

Sierra Leone



Sierra Leone's Flag

Overview

Sierra Leone, or "Lion Mountains," is located on the western coast of Africa and borders Guinea, Liberia, and the Atlantic Ocean. The terrain is a mix of plains, hills, swamps, mountains, and plateaus. The climate is tropical from May to December when rainfalls can reach 195 inches. From December to April conditions are very dry and windy.

Though English is the official language of Sierra Leone, its use is limited to the literate minority. Other languages spoken include Mende, Temne, and Krio—an English-based Creole used by descendants of Jamaican slaves who settled in the Freetown area. As many as 20 native tribal groups comprise 90 percent of the country's population. The rest are Creole and small numbers of Europeans, Lebanese, Pakistanis, and Indians.

The Bulom people, followed by the Mende, Temne, and Fulani groups, are believed to be the first inhabitants of Sierra Leone. The region began capturing the interest of Europeans in 1495 when the Portuguese built a fort on the current site of Freetown, the country's capital city. Used primarily as a location for trade, Freetown was ceded to English settlers in 1787 as a home for blacks discharged from the British armed forces as well as runaway slaves who had found asylum in London. In the late 1800s, Great Britain became the dominant force, declaring the area a crown colony and using it as a seat for governing its West Africa possessions. Sierra Leone gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1961 and became a republic on April 19, 1971. The current government, headed by President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, is categorized as a constitutional democracy.

Sierra Leone's natural resources include diamonds, titanium, bauxite, iron, and gold. Manufacturing is limited, and mining for anything but diamonds is nearly nonexistent. With their high value on both the open and illegal markets, diamond sales and smuggling provide the major source of hard currency. As governments, international agencies, and diamond merchants work to curtail illegal mining and sales—and the accompanying violence—it is hoped that a viable economy will evolve.

Nearly two-thirds of Sierra Leoneans engage in subsistence farming. Agricultural products include rice, cassava, coffee, cocoa, palm oil, peanuts, poultry, cattle, sheep, pigs, and fish. However, deforestation, overgrazing of livestock, and slash-and-burn agricultural are all practices contributing to poor food production and limited economic benefits.



Country Statistics

Population	6.0 million
Land mass	27,699 sq. miles
People per square mile	217
Life expectancy	42.5 years
Literacy rate	31%
Under age 5 mortality rate	284/1,000
Access to safe water	57%
Average annual income	US\$500

Religion in Sierra Leone

Muslim	60%
Indigenous	30%
Christian	10%

One of the world's poorest countries, the majority of Sierra Leoneans earn less than a dollar a day. There are few opportunities for employment or to start a small business as economic and social systems are not well-developed. Health also is of primary concern in Sierra Leone. According to the United Nations, Sierra Leone has the world's highest infant mortality rate. Cases of Lassa fever, diarrhea, respiratory problems, malaria, skin diseases, and malnutrition are occurring at alarming, life-threatening levels. In addition, HIV/AIDS has begun to take a toll on the lives of many Sierra Leoneans. There are nearly 170,000 people living with HIV/AIDS and 42,000 children have been orphaned by the disease.



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The civil war between the government and the Revolutionary United Front in the 1990s, which stemmed from economic and ethnic conflicts, caused the deaths of tens of thousands of victims and the displacement of more than 2 million people in Sierra Leone. The conflict was declared officially over in 2002, leaving thousands of people and countless children tortured and maimed. Since then, the government of Sierra Leone has slowly begun reestablishing its authority. However, the gradual withdrawal of UN peacekeepers by 2005, deteriorating political and economic conditions in Guinea, and the tenuous security situation in Liberia all present challenges to the continuation of Sierra Leone's stability.

The fate of Sierra Leone's economy depends on the maintenance of domestic peace and the continued receipt of substantial foreign aid. It is estimated that US\$3.5 billion will be needed to rebuild the country's infrastructure.

World Vision's History in Sierra Leone

World Vision's initial involvement in Sierra Leone took place in 1978 with a one-time grant to improve rice production in the northern region. World Vision returned to Sierra Leone in 1996 with the launch of its Emergency Relief Project to provide food, shelter, and health care to internally displaced people living in various camps, as a result of the war. Within the first year, war-affected families in the Bo, Bonthe, Pujehun, and Kono districts were receiving assistance. Emphasis was placed on solving problems associated with food distribution systems, the resettlement of displaced people, and the provision of seeds and tools. Health and nutritional services also were provided.

As fighting and emergency aid projects continued throughout parts of Sierra Leone, World Vision began to establish longer term development programs in more stable areas of the country. Projects included improving agriculture, health, child protection, commodities, and transition initiatives for community members.

In 2001 World Vision was the first international aid agency to return to the rebel-held eastern district of Kono since violence forced staff to leave in 1998. Projects responded to returning refugees and displaced people who were in need of food, shelter, health care, and agricultural assistance. Specifically, the Sierra Leone Agricultural Emergency Project provided 3,000 resettling families in the Kono district with rice and vegetable seeds, hoes, and machetes. World Vision also sent agricultural agents to offer technical information and to encourage formation of farmer groups to revive the food production systems, to help start a community seed

bank, and to work on long-term solutions to area development and food security. Other U.S. Government-funded projects included emergency health, youth training of 83,000 war affected youth and food aid.

Since 2002 the people of Sierra Leone have been attempting to recover from a decade-long civil war, five changes of head of state, three coups, and three failed attempts at peace. These years of conflict and displacement have perilously undermined food stocks, the ability to produce crops, and the majority of all health and social services.

World Vision in Sierra Leone Today

World Vision's efforts in Sierra Leone focus on establishing long-term benefits to families in need. Through holistic training, World Vision staff are able to help people recognize a need for and create lasting change within their communities. These efforts include projects focusing on the following:

- Agriculture—provides materials and technical assistance for increased production and market share for area farmers.
- Health care—reestablishes health clinics, distributes medicine, trains traditional birth attendants, and repairs fresh water wells to ensure a source of safe water.
- Community Development—several 15-year Area Development Programs have begun through child sponsorship funded by WV with a focus on community self-reliance.
- HIV/AIDS prevention—helps prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS by providing education and promoting community awareness regarding the causes of the virus.
- Skills training—offers education and skills training to girls and young women traumatized and brutalized by the war so that they will be able to find employment or start their own small business.
- Peace building—communities learn the civil society skills that will help them to build tomorrow's democracy.

World Vision continues to be highly committed to working alongside the people of Sierra Leone to help them achieve their needs for today and the dreams they hold for the future of their children and communities. For more information about World Vision's programs in Sierra Leone, please contact the United States office.

World Vision is a Christian relief and development organization dedicated to helping children and their communities worldwide reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty.