

## EDITORIAL: THE SIERRA LEONE I WANT TO SEE

### INTRODUCTION

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1961, Sierra Leone attained self-rule and became a sovereign State. As we reflect on 63 years of self-rule, it becomes absolutely clear, that the hopes and aspirations of the people that accompanied self-rule have not been realized. Sierra Leone has not prospered as was expected neither do the people live a better life. Instead, the country has moved in a reverse direction with a small elite enjoying and living affluent lives from ill-gotten gains and corrupt dealings. This has been going on over and over for the past 63 year regardless of the political outfit or party that has governed the country. The elite does not care about the people. They have organized themselves into two tribal alliances masquerading as political parties. The elites of the south-eastern tribes have mainly formed themselves into the SLPP party while the north-westerners into the APC party. These parties have become the instruments of access to national resources. Whatever party finds themselves in power control and loot national resources, leaving the masses and youth in desperate squalor. Young Sierra Leoneans these days graduate from universities and join these parties with the sole aim of having access to the national cake through political appointments and contracts and enriching themselves. The result is that Sierra Leone has sunk into an unrecognizable abyss of poverty and underdevelopment even by third world standards. In the next few parts of this piece, we will first, lament on the current state of affairs; second, taking an individual lens, we will reflect on the Sierra Leone that we want to see; and third, conclude with a call to action.

### A SYNOPSIS OF THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

Cataloguing the current state of Sierra Leone does not require a long narrative as citizens are more than familiar with the state of decay. Endemic poverty has resulted from corruption and kleptocracy. The state of poverty has totally eroded the moral fibre of the society. 57% of the population lives below US\$1.25 a day. The ordinary Sierra Leonean see their politicians and public servants living affluent lives and conclude that if those at the top live by theft, so can they. The young think that a life of theft and dishonesty is a smart way of life. According to the recent census estimates, 45.8% of the population of Sierra Leone is approximately under the age of 15, and 74.8% below the age of 35. Employment-generation, especially among youth, the majority of whom are unemployed or underemployed with low levels of literacy, remains a major challenge. Youth unemployment has been an historic grievance and conflict driver. The literacy rate of 2021 was 47.70%, very low for a country that had established formal schools since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first modern university in sub-Saharan Africa which was established in 1827. Recent efforts by the government to introduce free quality education was badly conceptualised and implemented, lacks finance and is not sustainable.

Low agricultural production contributes toward 43% of Sierra Leoneans being categorized as food insecure, (Food Security Monitoring System, WFP and MAF) whilst poor dietary diversity results in

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one third (31.3%) of children being chronically malnourished (SMART Nutrition survey, UNICEF and MOHS). Overall inequality continues to increase. For every 100,000 live births, 970 women die from pregnancy related causes.

Finally, the country, and particularly its capital Freetown, remains vulnerable to disasters. Floods account for 85% of disaster-related mortality in the country, followed by landslides, storms and fire accidents (Sierra Leone Country Climate Action Reports).

The Sierra Leone political landscape has been dominated by two political forces, the APC and SLPP, with corridors of military rule. However, these political parties have appropriated the governance space and converted it into a looting shed, colluding with multi-nationals especially in the mining industry, signing bad contracts for kickbacks that go into their private pockets.

Government officials remain unaccountable for budgetary allocations and the Auditor General and her deputy were recently suspended and subjected to a sham tribunal for questioning illegitimate and unsubstantiated spending by the president during frequent and unnecessary official trips abroad.

### **THE SIERRA LEONE I WANT TO SEE**

The Sierra Leone I want to see is written in the first person to individualise the aspirations of all citizens. All Sierra Leoneans are called upon to visit the Grassroots Initiatives (GI) website and add their voice to the Sierra Leone they want to see in the comments section and state how they want it to happen. This should be the new narrative for all Sierra Leoneans. Whenever you see a public official, tell them about the Sierra Leone you want to see. Talk about this in schools, churches, mosques, universities, offices, market places and in the media.

I want to see a Sierra Leone where equal opportunities are afforded to all, especially the youth. A Sierra Leone where the youth are provided with sound education and skills training that enable them to be self-employed rather than depend on kush and other drugs.

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Sierra Leone needs a political system where the judiciary and parliament are independent from the executive. A parliament that is not a rubber stamp institution that is subjected to brown envelopes. A judiciary that does not accept bribes and can limit and overturn unlawful and constitutional executive action through judicial review. In other words, a judiciary that can say to the president – “No! you are wrong,” without any repercussions. We need strong institutions that are responsive and answerable to the concerns of the public. An independent electoral commission that does not take instructions from the executive but able to organise transparent and credible elections, and to see the end of corruption. Elections must represent the will of the people and their votes must be respected. Harnessing national resources requires stemming

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corruption and ensuring that no sacred cows means just that! By stemming corruption, national funds will be available to pay liveable salaries and provide public services.

I want to see Sierra Leone transformed into a middle income country in a space of 10 years. I want to see a Sierra Leone where those who are corrupt and embezzle public funds are sent to PRISON! Sierra Leone is not a poor country and does not need to rely on donor aid. Every Sierra Leonean should be able to live a respectable life and be able to afford their basic necessities if the resources of the country are managed honestly.

I want to see a Sierra Leone where the rights of citizens are respected. Freedom of speech, expression and the right to protest as critical. The executive must refrain from colluding with the police and from silencing and subjugating citizens who disagree with government.

I want to see a Sierra Leone where the health care system is properly equipped and the doctors and nurses well trained and properly remunerated to provide first call medical services in every part of the country right down to the chiefdom and village level.

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Sierra Leoneans need to travel to Ghana and Senegal for basic medical health care services or face preventable death. Why should this be happening? The majority who cannot afford the trip face certain death. Is this acceptable? Moreover, I want to see a Sierra Leone that can produce 24 hours electricity for its people, safe drinking water for the majority and the capacity to manage garbage and dispose of its waste efficiently.

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## CALL TO ACTION

Sierra Leoneans! Over the past 63 years we have had 6 elected leaders and a military leader who was in power for a reasonable period. They all came with lofty promises but failed to deliver. They start off with short-lived high sounding flagship projects that go nowhere and soon start looting public resources. Must we allow this to continue? Our APC and SLPP politicians and their small elite of looters stay in power by manipulating tribesmen in the villages to vote for them, telling them that the other side is a threat to their existence.

Things need to change. It's time to educate the masses. These parties belong to small tribal elites who dish out crumbs of handouts to them and fool them that these are their parties. This hegemony needs to change. Temne man, Limba man, APC is not your party. Mende man, Sherbro man, SLPP is not your party. Do not be fooled. These parties belong to small tribal elitist enclaves who are manipulating you. The system needs to change. The grassroots need to forge out their own path. I want to see a Sierra Leone where truly patriotic leaders are elected. We need to relegate the current APC/SLPP led system to the dustbin of history and birth a new and revolutionary

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grassroots and people-led system where leaders are not all-powerful emperors but listen to the people or be recalled. 2028 is just round the corner. We cannot continue like this. **LET'S TAKE OUR COUNTRY BACK!**

If you support this message, go to Grassroots Initiatives web page on <https://grassrootsinitiatives-sl.org/> and make a comment regarding the Sierra Leone you want to see and how this should be achieved.

