

Industry and market trends freetown

ACRC has published a new report examining the politics, systems and key urban development domains in Freetown, Sierra Leone. It highlights how national, city and domain-level power and politics interact and the implications for solving intractable development challenges in Freetown.

Freetown accounts for 15% of Sierra Leone's total population and 35% of its entire urban population, generating 30% of the country's GDP. It remains by far the country's largest city and serves as its main economic and administrative hub.

The city'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.

Authored by Joseph M Macarthy, Kars de Bruijne, Felix Marco Conteh, Jamie Hitchen, Braima Koroma and Francis Reffell, with contributions from in-city domain, political settlements and city system researchers, the report 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.

A key challenge to Freetown City Council's authority is that successive national governments have worked to reassert control over the running of the city, despite 2004's decentralisation framework, which gives direct responsibility to local councils for some devolved functions. This power imbalance between the centre and the city, which devolution efforts have exacerbated, is among the major obstacles to urban reform in Freetown.

Ten core systems were selected and analysed in Freetown, most functioning at the interface between formality and informality - which sometimes create a dichotomy in the way services are provided and distributed within the city.

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.

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).

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. 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, 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.

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 health, wellbeing and nutrition indicators, including reduced stunting, child mortality and maternal mortality rates.

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. 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.

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