. While most of the formal sector jobs in Sierra Leone are concentrated in Freetown, the sector is not big enough to cater fully to the growing city population. Furthermore, governance capabilities are mostly weak, and many still struggle with unclear mandates and unresolved devolved functions. Although weak enforcement capacity is partly the cause of informality (which rapid population growth tends to intensify), it is unlikely that focusing only on improving formal governance capability and/or the formalisation of the informal sector will lead to the outright removal of informality. Rather, the informal sector is likely to remain an important part of the city for as long as the informal relationship through which powerful groups provide incentives to their clients thrives. This entrenched patron–client relationship maintained by political elites often obstructs access by formal institutions targeting the informal sector for reform. Moreover, the personalisation of institutions remains a challenge for the work of ACRC domain teams, as effective working relationships between central and local government structures can be lost, just as non-functioning ones can be drastically improved, depending on the individuals involved.

With the central government seemingly set on reasserting its control over the management of Freetown, even a change of leadership at the city level is unlikely to alter its political settlement. Prospects for collective action are weak, as rights-based organisations representing the interests of vulnerable and marginalised persons, as well as other CBOs that lobby and advocate for transformative change, are still fairly unassertive. The challenge is to get willing actors to actively take part in reform coalitions to bring about transformative change, drawing attention to the factionalism in governance, the failure to fully devolve functions, the poor service delivery and the specific forms of corruption that generate instability and hinder collective actions towards solving development challenges in the city.

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The African Cities Research Consortium is funded by UK International Development. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.