

# Mayors Dialogue on Growth and Solidarity

## City profile: Freetown, Sierra Leone



**Population:** 1,055,964 (2015)

**GDP per capita:** \$1,079 (2018)

**Major industries:** retail and wholesale trade, services

**Percentage of migrants:** 2.2% (2015)

**Mayor's name:** Yvonne Aki-Sawyer | **Next election date:** 2024

### Socioeconomic profile

Freetown is the capital and largest city in Sierra Leone. It is in the west of the country and is a major port city located on the Atlantic Ocean. The city is home to 1,055,964 individuals (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2016) and has expanded rapidly, experiencing a tenfold growth over the past 50 years (World Bank, 2019a). The city's high population growth rate (exceeding 3% annually since 1985) (ibid.) has been driven largely by migration, both internal displacement (during and following the 1991–2002 civil war) and employment-driven rural-to-urban migration. Although the urban area of Freetown has also exploded (almost doubling from 35.9 km<sup>2</sup> to over 65 km<sup>2</sup>) over the same period, population density remains high at 8,450 people/km<sup>2</sup> (ibid.). The city's rapid urbanisation has been characterised by 'leapfrog development, i.e. construction on unbuilt plots not bordering existing development' (World Bank, 2019b) and the creation of many informal settlements. Since most of Freetown's urban growth occurred during the civil war period, much of the city lacks crucial infrastructure such as roads and sanitation. Moreover, the historical lack of centralised urban planning has left certain areas highly vulnerable to natural hazards including floods and landslides (World Bank, 2018a).

Freetown is Sierra Leone's economic nerve centre, accounting for 30% of the country's GDP (World Bank, 2018b). Home to the country's only sea/airport, the city acts as a clearing house for major products sourced elsewhere in Sierra Leone (including agricultural products and diamonds). Per capita GDP in Freetown is estimated at around \$1,079, almost double the national average.<sup>1</sup> The poverty rate in greater Freetown was recorded as 22.8% in 2018, significantly lower than the national average (56.8%) and the rates experienced

in other Sierra Leonean cities (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2019). Although the city is extremely youthful (59% of residents are between 18 and 34), labour force participation is fairly low as only 59% of the active age population is economically active (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017a). Of those who are employed, approximately three-quarters have jobs in the informal economy while the remaining 25% hold formal, paid employment. Small-scale informal businesses – including wholesale/retail trade and other services such as finance, transport and hospitality – comprise the bulk of Freetown's economic activity (World Bank, 2018a). The city's urban sprawl is also evident in that only 4% of land near the city centre is used for commercial or industrial purposes (World Bank, 2018b).

### Migration profile

Half of Freetown's residents were born outside the city, most in another region of Sierra Leone (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017b). In 2015 Freetown, was home to 22,966 international immigrants, out of a total 58,053 enumerated in the census, meaning around 2.2% of the population of the city were international immigrants at that time.<sup>2</sup> At the country level, over half of these international migrants were Sierra Leoneans born abroad, followed by immigrants from neighboring countries (Guinea 28.7%; Liberia 4.3% and Nigeria 3.5%) (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017b). In part due to the regional movement framework for Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) states, Sierra Leonean immigration authorities have allowed nationals of these countries to remain, even though they generally do not hold the required stay and work permits (ICMPD, 2015). Deportations and expulsions are also rare. Although Sierra Leone historically hosted large numbers of Liberian refugees, the current refugee

<sup>1</sup> Based on author's own calculations. GDP figures are taken from World Bank database ([www.data.worldbank.org](http://www.data.worldbank.org)). The GDP figure for 2018 (\$4.085 bn) is used. The per capita figure for the city is calculated using the 30% benchmark contribution and the population figure estimate for 2018 (1,136,000). See Nations Online ([https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/capitals\\_africa.htm](https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/capitals_africa.htm)).

<sup>2</sup> The figures for international immigrants in Freetown and for Sierra Leone are taken from the 2015 Census. The percentage migrant population is calculated over Freetown's 2015 population. See Statistics Sierra Leone (2017b).

population is less than 1,000 (European Commission Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography, 2019). Information on socioeconomic, integration and employment trends for migrants is extremely limited. Interviews in 2015 with immigration officials estimated that around 3,000 foreigners held an official work permit; most of these individuals were employed in the mining sector. This suggests that most international immigrants to Sierra Leone are informally employed (ICMPD, 2015).

## Governance structure

The Freetown City Council, established in 1893, is one of the oldest municipal governments in Africa. The city has three administrative regions, which are further divided into 47 wards. Each council member represents a ward and – along with the mayor – are directly elected every four years (World Bank, 2018a). Currently, every member of the council is an All People's Congress representative; the main opposition party (Sierra Leone People's Party) did not win any seats in the 2018 election. The city council recently developed the Transform

Freetown Strategy for 2019–2022 in consultation with multi-stakeholder groups including representatives from civil society, non-governmental organisations, the private sector and the national government. It lays out 11 priority sectors in four clusters: resilience (focus on environmental management, urban planning and housing, and revenue mobilisation); human development (focus on education, skills development, job creation focused on tourism and disabilities); healthy city (focus on health, water and sanitation); and urban mobility (Freetown City Council, 2019).

On average, between 2013 and 2017, 80.3% of local council expenditure was funded by national government transfers (World Bank, 2019a). The Freetown City Council's financial situation impedes the necessary urban investments, with most of the city's budget going to staff salaries and maintenance costs, leaving little for infrastructure investment (World Bank, 2019b). The Council's regulatory authority is also limited, as national-level ministries still control most urban planning and land management functions (World Bank, 2019b).

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