

Erin Dorpinghaus
Central High School
DeWitt, IA
Sierra Leone, Factor 13

Sierra Leone: On the Road to Recovery

From 1991 to 2002, a civil war raged across Sierra Leone. Tens of thousands were killed; land, crops, roads, and homes were destroyed; and human suffering was widespread. The war affected the whole country. Now, more than two-thirds of the population live in poverty. Agriculture, which makes up between 40 and 50 percent of the country's GDP, needs to improve to save Sierra Leone. Although the country has already recovered some, much more reconstruction has to be done to bring the country out of its hunger situation. Sierra Leone was ranked fifth from the bottom of countries of the Global Hunger Index and was the last country in the Human Development Index in 2008. Sierra Leone has the land and natural resources to succeed in agriculture, but it lacks the physical infrastructure, the social infrastructure, and the organization to use the resources. It also lacks the technology to optimize those resources. With one fourth of the rural population living in hunger, a change needs to be made so farmers can supply their families with food, along with being able to market their crops. With the return of refugees to their homes, the economy has improved some since the end of the war, but the country still relies on donations from outside donors. To continue to improve, Sierra Leone has to start becoming successful on its own. It can begin to succeed by helping its children. Over 40 percent of children under age five in Sierra Leone are chronically undernourished. This means it is possible these children will never fully develop their capabilities. Children, especially girls, do not receive the best schooling possible. Children are the future, and if the way of life in Sierra Leone is to improve, children must be given the chance to reach their potential and the chance to be educated the best they can be. Infrastructure is important to help these children and the rest of society. This paper will identify the problems caused by inadequate infrastructure in Sierra Leone and will identify potential solutions to improve infrastructure and solve these problems.

In Sierra Leone, on average families consist of about five children. Families often live with or near relatives, so grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins would most likely live close by each other. Most Sierra Leoneans living in the northern provinces of Sierra Leone are Temne. Most residents of southern Sierra Leone are Mende. Ninety-five percent of the population understand Krio, the language of the freed slaves who settled around Freetown in the late eighteenth century. English is the official language of Sierra Leone, but it is not commonly used. Islam is the major religion in Sierra Leone, with Christianity being the second most common. Most Sierra Leonean dishes contain meat, rice, and root vegetables (ex: cassava and sweet potatoes). Fish is also common, especially in the west, along the coast. Fruits such as bananas are available because of the tropical climate. The boys of a family typically go to school for eight years. Then, they would take over helping on the farm. Girls typically go to school for six years. Many girls marry and get pregnant at a young age. They are also expected to help on farms.

Education and health care are major components of the social infrastructure of a society. Schools in Sierra Leone have limited teachers for the amount of students. For example, one school has 425 students with only five teachers in three classrooms. There are no desks and few supplies. Lessons are often held outside where one teacher is assigned around 85 students. Children in rural areas often have a long walk to school, and are sometimes unable to go. Instead, they have to help their family. If it rains, school may have to be canceled because of the limited classroom space. Health care in Sierra Leone is controlled by the government. It provides immunizations for common diseases like polio, diphtheria, tetanus, and measles, but there is still a high risk of getting an infectious disease. Sierra Leone has the highest rate of maternal death in childbirth of any country in the world. Most people can not afford medicine or a visit to the doctor. The average life expectancy is 55 years old.

Two-thirds of the population are subsistence farmers. Rice, coffee, and cocoa are main crops. Tropical fruits, vegetables, and cassava are also commonly grown. Cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, and pigs are raised by farmers. A typical family would have a small plot of land to farm. They would not have the technology, manpower, or land to produce a large surplus of crops. They would have to travel far to reach a marketplace, and rural roads are in bad shape, so they would seldom make the journey. Improved crop varieties and chemical fertilizer would not be available to this family. They would have to make do with what they have or are naturally given. The typical farming family is too poor to do anything to solve the problems they have with farming, so little to no improvement is made. Many families were affected by the war, and are still recovering from tragedies that befell them. More women are taking charge of farming because so many men died in the war.

The civil war damaged the physical and social infrastructure of Sierra Leone. Fighting destroyed roads and made the use of them impossible. Now, there is insufficient access to food markets because of poor road conditions. Sierra Leone has 11,300 km (about 7,021 miles) of roads. Of these, only 904 kilometers (about 561 miles) are paved roads. The other 10,396 km (about 6,459 miles) are unpaved. That means 92 percent of the roads are unpaved. Only one of Sierra Leone's eight airports has a paved runway. Paved roads make transporting people, crops, and other products much easier. Social infrastructure was harmed during the war and before the war. The rapid change of government and government leaders both legally and corruptly, put a strain on the infrastructure. New methods were inserted with every new regime, and some were not for the better. The war destroyed people's trust in their neighbors and their communities. Efforts have been made to make Sierra Leone more peaceful, but the country still remains fragile.

Crop production makes up most of Sierra Leone's agriculture. Most Sierra Leonean farmers are subsistence farmers who struggle to provide enough food for just their families. Crop production could be improved with the use of new crop varieties that work well with Sierra Leonean soil, and the use of more advanced technology could help produce a higher quantity and quality of crop. Researchers working on these methods, trying to help small-scale farmers, have a hard time learning of farmers' issues. Research institutions do not have the funding for their researchers to be able to talk and visit with farmers, so the farmers' problems are not understood soon enough. The link between researchers and farmers is vital to making farming more productive. Lack of communication and inability of transportation weakens the link and reduces the progress that could be made to improve crop production. Researchers need a way to make research more accurate, more current, and easier to gather.

Farmers in rural areas cannot access markets easily. Markets are needed for families to sell their surplus crops and to trade and buy supplies and other products. Farmers in remote places may only be able to reach one market or no market at all. These farm families have to either pay high costs to transport their crops a long way to market or rely on traders that come to them. If they choose to transport their crops to market, many crop losses can occur. Roads are unpaved and in poor condition, making the journey a rough one. This plus the high transportation costs reduce profit. If farmers rely on traders to come to them, they also risk losing some or all of their crop. Traders cannot be depended on to arrive at a certain time. Long periods of time can go by without a family seeing a trader at all. During this time, perishable foods can go bad without proper storage facilities.

With no competition, purchasers can take advantage of rural farmers. The farmers do not have knowledge of current agricultural prices, and they have no other options, so they end up selling to a buyer for a lower price than their crops' value. No competition means small-scale farmers are forced to sell for unjust prices. Communication needs to improve in Sierra Leone. Researchers need to talk with rural farmers, and farmers need to access potential buyers. For communication to happen roads need to improve, so face-to-face meetings can take place. Telephones must become more common for more distant conversations to

be possible. If communication improves, farmers will be better equipped to face the market and arrange sales. They will also be able to talk with their buyers and form relationships with them.

If farmers do produce surplus crops, they need a way to store and export their harvest. Sierra Leone has undeveloped and inadequate methods for storing and exporting food. Handling techniques in general are poor. Storage facilities are inadequate and the transportation from farm, to storage facilities, to market is disastrous. Perishable crops, like vegetables, fruits, sweet potatoes, and cassavas, have huge losses in the transportation from farmer to market. Losses are often over 50 percent and are sometimes up to 100 percent. If more crops are grown and a better method for exporting crops is used, more jobs would be created and the economy would be greatly helped, but if crop production increases and the handling of grain and produce does not, farmers' incomes will not increase. A better exporting system is essential for the economy to improve, but there is much progress to be made. Currently, Sierra Leone is in the bottom twenty percent of worlds' exporters.

Health care and education must improve if the standard of living is to improve. Medicine is often unavailable, and most citizens cannot afford it anyway. The war destroyed most of the country's medical equipment and buildings. Hospitals are unsanitary and many health care workers, especially in rural areas, are untrained. Education was affected by the war as well. Over 12,000 schools were destroyed during the war. Now, schools are often overcrowded with students. This is not a good learning environment, and students do not get the attention from teachers they need.

Poor infrastructure deprives rural families of access to markets to trade, buy, and sell food and other basic goods. Families are forced to accept unfair prices because they have no other options. Inadequate handling techniques and facilities cause farmers to lose much of their harvest. Unpaved roads limit a family's ability to travel, separating them from the community. Remote rural families have no influence on ongoing research projects because the researchers cannot reach them to understand the challenges they are facing. Education and public health are important aspects in a society. Families need the best they can get. If the infrastructure in Sierra Leone was improved, rural families would find their life easier. They would earn more profit because more of their crops would reach the market. They would be able to grow their crops easier sooner because researchers would be at a more advanced stage in fixing farmers' problems. They would have better hope for the future because their children would get a better education and be able to improve things for themselves. The 38 percent of the population living in urban areas would also benefit from improved infrastructure. Urban people's cost of living would decline because more products would be available, education would improve, and more jobs would be created.

The civil war played a large role in bringing Sierra Leone deep into poverty. The trade in "blood diamonds" that occurred during the war continues to this day. This black market brings violence and corruption to Sierra Leone. The government is working to retain control of the industry and keep it legal because the diamond trade is still a major part of the economy. The civil war made it evident Sierra Leone needs a stable government. Currently, Sierra Leone has a constitutional democracy, with President Ernest Bai Koroma of the All People's Congress leading. The government needs a plan to get Sierra Leone out of poverty. Citizens of Sierra Leone need to help maintain a stable government, so war will not break out again. Citizens need to participate in elections and educate themselves about the issues. Rural and urban residents need to give their support to good leaders who will strengthen the democracy and promote fairness in elections and the government.

Most of the farmers in Sierra Leone are subsistence farmers. Even if a market is created and more opportunities are given to farmers to sell their crops, farmers still need to commercialize their farming, so they can create a surplus and profit. Agricultural technologies would help farmers with crop production. If farmers could use machinery, like tractors, they could commercialize their farming. Organizations provided Sierra Leone with some tractors, but they were only ten percent of the number of tractors Sierra

Leoneans needed. Also, the tractors required maintenance and gas that was unattainable for farmers. Before new technologies can increase crop production, farmers need to be educated in how to use them. New organizations must work with the farmers, so that changes can be made.

Farmers need knowledge of crops in demand. Because basic crops (rice, cocoa, etc) are declining in value, it would help farmers if they could specialize in less common crops. For example, the International Trade Centre (ITC) helped farmers in Sierra Leone develop ginger for export into the Indian oils market. In 2006, Sierra Leone exported four tons of ginger as a trial. The trial was a success, and in 2007, Sierra Leone exported eighty tons of dried ginger. This was the first export of ginger since before the war. This proves with knowledge of crop demand and a little assistance, Sierra Leone farmers can be successful international traders. Farmers also need market awareness and training, so they can barter and get the best price for their products.

Even if rural roads are paved, and roads everywhere are improved, they will eventually deteriorate. If infrastructure is to remain improved, the roads will have to be maintained, and a system must be established to ensure this. Major roads should be kept up by the government, but district councils should be responsible for all other roads. For district councils to do this, funding must be provided or must be earned. Other sections of infrastructure, like irrigation and storage facilities, must also be maintained. It would be helpful if rural farmers formed assemblies to make sure these stay in proper operating condition. This way, farmers are in charge of their own means of farming. Money from districts and chiefdoms will most likely still be needed to sustain the irrigation and storage facilities, but the farmers can make sure the maintenance is taken care of.

Communicating current market data and prices to farmers is a challenge. With only 13,900 Internet users (less than 0.5% of the population), the Internet is not an option. With a literacy rate of 35.1 percent, newspapers or any other written form would also not be the best choice. This leaves the radio. There are dozens of radio stations in Sierra Leone. Most of them are privately owned. The Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) is a new national public broadcaster. This would probably be the best option to generate news to all farmers. Unfortunately, unreliable power supplies and poor funding often affect radio stations in Sierra Leone. The government or outside organizations need to invest some money into the SLBC, so current crop and market information can reach rural farmers. Farmers need to be educated on how to use the information, and they need to realize the value of the information. If the farmers do not see how this knowledge can help them, they will not use it, so training and advertising must be provided.

Although a market with private sectors is better than a government controlled one, the government still needs to create policies and standards the marketplace must follow. The government needs to continue to invest in market research. Food standards should be made and enforced, so food to be exported internationally is marketable. Policies need to be made to protect farmers from exploitation by buyers. Also, the government needs to work with outside organizations to come up with a plan to improve rural roads and to improve communication methods between researchers, farmers, and purchasers. With its tropical climate and extensive beaches, government officials hope to increase tourism to stimulate the economy similar to Gambia, a neighboring country. The improving of infrastructure will help boost tourism as well as agriculture.

Outside research organizations need to allow their researchers to go out into rural areas, so they can know what farmers want and need to improve. If the government and other organizations work to improve the infrastructure, new, quality planting and harvesting material and equipment can be produced and distributed. To help livestock, veterinary clinics, research labs, and processing plants must be built. Supporting farmer associations through donations and education in market and rural finance would also be helpful. Organizations working with farmers to help produce specialized crops, like the International

Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) does, also helps improve Sierra Leone's agriculture and economy. World Food Programme (WFP) is helping Sierra Leone improve its social infrastructure through supporting its health services and education. This must be kept going and could use even more aid. WFP also helps link farmers with markets through their support and purchasing power. WFP has worked with the government and other organizations to reconstruct parts of Sierra Leone since the war. This upkeep is also a large and important role. If outside organizations work with each other and the government to help connect farmers to the market and help farmers create better products for the market, gradually, agriculture in Sierra Leone should improve, and poverty in Sierra Leone should decrease.

It is difficult to recover from an eleven year war. Sierra Leone has already made some progress. The population is steadily growing, the economy is gradually improving, and will, hopefully, continue to improve, but the lack of infrastructure remains a problem, as it is in many developing countries. Good infrastructure is key to a society's success. Road conditions, water sources, health, education, etc. all contribute to infrastructure. These components must be maintained for a community to function. To improve agriculture in Sierra Leone, farmers need to connect with the market. Infrastructure must be improved to allow this. Farmers must also be able to supply the market with a quality product. Researchers are working to provide farmers with the proper tools needed to help crop and livestock production. After the crop is harvested and the livestock is ready, farmers must transport their goods to a market. Sierra Leonean farmers lose a large percentage of their crops during this process. With the help of organizations and the initiative of some farmers, groups of farmers can upgrade storage facilities. This will cut back crop losses and lead to a higher crop surplus. The support of local farming groups and individual small-scale farmers is crucial to helping Sierra Leone recover. Emerging from a horrible conflict, Sierra Leone can rise to new heights if its rural farmers are given the help to succeed.

Works Cited

- "BBC News - Country Profile: Sierra Leone." *BBC News - Home*. 28 Jan. 2010. Web. 14 Aug. 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1061561.stm>.
- Beah, Ishmael. *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
- "Crop Issues." *Sierra Leone Alliance Against Hunger*. Apr. 2010. 31 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.slaahunger.org/>>.
- "ERADICATE EXTREME POVERTY AND HUNGER." *International Trade Forum Issue 4, P29-34*. EBSCO, 2007. 21 Sept. 2010.
- Healey, Christina. "Sierra Leone." *Our World: Sierra Leone (2010) MasterFILE Premier*. EBSCO, Web. 21 Sept. 2010.
- "MDG Sierra Leone Goal 1 - Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger." *UNDP Sierra Leone Country Office*. 31 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.sl.undp.org/Goal1.htm>>.
- "Promoting Market Access for the Rural Poor in Order to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals." *IFAD*. Feb. 2003. 26 Sept. 2010. <www.ifad.org/gbdocs/gc/26/e/markets.pdf>.
- Sheriff, Mohamed. *TRC Report*. A Senior Secondary School Version ed. St.Pauli, Hamburg, Germany: Druckerei, 2005. *TRC Report*. Truth and Reconciliation Working Group. 12 Aug. 2010. <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Text_book_Sierra_Leone.pdf>.
- The Sierra Leone Web*. 1996-2010. 12 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.sierra-leone.org/index.html>>.
- "Sierra Leone." *WFP | United Nations World Food Programme - Fighting Hunger Worldwide*. 14 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.wfp.org/countries/sierra-leone>>.