

[Introducing the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre: Connecting Urban Data and Policy](#)

By Joseph Macarthy

In his keynote address to the International Expert Group Meeting on Forced Eviction Dr. Joan Clos, Executive Director of UN-Habitat, noted that urbanisation is not simply about housing creation and slum prevention. Rather, urbanisation should be understood in much broader terms and consider the potential roles played by governments and policymakers in making cities more efficient, inclusive and equitable.

As in many parts of Africa, Sierra Leone faces a significant challenge in advancing the ‘urban’ in the country’s development agenda, owing mainly to the lack of relevant, evidence-based knowledge on the processes and trends influencing urban development. There is, therefore, a real need for the development of a policy framework to support urban centres in becoming engines of growth and providers of economic opportunities for inclusive development.

In a country where good quality data at the local level is very limited, a major challenge to the municipal government is how to design appropriate policies that reflect the needs of low-income and marginalised communities.

While there have been some initiatives to collect data at the local level with the involvement of residents — (examining living conditions, identifying needs, and evaluating interventions) — the scope of data collection and analysis systems as well as reporting mechanisms are limited to a few communities. Moreover, much of the data collected is fragmented, with a need for greater disaggregation to allow for a deeper understanding of the different factors shaping the urban environment

In the absence of a city wide and comparative framework for data collection and analysis — and without clearly defined stakeholders responsible for analysis, synthesis, and reporting — the data that does exist remains under-utilized. To bridge this gap, and in response to the need for evidence based research and policy development, the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre

(SLURC) was established in Freetown in 2015. SLURC was created through a partnership between the Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London, and the Institute of Geography and Development Studies, Njala University, with initial funding from Comic Relief.

The Centre's work is not only about knowledge co-production (and management) through grounding the data it generates with other kinds of data collected by community residents, NGOs and other agencies, but it is also about sharing and communicating this knowledge to policy makers and those working to improve urban living conditions. SLURC aims to build the research and analysis capacity of urban stakeholders in Sierra Leone through the development of a comprehensive information bank on the urban environment, which reflects a diverse set of attributes, from socio-economic heterogeneity and geographic variability, to socio-cultural conditions.