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Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Sierra Leone at 60

Dietz, A.J.; Ehrhardt, D.W.L.; Veldkamp, F.

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## Sierra Leone at 60

### Political history

1960 was the 'Year of Africa': many former colonies in Africa became politically independent. One year later,

Sierra Leone was the next in line: on 27 April 1961 it gained political independence from the United Kingdom (see Figure 1 for a post-independence political timeline).

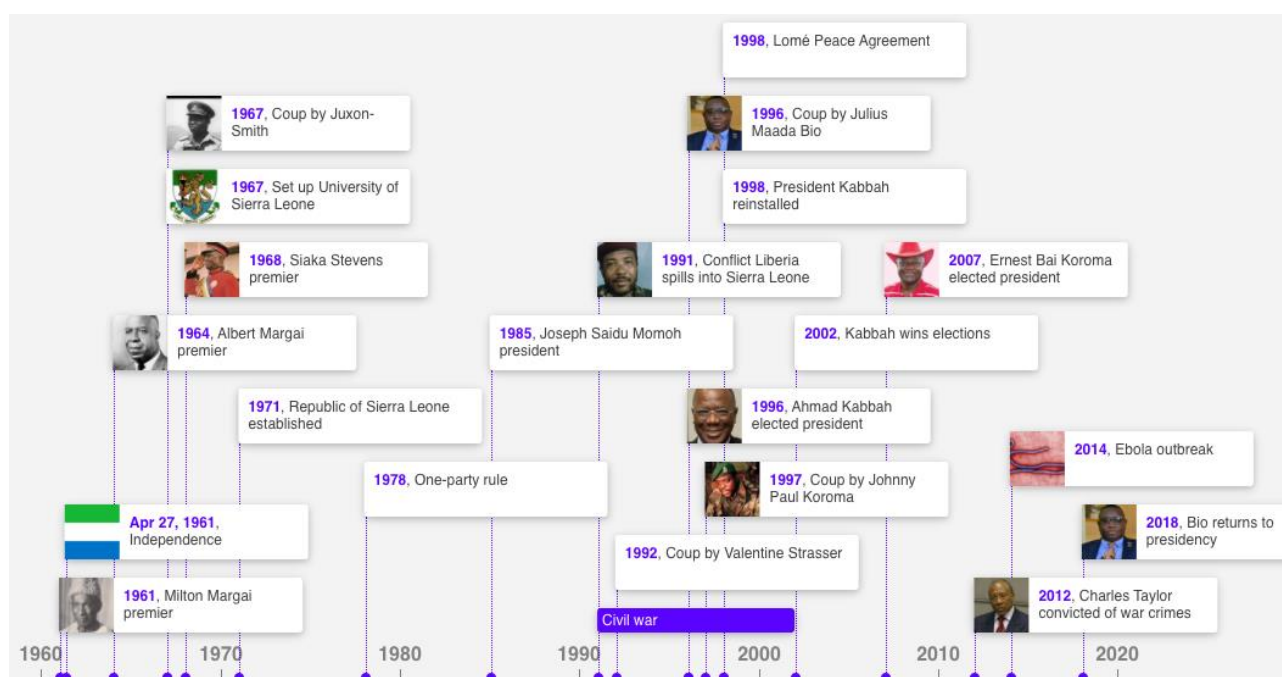


Figure 1: Political timeline of Sierra Leone since independence (source: Encyclopaedia Britannica)

After a decade of gradual institutional reform, Sierra Leone became an independent state within the Commonwealth in April 1961. Sir Milton Margai, elected as government leader in 1951, became its first Prime Minister and was, after his death, succeeded by his brother Albert in 1964. The first years of independence, like in many other African countries, were good, as resource income was devoted to investments in development, including infrastructure and education. The 1967 elections proved a turning point, however, as Siaka Stevens' government was quickly ousted by a military coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Juxon-Smith. His government would remain for just over a year, after which Siaka Stevens was called back and parliamentary democracy was restored. Stevens oversaw Sierra Leone's transition to a republic, in 1971, and a one-party state in 1978; he was its Executive President until 1985. During this time the country's economy, however, plummeted; corruption became increasingly problematic, and political

instability grew. Joseph Saidu Momoh, Steven's successor, did not change much in this regard.

The spill-over of Liberia's civil war into Sierra Leone in 1991 was a major turning point in the country's history. The Liberian rebel group National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), under Charles Taylor, was joined by the Revolutionary United Front, led by the Sierra Leonian Foday Sankoh. Together, they engaged the Sierra Leonian government in a decade-long civil war in which control over blood diamonds was a central strategic objective, and notoriously gruesome tactics became commonplace. Politically, these were also unstable years, with military rule under Valentine Strasser, Johnny Paul Koroma, and Julius Maada Bio, and only a short democratic period in 1996-1997 under Ahmad Tejan Kabbah.

After the end of the civil war, in 2002, Kabbah returned to the presidency; his first years in office featured the introduction of a Truth and Reconciliation Committee, a war crimes tribunal, and economic recovery with

extensive international support. Subsequent elections were relatively free and peaceful, seeing Ernest Bai Koroma win twice (in 2007 and 2012) followed by a return to power from Julius Maada Bio in 2018. In 2014, however, the Ebola epidemic hit the country heavily: by its end in 2016, 14000 people had been infected and at least 4000 killed.

**Conflict, state fragility, and travel risks**

Since the end of the Ebola crisis, however, Sierra Leone’s lot has improved, and it is not very high on the ‘security risk’ indices. Before the COVID-19 crisis, in December 2019, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs put the country in the yellow zone (mild risks). [Currently, June 2021, and since March 2020, all ‘danger zoning’ has been disturbed by the global COVID-19 crisis]. In earlier periods, during the time of the civil war, and again during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 that hit Sierra Leone, neighbouring Liberia and Guinea, the country had been in the ‘red zone’.

The State Fragility Index of the Fund for Peace puts Sierra Leone in the ‘high warning range’, with 86.8 points

(most negative score would be 120.0 points; for Africa, ‘high warning’ is a relatively problematic category, eighth of eleven) (<https://fundforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/9511904-fragilestatesindex.pdf>).

However, when the index started in 2005, Sierra Leone was in the ‘alert’ category, one step worse, and it was in the top-10 of ‘most fragile states’. During the last few years the situation has improved.

The index consists of twelve variables, and Sierra Leone has relatively good scores for its security apparatus (not a high chance of military coup d’états), for human rights and the maintenance of the rule of law, and for group grievances, meaning that ethnic or religious divisions are not being regarded as major threats to stability. Sierra Leone has relatively problematic scores for the quality of its public services, for ‘economic decline’ and for ‘demographic pressure’, but also for uneven development and for ‘human flight and brain drain’ (all scores between 8 and 9 on a 10-point scale, which means ‘high warning’).



Source of the map: <https://geology.com/world/sierra-leone-satellite-image.shtml>

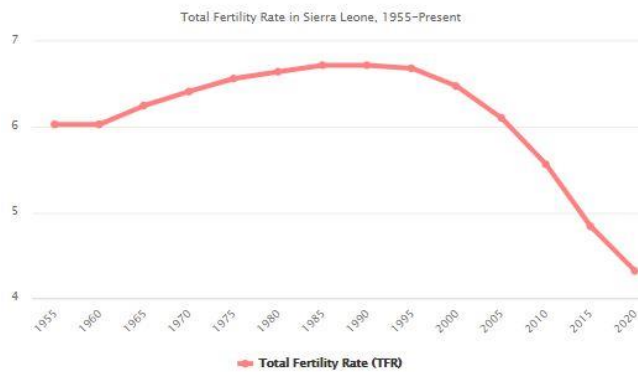
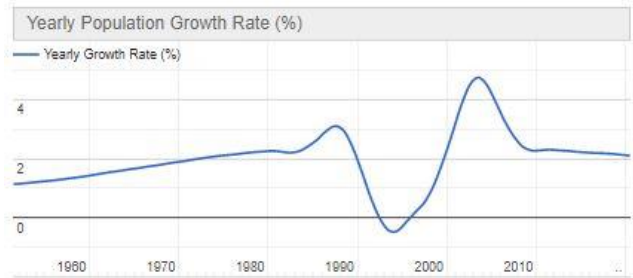
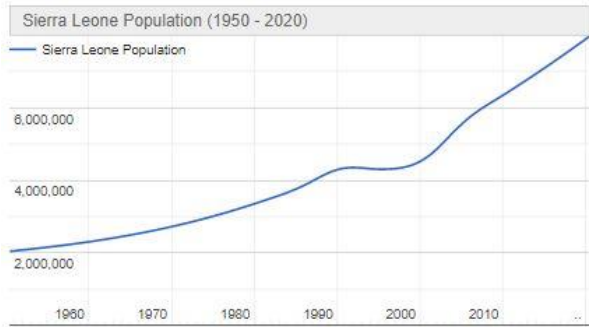
**Demography**

Sierra Leone’s population increased more than threefold between 1960 and 2020, from 2.3 million in 1960 to 8.0 million in mid 2020, mostly through high fertility rates and longer life expectancy for both males and females (also

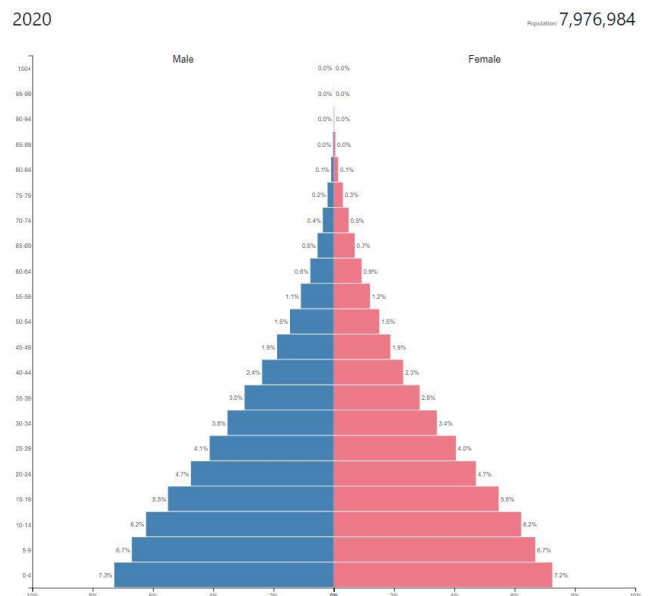
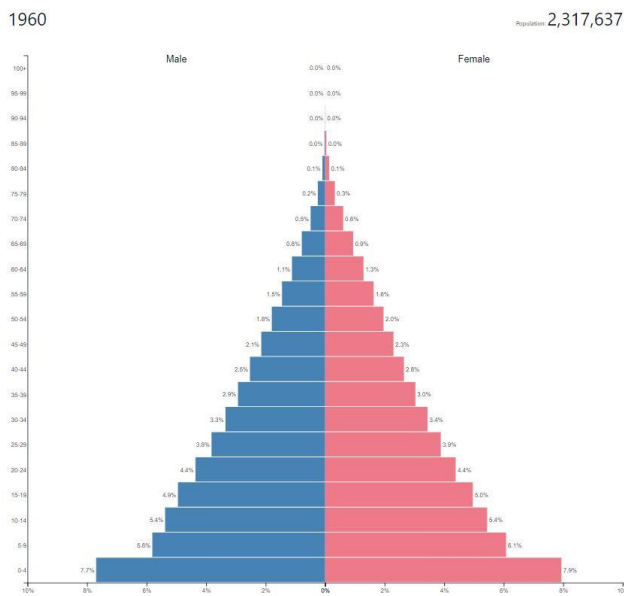
because of rapidly improving child and infant mortality figures). After 1972, population growth figures have always been higher than 2.0%, with the exception of the troubled period between 1989 and 2000. In the years 1992-1995 there was even a period of population decline as a result of

the civil war, the killing of people and refugee migration to other countries. In 1987 and during the recovery years between 2001 and 2006 population growth figures have been higher than 3% per year. Currently, the average growth rate is around 2.1 percent per year. Total fertility was around 6.0 live-born children per woman in 1960; it first increased to 6.7 between 1985 and 1990, and then started to diminish relatively fast, with currently 4.3 births per average woman in Sierra Leone during her lifetime. As a result of these demographic developments Sierra Leone has a skewed population pyramid, with more young people than adults and elderly people. The median age changed from 21.0 years

old in 1960, to 17.7 years old in 1995-2000, and currently 19.4 years old. Urbanisation is on the increase, and the urbanisation rate has reached 43% in 2020. Sierra Leone always had and still has one of the worst health records of the world, with very high (although improving) infant and child mortality figures. It is also one of the poorest countries on earth if one looks at the income levels of the large majority of the population and at the human development index (see later). This is in stark contrast to its natural wealth, with tropical forests, rich sea waters and immense mineral deposits.



Source: Worldometers



Source: <https://www.populationpyramid.net/sierra-leone/>

**Demographic statistics, Sierra Leone as a whole, 1960 and 2020**

	1960	2020
Population	2.3 million	8.0 million
Fertility rate	6.0	4.3
Life expectancy (males)	31	55
Idem (females)	34	57
Median age	21.0	19.4
Infant mortality (< 1 yr)	216/1000	70/1000
Under-5 mortality	379/1000	96/1000
Urbanisation rate	17%	43%
Urban population	0.4 million	3.5 million
Rural population	1.9 million	4.5 million

Source: Worldometers

**Human Development Index, Sierra Leone as a whole, 1990 and 2019**

Human Development Index data exist since 1990, with annual UNDP updates. In 1990, Sierra Leone's Human Development Index started at a level of 0.287, very low for African standards. The HDI consists of a health index, an income index and an education index, while UNDP also provides data about life expectancy, and some other indicators. For Sierra Leone the various components of the HDI mostly show gradual improvements after 2000, after a period of crisis in the 1990s: the HDI as a whole reached its lowest point in 1992, the health index in 1995, and the

income index in 1999. Only the education index showed steady improvements during the period as a whole, but at relatively low levels. The HDI as a whole increased to 0.452 in 2019, which can be attributed to improvements in all components: health, education and standard of living (but particularly education, and hardly in income) and can also be seen in the data for life expectancy. Average income levels per capita (in US\$ of 2011, PPP) show slow improvements between 1990 and 2018 (except during the Ebola crisis in 2014-2015), to current average levels that were and are very low for West African standards, despite Sierra Leone's natural and mineral wealth.

**Sierra Leone: Human Development Index, its composition, and other indicators; data for 1990 and 2019**

	1990	2019	2019/1990
Health Index	0.286	0.534	1.87
Income Index	0.434	0.425	0.98
GNI/capita*	1114 \$	1381\$	1.24
Education Index	0.189	0.407	2.15
Mean years of schooling	1.6	3.7	2.31
Expected years of schooling	4.9	10.2	2.08
Life Expectancy	39 years	55 years	1.41
Total HDI index	0.287	0.452	1.57

Source: <https://globaldatalab.org> 5.0; \* GNI/capita in US \$ of 2011, PPP, figures from version 4.0

**Trade statistics, Sierra Leone: exports and imports, 2019**

In 2019 Sierra Leone exported products for a total value of \$ 697 million, and imported for a total value of \$ 1.160 billion (mostly from China, India, the USA, Ghana, Turkey, the UK and the Netherlands, in that order), resulting in a

major negative trade balance. Leading import products were rice, plastics, packaged medicaments, sauces and seasonings, and cars, in that order. In 2018 Sierra Leone imported services at a value of \$ 404 million (and it exported services for \$ 116 million).

**The most important export products and most important export destination in 2019 were:**

Main export products (value in \$ million)		Main export destinations (value in \$ million)	
Titanium ore	194	Belgium	180
Rough wood	116	China	177
Diamonds	113	Romania	65
Aluminium ore	74	UAE	42
Cocoa beans	33	Germany	38
Fish	27	Netherlands	36

Source: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/sle/>

If we compare Gross Domestic Product, exports and imports, and if we use Macrotrends data for the average of the two-year period of 2018-2019 (for exports and

imports these differ from OEC data), we get the following picture for Sierra Leone:

1.6 b\$	3.4 b\$	0.7 b\$
Imports	Home use	Exports
	Gross Domestic Product (4.1 b\$)	

Sources: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SLE/sierra-leone/gdp-gross-domestic-product>,  
<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SLE/sierra-leone/exports>,  
<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SLE/sierra-leone/imports>

Export values were and are very volatile. Between Independence in 1961 and the end of the civil war in 2002 export values fluctuated between \$ 60 million (in 1986, the lowest point), and \$ 110 million (in 2002, the highest point), from a starting point of \$ 100 million in 1960. After 2002 export values increased dramatically: to \$ 480 million in 2011 and even \$ 1.54 billion in 2015. After that peak level exports went down to \$ 820 million in 2015 and \$ 660 million in 2019.

### Protected areas and Forests

Sierra Leone currently has 50 protected areas, a total of 0.7 million ha (9% of its land area). 86,000 hectares are marine protected areas<sup>1</sup>. There are six national parks, two game sanctuaries, five game reserves, 52 forest reserves (4 without hunting allowed), ten strict nature reserves, and one RAMSAR wetland<sup>2</sup>. Sierra Leone has 8.5 million hectares of forests, 44% of its total land area). Mongabay writes about Sierra Leone's forest situation: 'Sierra Leone has substantial mineral reserves, but still depends much on slash-and-burn cultivation for agriculture. Logging, clearing for cattle grazing, fuelwood collection, and mining have produced a dramatic drop in forest cover in Sierra Leone since the 1980s. Until 2002, Sierra Leone lacked a

forest management system due to a brutal civil war that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and the displacement of more than 2 million people (about one-third of the population). On paper, 55 protected areas covered 4.5 percent of Sierra Leone as of 2003. The country has 2,090 known species of higher plants, 147 mammals, 626 birds, 67 reptiles, 35 amphibians, and 99 fish species. In June 2005, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and Bird-life International agreed to support a conservation-sustainable development project in the Gola Forest in southeastern Sierra Leone, the most important surviving fragment of rainforest in Sierra Leone. Deforestation rates have increased 7.3 percent since the end of the civil war<sup>3</sup>. Other areas are mainly 'other wooded land', and areas for agriculture, livestock, hunting and gathering. Sierra Leone is in the tropical rainforest zone, but during the last 200 years it has lost 97% of its primary rainforest cover<sup>4</sup>.

### Agricultural Sierra Leone

Crop area (in 1000 hectares), and total production (in 1000 tonnes), 1961 and 2019, in the order of the crop areas in 2019:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.protectedplanet.net/country/SLE>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.parks.it/world/SL/Eindex.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://rainforests.mongabay.com/20sierraleone.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.parks.it/world/SL/Eindex.html>



## ASCL Infosheet 51/2021

	1961		2019		2019/1961	
	Area	Prod.	Area	Prod.	Area	Prod.
Rice (paddy)	283	264	602	948	2.1	3.6
Cassava	20	56	346	4589	17.3	81.9
Vegetables	77	188	197	484	2.6	2.6
Sorghum	8	12	54	50	6.8	4.2
Groundnuts	19	22	44	106	2.3	4.8
Millet	8	12	36	38	4.5	3.2
Oil palm fruits	31	250	34	257	1.1	1.0
Kola nuts	0	5	29	9	+++	1.8
Maize and other cereals	18	9	27	50	1.5	5.6
Fruits	?	40	27	138	?	3.5
Cocoa beans	6	3	24	15	4.0	5.0
Sweet potatoes	3	9	19	179	6.3	19.9
Coffee green	8	5	9	19	1.1	3.8
Plantains	4	15	8	47	2.0	3.1
Coconuts	1	2	5	5	5.0	2.5
Taro/cocoyam	10	25	1	3	0.1	0.1
Sugarcane and other crops	0	1	1	81	...	81.0
Total (area)	496		1463		2.9	

2019/1961: **red** = 2019 is below 1961; **green**: 2019 is more than 3.3 times the 1961 figures (that is: more than population increase in Sierra Leone from 2.4 million to 7.8 million between 1961 and 2019); **black**: in-between. Source: Faostat data.

Sierra Leone's land area is 7.2 million hectares, and its crop area increased from 7% to 20% of its land area between 1961 and 2019. The country's most important crop was and still is rice, and although its production area only doubled during these almost sixty years, total rice paddy production increased faster than population growth, as a result of yield increases. However, import of rice has always remained necessary. Many other crops also increased faster than population growth, and that is particularly true for staple crops cassava, sweet potatoes and sorghum, both in area and in volumes. Only the traditional crop taro (cocoyams) almost disappeared, and oil palm fruits stagnated. Sierra Leone has never been a

major export crop producer (its export economy is and was much more based on mineral wealth), but groundnuts, cocoa and coffee play a minor role, as well as fish.

The numbers of all live animals, measured in stock units, expanded much more rapidly than Sierra Leone's population: 590% compared with 330%. Per capita the numbers of live animals in the country increased from 0.06 livestock units per capita in 1961 to 0.15 livestock units per capita. The best growth performance can be seen for pigs, chickens, and goats; the growth of the number of cattle lagged behind.

### Livestock numbers (x 1000)

	1961	2019	2019/1961
Cattle	220	584	2.7
Chicken	1900	23729	12.5
Goats	80	796	10.0
Horses	..	443	+++
Pigs	10	251	25.1
Sheep	150	972	6.5
Livestock units	197	1158	5.9

Source: Faostat data; 1 livestock unit = based on 0.7 cattle/horses; 0.1 goats/sheep/pigs; 0.01 chicken.

### International migration

In 2019, 187,000 people who were born in Sierra Leone lived outside the country (2.3% of Sierra Leone's total population of 8.2 million people inside and outside the country during that year), of which 57,000 million elsewhere in Africa (many of them in Liberia, Senegal and Guinea), and 130,000 outside Africa (1.6% of Sierra Leone's total population: most of them in the USA and the

UK; UN migration report 2019). In 2019 Sierra Leone had around 55,000 immigrants, mainly from Guinea and Liberia. Sierra Leone's migration statistics reflect the turmoil of the country and its immediate environment: in 1990 outmigration was quite modest (only 62,000, of which 42,000 to other African destinations, mostly neighbouring countries). Immigration was high: 222,000 persons, and mostly from troubled Guinea (130,000

immigrants) and Liberia (74,000 immigrants). At the height of the civil war in Sierra Leone itself, in 2000, immigration had dropped to 98,000 (71,000 from Guinea and only 11,000 from Liberia), but outmigration had become very high: 509,000 people, of which 458,000 to other African countries. This would mean that around 2000 10% of the Sierra Leonean population had fled from the country. After the end of the civil war many came back from the neighbouring countries, but those who had gone to the USA or the UK mostly stayed there, although many of them still maintain emotional and supportive relationships with family and friends back home.

**Urban Sierra Leone**

The majority of Sierra Leone’s population still lives in rural areas, but urbanisation is increasing. Sierra Leone’s urban population increased from 400,000 people in 1960 (17% of its national population at Independence) to 3.5 million in 2020 (43%). Growth has been rapid for all cities. Freetown, the capital city, is by far the biggest urban conglomeration, but currently two (or four, depending on the source one uses) other cities also have more than 100,000 inhabitants: Bo and Kenema (as well as Koidu and Makeni, according to one source).



<https://cdn.britannica.com/s:690x388,c:crop/80/5080-050-94EB5392/Sierra-Leone-boundaries-map-cities-locator.jpg>

**Major urban areas in Sierra Leone**

Cities	Population in thousands of inhabitants			
	Early periods	Population census 2015 (wikipedia)	Macrotrends 2020	Worldometers, city, as given in 2021
Freetown	1960: 119	1056	1236	803
Bo	?	174	-	174
Kenema	1974: 31	200	-	143
Koidu	?	125	-	-
Makeni	2004: 85	125	-	-

Sources: Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_cities\\_in\\_Sierra\\_Leone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_in_Sierra_Leone) based on population census 2015; according to [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bo,\\_Sierra\\_Leone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bo,_Sierra_Leone), Bo had a population of 234,000 in 2017 (estimate) and 149,000 in 2004 (census). From 1930 tot 1961 Bo was the capital of the Protectorate of Sierra Leone. Kenema 1974: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenema>; Koidu only became a city after 1995, the start of large-scale diamond mining (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koidu>). Makeni: <https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makeni>  
 Worldometers: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/sierra-leone-population/> Macrotrends Freetown 1960 and 2021: <https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/22445/freetown/population>



## Regional Inequality in Sierra Leone

Map	Region / Région		Population x 1000		'18/'90
			1990	2018	
<p>1 - Western Area Urban 2 - Western Area Rural</p>	1	Bo	380	660	1.74
	2	Bombali	390	640	1.64
	3	Bonthe	160	200	1.25
	4	Kallahun	210	490	2.33
	5	Kambia	340	350	1.03
	6	Kenema	320	750	2.34
	7	Koinadugu	280	410	1.46
	8	Kono	270	510	1.89
	9	Moyamba	150	350	2.33
	10	Port Loko	460	680	1.48
	11	Pujehun	180	300	1.67
	12	Tonkolili	410	510	1.24
	13	Western Rural	170	570	3.35
	14	Western Urban	600	1240	2.07
Total Sierra Leone			4320	7650	1.77

Source: <https://globaldatalab.org> 4.0

Map: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d9/Sierra\\_Leone\\_Districts.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d9/Sierra_Leone_Districts.png)

Sierra Leone has 14 Regions. Between 1990 and 2018 all regions experienced population growth, but the highest growth happened in Western Rural, the outskirts of capital city Freetown. On the other hand, Kambia, in the northwest, hardly experienced any population growth. If we look at the regional data for human development, which for Sierra Leone exist since 1990, we see that across the board improvements have taken place between 1990 and 2018, and for education these improvements have been considerable, but they come from an extremely low basis in 1990. The best conditions for all variables and for both 1990 and 2018 could be found in the capital city, Freetown ('Western Urban'), except for life expectancy, for which the conditions were relatively best in Kambia in both years (and in 1990 also in Bombali and Kallahun, and in 2018 in Bo).

For SHDI, income levels and life expectancy, in 1990 the worst conditions could be found in Koinadugu in the

northeastern part of the country, and for education levels the worst conditions could be found in Pujahun in the southeastern part of the country in 1990 (these worst positions were shared with Tonkolili in central Sierra Leone for life expectancy and income levels, in western rural also for life expectancy and in Moyambu in the west also for income levels). Between 1990 and 2018 there was quite a shift in the positions of worst regions. In 2018 the worst overall conditions could be found in Pujahun, near Liberia, the worst life expectancy situations in western rural, the worst education results in Koinadugu and the worst income levels in Tonkolili. Between 1990 and 2018 regional inequality in Sierra Leone became less extreme for the index as a whole and for education in particular. However, regional differences increased for life expectancy, and for average income per capita.

## ASCL Infosheet 51/2021

Region	Subregional HDI			Life expectancy			Education index			K\$/capita		
	1990	2018	18/90	1990	2018	18/90	1990	2018	18/90	1990	2018	18/90
1	267	476	1.8	38	62	1.6	195	429	2.2	1.1	1.3	1.2
2	282	428	1.5	41	53	1.3	204	399	2.0	1.0	1.3	1.3
3	236	394	1.7	38	59	1.6	146	290	2.0	0.9	1.0	1.1
4	258	397	1.5	41	52	1.3	163	364	2.2	0.8	1.0	1.2
5	246	409	1.7	41	62	1.5	133	300	2.3	1.0	1.1	1.1
6	265	430	1.6	40	53	1.3	175	356	2.0	1.0	1.3	1.3
7	204	373	1.8	36	55	1.5	105	279	2.7	0.8	1.0	1.2
8	258	407	1.6	39	53	1.4	181	370	2.0	0.9	1.1	1.2
9	239	384	1.6	39	57	1.5	150	291	1.9	0.8	0.9	1.2
10	258	415	1.6	40	54	1.4	162	363	2.2	0.9	1.2	1.3
11	209	371	1.8	39	52	1.3	97	301	3.1	0.9	1.0	1.1
12	225	379	1.7	36	55	1.5	142	310	2.2	0.8	0.8	1.0
13	289	463	1.6	36	51	1.4	229	473	2.1	1.6	1.9	1.1
14	374	533	1.4	40	54	1.4	341	568	1.7	2.6	3.1	1.2
Sierra Leone	270	439	1.6	39	54	1.4	190	403	2.1	1.1	1.4	1.2
Ineq	1.83	1.44		1.14	1.22		3.52	2.04		3.25	3.89	

HDI and education figures / 1000; life expectancy: years; k\$/capita: 1000 US \$ (2011), PPP (comparisons between the years on the basis of more detailed figures).

If we compare 2018 with 1990, the education situation has improved considerably, with the fastest improvements in the worst region, Pujehun, and the slowest improvements in the best region, Freetown/Western Urban. The same is true for SHDI as a whole (although here the fastest improvements could also be noticed for Bo and Koinadugu). For life expectancy, the biggest improvements took place in Bo and Bonthe, and the slowest improvements in Bombali, Kallahun and Pujahun. For income per capita, the fastest improvements took place in Kenema and in Port Loko, and the slowest improvements (in fact: stagnation) could be noticed in Tonkolili.

If we connect the information about the mineral exploitation areas with the data about average poverty, the situation looks pretty grim: the Titanium mines can be found in the Southern Region (Bonthe and Moyamba districts), and commercial diamond mining mainly in the Eastern Region (mainly in Kono district). Aluminium mines can mainly be found along the Coast, from Freetown to

Pujehun. Iron ore (important between 2011 and 2015, and catching up again) can be found in Tonkolili. In these districts average incomes per capita (measured in PPP, so adjusted to purchasing power) were and still are around \$ 1,000 per annum: it is obvious that the people living in these mining districts hardly profit from the mineral wealth in their living environments and (for many) ancestral areas.

Data about regional inequality do not say anything about income inequality between the rich and the poor (let alone wealth inequality). Sierra Leone's situation for income inequality first improved from a Gini coefficient of 40.2 in 2003 to a level of 34.0 in 2011. Afterwards it became less equal; to a level of 35.7 in 2018. For Africa these are relatively modest figures

(<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=SL>). Most probably this indicates that most (mineral) wealth leaves the country, and only very few local people seem to profit from this wealth.

### Further Reading

Country Portal:

<http://countryportal.ascleiden.nl/sierra-leone>

Sierra Leone's education situation, focus on higher education:

<https://www.africaknows.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Sierra-Leone-Knowledge-Institutions-final-draft.pdf>

Country Information: Ton Dietz, David Ehrhardt and Fenneken Veldkamp

Country Portal: Harro Westra

*African Studies Centre Leiden, July 2021*



Reflecting on  
60 years  
of independence

