



# Sierra Leone

Environment, Conflict and  
Peacebuilding Assessment

Technical Report



UNEP

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*The Sierra Leone Environment, Conflict and Peacebuilding Assessment was completed as part of UNEP's Environmental Cooperation for Peacebuilding project, which offers technical assistance to Member States and the UN system to sustainably manage natural resources and the environment in ways that contribute to peacebuilding, conflict prevention and transboundary cooperation. Like other UNEP post-conflict assessments, this document is intended to provide practical analysis and recommendations to the Government of Sierra Leone, the UN and international community, and partner organizations regarding natural resources, peace and development.*

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*Cover photo: © UNEP – As a result of displacement during the conflict and population growth, slash-and-burn techniques have been used in Sierra Leone, risking conflict over land access and ownership*

*UNEP wishes to acknowledge the photo contributions of authors Richard Matthew and Renard Sexton*

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

In Sierra Leone, the environmental causes and consequences of war have been prominent for the past 20 years. Inequitable benefits-sharing of natural resource wealth was one of the drivers in the civil war that ravaged the country from 1991 to 2002. Diamonds and other minerals were used to fund combatants, and also became the spoils of war. In the post-conflict era, the environmental impacts of the conflict and continued unsustainable natural resource management have presented challenges to development and peace consolidation that persist today.

In recognition of their critical value, the Government of Sierra Leone has included environment and natural resources as key peace and development priorities, most importantly in the government's "Agenda for Change" (Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper II). Accordingly, in 2009 the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was asked to provide technical assistance to the United Nations (UN) Country Team in order to bolster UN assistance to the government on the subject. Specifically, UNEP was requested to contribute to the "UN Joint Vision", which outlines the UN support of the Agenda for Change and activities further to Sierra Leone's status as a Peacebuilding Commission agenda country.

Three UNEP field missions were undertaken in 2009, including a main two-week field mission in May during which the assessment team visited ten of Sierra Leone's 13 districts and conducted over 80 interviews with stakeholders from the national government, local government, civil society, international organizations, UN agencies, local communities and international development partners.

In summary, this assessment found that the civil war had significant impacts on the basic environmental resources of the country, namely water and agricultural land, and did major damage to institutional capacity. In addition, many of the risk factors for conflict that existed in the 1980s and 1990s have not been adequately addressed, most prominently in the environment and natural resources sector.

However, if reformed and managed effectively, natural resources and environment can play a vital peacebuilding and development role in Sierra Leone, building the foundation for sustainable jobs and economic growth.

Ahead of the 2012 presidential election, significant care must be taken to ensure that natural resources and the environment do not lead to renewed instability and conflict. Whether issue-specific and localized or connected to national political issues, it will be vital for the Government of Sierra Leone as well as the international community to take the risks seriously as well as to capitalize on the opportunities.

## Key findings

### Environmental impacts of the civil war

The official cessation of hostilities in 2002 brought to a close a period of intense damage to the environment and natural resources in Sierra Leone. The war caused or aggravated many acute environmental problems through a combination of direct, indirect and institutional impacts.

**1. Direct environmental impacts remain:** Though the conflict in Sierra Leone ended nearly a decade ago, many of the direct environmental impacts of the conflict have not been addressed. Still apparent is the damage to water infrastructure and agricultural infrastructure in rural areas, as well as the impacts of maintenance neglect. In many parts of the country, basic services are not available, raising questions about the government's ability to provide public services to a growing population and undermining its credibility with rural communities.

**2. Environmental governance in shambles:** An even more worrisome trend is that environmental and natural resource governance at the institutional level in Sierra Leone has effectively ground to a halt. Arable land degradation, land grabs, and the widespread and unsustainable use of natural resources have occurred across the country. In the extractives sector, instability brought concessionary

agreements and contracts negotiated in “back-rooms” that provided few benefits to the people and did not consider long-term sustainability.

**3. Lack of institutional capacity and conflicting mandates:** The Sierra Leone Environmental Protection Agency (SLEPA) and the Division of Forestry (DoF) in the Ministry of Agriculture, as well as district and city councils, are currently not able to administer or plan resource usage, in part because of poor coordination, a lack of data and unclear institutional mandates. The segmented land tenure and resource management system in the provinces has created confusion and encouraged overuse, as paramount chiefs, national ministries, local councils and communities struggle to control ownership and access to resources ranging from forests, water and mining resources to commercial and subsistence agricultural land.

**4. Unsustainable coping strategies from displacement have become institutionalized:** The civil war also precipitated a large number of indirect impacts, many of which persist to this day. The most visible is a result of the large-scale displacement of up to half the population that took place, both internally within Sierra Leone and over the borders, as refugees flooded into Guinea and Liberia. The coping mechanisms of displaced populations were understandably survival-based and, as such, have resulted in highly unsustainable forest, agriculture and mining practices.

## Risks to the peacebuilding process

Despite the many positive signs of a country recovering and rebuilding after a decade of war, Sierra Leone remains a fragile state, with many conditions in the environment and natural resources sector that resemble, or are worse than, the circumstances that led up to the fighting. Compounded by massive unemployment among young men, severe poverty, regional instability and a worrisome proliferation of drug trafficking, the natural resource-linked risks for renewed instability or conflict are significant.

**1. Considerable unmet expectations from natural resources:** In particular, there is a tremendous gap in the expectations between the population and government as to the productive potential of the agricultural and mineral sectors. Unrealistic expectations risk creating a sense of unease among a

population that expects immediate development payoffs and feed a perception of an underperforming or corrupt system. Climate change and population pressures both threaten to exacerbate this problem, particularly in the agriculture sector.

**2. Low transparency and accountability:** Sierra Leone continues to lack transparency and accountability in natural resource allocation and land-use decisions. For example, with conflicts of interest endemic in the resource sector and wide discretion available to paramount chiefs and government officials, corruption can become the norm, with no robust systems in place to ensure transparency and accountability. Not only does a lack of transparency and accountability feed perceptions of collusion and corruption, but it also creates opportunities whereby natural resources revenues can be channelled into illegal and illicit activities.

**3. Poor benefits-sharing:** Across the natural resources sector, poor sharing of the benefits of Sierra Leone’s natural wealth is a major risk for long-term peace and development. With highly unequal distribution of income in the country, particularly with regard to high-value natural resources, significant changes are needed to break the systemic channels of influence and income. This may be further amplified with the recent discovery of oil off the coast.

**4. Increasing local-level violence over natural resources:** While reforms to the sector have been promised, such as land reform and minerals sector renegotiation, they have been criticized for their perceived insufficiency, lack of equitable benefit-sharing and low transparency. The perception has been aired among some in the mining communities that the only way to publicize their grievances is through public protest and potential acts of violence. This view was bolstered by the December 2007 riots in Kono where the violence quickly drew the attention of the government and international community and resulted in proposed policy change.

## Opportunities for cooperation and peacebuilding

Sierra Leone’s economy is almost entirely dependent on its natural resource endowment, with most employment in the country linked to environment and natural resources. If harnessed in a sustainable, transparent and equitable fashion, environment

and natural resources can play a more effective role in confidence-building, job creation and peacebuilding.

**1. Making sustainable livelihoods a development priority:** Sustainable livelihoods, where individuals and communities are able to develop diversified, environmentally sustainable economic activities, must be the target of development. Otherwise, the younger generation will continue to fall into cycles of temporary employment, internal migration and the draw of “gambler-spirit” mineral extraction. As part of this effort, community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), through targeted capacity-building of city and district councils and the local paramount chiefs, can become the norm.

**2. Improving participation and consultation:** One of the most pronounced grievances in relation to the environment and natural resources is a lack of genuine participation and consultation with communities. Communities often see decisions made in Freetown and by some local authorities as poorly designed, inequitable and not well planned to meet local needs, in some cases bolstering the impression of collusion and corruption. The consultative process in decision-making for environmental and natural resource management issues is an opportunity to build confidence and trust between authorities and local communities simply by inclusion in the process. Improved trust in public functions is one of the most fundamental parts of the peacebuilding process.

**3. Improved environmental governance capacity at the national and local levels:** The nascent institutional framework for the environment and natural resources created by the Environmental Protection Agency Act offers unique opportunities to build capacity and institutional knowledge in the new SLEPA. Momentum on forest reforms provides an opening to assist the DoF in the Ministry of Agriculture in building the forestry department’s capacity and designing a new forest policy. At the same time, the reforms that have been ongoing in the minerals sector offer a parallel opportunity for capacity-building and the coordination of institutional roles regarding mines and minerals.

**4. Joint management and planning of water, forest and agricultural resources:** In the meantime, with the current fragmentation of environmental and

natural resource management in Sierra Leone, there is a unique opportunity for joint management by communities. More specifically, since communities are jointly reliant on resources such as water and forests, they provide an opportunity for communities to come together and cooperate on issues of planning, allocation and development. Joint management also provides opportunities to inform government and others about regional or area-specific situations.

## Recommendations to stakeholders

The need to reform and strengthen environmental management is widely understood in the country, and efforts have been made to improve the sector. For example, environment and natural resources have been included in almost every peacebuilding and development document since the end of the civil war. In addition, renegotiations of mining contracts have been undertaken by the President’s office, recent reforms of the national mining law have been made by the Parliament and efforts continue to become compliant with resource certification methods such as the Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative.

However, the reforms thus far have not been able to address the more fundamental problems of the sector such as the chaotic land tenure situation, benefits-sharing from natural resources wealth, low capacity of environmental authorities and poor data quality. This has included insufficient financial resources and capacity to implement what otherwise would be good political support for the sector.

Therefore, for stakeholders inside and outside Sierra Leone, UNEP recommends several priorities to ensure that natural resources contribute in a positive way to the achievement of the Joint Vision and Agenda for Change.

UNEP’s 16 recommendations are organized by their intended outcome into four sections, which roughly correspond with the priorities of the Agenda for Change and the UN Joint Vision: participatory sector reform, improved natural resource management capacity, improved environmental infrastructure and services, and sustainable livelihoods.

In order to implement these recommendations, a joint programme of UNEP, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been included within the UN Joint Vision for Sierra Leone called Programme 21: Environmental Cooperation for Peacebuilding.

## Participatory Sector Reform

**1. Respond to institutional failures regarding resource ownership and access:** Across the environment and natural resources sector, there is considerable tension regarding land tenure, benefits-sharing and decision-making that needs to be addressed through transparent dialogue and dispute-resolution processes. At the policy level, new rules are needed that put into practice the principles of sustainability and benefits-sharing.

**2. Conduct a comprehensive land reform programme:** A highly consultative and participatory land tenure reform process is needed, where equity and conflict resolution are carefully addressed.

**3. Develop transparent and participatory benefits-sharing mechanisms for all natural resources:** A clarified process for benefits-sharing that is consultative and transparent is needed between natural resources sectors, including commercial agriculture, forestry and mining.

**4. Continue structural reforms in the extractives sector:** Environmental sustainability and rehabilitation, benefits-sharing and robust consultation must be built into the ongoing renegotiations of the mining concessions, the implementation of the new mining law, the emerging oil sector, and the ongoing land tenure reform.

**5. Utilize natural resources as platforms for dialogue and confidence-building:** A systematic process that includes dialogue and confidence-building between the national government, civil society, local communities and the private sector on issues of natural resource management should be established.

**6. Incorporate considerations for equity, gender and community consultation into all programmes and projects:** In all programmes, capacity-building and reforms of the environment and natural resources sector, a consultative, collaborative and coordi-

nated approach will be vital to the peace and development process.

## Improved natural resource management capacity

**7. Develop the capacity of SLEPA to fulfil its responsibilities:** Given SLEPA's wide mandate but relatively low capacity, significant capacity-building of the institution is needed. In particular, basic operational modalities must be put in place, regulations and rules enacted to concretize the principles set out in law, and SLEPA must be able to play its coordinating and convening role in the sector.

**8. Harmonize environmental regulations between national authorities:** The environmental regulations and policies of the many responsible government agencies must be mutually supportive through close coordination – including monitoring and data collection, consultation and review, and the use of comparative advantage to maximize the effectiveness of limited resources and capacity.

**9. Undertake a wider climate change vulnerability assessment based on the National Adaptation Plan for Action:** Given the projected impacts of climate change on Sierra Leone for food security, the medium- and long-term risks of climate change should play an important role in 10–15-year planning processes, piloted by a comprehensive vulnerability assessment that considers regional variability in resources, capacity and resource reliance.

**10. Build capacity for environmental management in rural government:** Improved capacity for district ministry offices, district and city councils and other local managers to play an important role in resource allocation and planning will help to build trust between levels of government, and improve rural integration in decision-making.

**11. Fill the major information gaps concerning natural resources, including baseline data:** A systematic natural resource inventory is needed, with assurances that data collection is transparent and the resulting inventory is made available to all stakeholders.

**12. Develop a strategy for integrated water management:** Given the very close connection between forest cover, rainfall, groundwater resources and





Women washing clothes in a stream outside Freetown. Insufficient liquid waste infrastructure threatens water security for the people of Sierra Leone

the fact that many of Sierra Leone's urban areas are located in sensitive watersheds, a district-level integrated water resource management plan is needed in most districts of Sierra Leone.

### Improved environmental infrastructure and services

13. Provide support for recovery and reconstruction for basic environmental infrastructure and services

Koidu, Bo and Kenema have severe, long-running waste management problems, some of which are a result of the conflict, but mostly due to unplanned population growth and urbanization.

### Sustainable livelihoods

15. Assist rural populations to scale down unsustainable coping strategies: Coping strategies in the water and forest sectors are the most concerning at

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