

SLURC

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Transforming Sierra Leone's Housing Landscape: A Bold Step Toward Affordability and Inclusivity

Joseph M. Macarthy

Housing is more than just a roof over one's head; it is a fundamental human right that underpins societal progress and individual dignity. The 2018 Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey highlights a significant housing deficit, especially in urban centres like Freetown, where overcrowding and inadequate basic services are widespread. Recognising the urgent need to address housing challenges, Sierra Leone is committed to creating a more inclusive, sustainable housing sector.

In March 2025, a pivotal three-day workshop held in Freetown brought together key stakeholders - including policymakers, researchers, housing professionals, NGOs, community leaders, and academics - to chart a strategic path forward. Organised by the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), UN-Habitat, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Country Planning (MLHCP), this gathering aimed to develop actionable solutions for closing the housing gap and rectifying systemic inequalities.



Stakeholder engagement exercise Photo Credit: Umar Buckus

The workshop opened with a keynote address by the Minister of Lands, Housing, and Country Planning, Dr Turad Senesie, who emphasized housing's vital role in ensuring human dignity and economic stability. He highlighted critical issues such as unplanned settlements, land disputes, and systemic injustices that leave many without secure shelter or access to essential services.

Participants explored barriers such as regulatory challenges, financial constraints, and limited land access. They emphasised the need for comprehensive policies that promote land security, equitable access, and resilient building practices. A core focus was ensuring marginalised groups - including women, youth, persons with disabilities, and residents of informal settlements, are actively involved in decision-making processes.

Strategic recommendations included establishing legal protections against forced evictions, developing affordable financing options such as low-interest mortgages, and leveraging local building materials to reduce costs. The importance of public-private partnerships, capacity building for local authorities, and community-led planning was also underscored.

Innovative approaches such as climate-resilient housing and proximity to employment hubs are seen as essential for long-term resilience. Strengthening land policies to support informal settlements and ensuring transparent, participatory land governance are critical steps toward securing land rights for vulnerable populations.

Throughout the workshop, a shared commitment emerged: affordable, secure, and resilient housing is a right everyone deserves. Participants outlined a roadmap that integrates social, economic, and environmental considerations into housing policies. The UN-Habitat representative reaffirmed his organisation's dedication to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 11 - making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable - and pledged ongoing support to Sierra Leone's housing initiatives.

This collective effort underscores a fundamental truth: achieving safe, affordable, and resilient housing requires unwavering commitment, cross-sector collaboration, and policies rooted in equity and sustainability. The spirit of cooperation over these three days signals hope - through innovative solutions and concerted action, Sierra Leone can bridge its housing gap and ensure dignity and opportunity for all its citizens.

Building Inclusive Cities: Overcoming Barriers and Promoting Disability Inclusion through Global Action

Braima Koroma

Creating inclusive cities that prioritise the needs and rights of all individuals, including those with disabilities, is crucial for urban development. As urban populations grow, ensuring accessibility and equality becomes not just a moral imperative but also critical for sustainable development.

The Disability Innovation Summit: Inclusive Interactions, held at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in East London on September 13th and 14th, 2023, marked a significant milestone in promoting global action to build inclusive cities. The summit brought together 20 research partners and representatives from city and national governments across six research cities: Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; Nairobi, Kenya; Solo, Indonesia; Freetown, Sierra Leone; Medellín, Colombia; and Varanasi, India. Participants engaged in collaborative workshops to validate research findings, share experiences, and build consensus on actionable steps for enhancing disability inclusion.

This summit underscored the importance of recognising people with disabilities as active agents of inclusive urban development rather than passive recipients of aid. For example, Medellín's initiatives highlighted how inclusive public transportation designs—such as tactile paving, audio-visual announcements, and wheelchair-accessible metro stations—have improved mobility for over 15,000 individuals with disabilities annually, fostering a 30% increase in community participation in employment and education programs. Similarly, Nairobi showcased its pilot program for affordable, disability-friendly housing units, which reduced barriers to independent living for 500 families.

The summit also emphasised the need for comprehensive data collection to inform decision-making. In Varanasi, partnerships with local disability organisations led to the creation of a city-wide accessibility audit, identifying gaps in 40% of public infrastructure. This data-driven approach enabled targeted upgrades, such as retrofitting 200 heritage sites with ramps and Braille signage.

Key outcomes of the summit included the development of a Global Disability Inclusion Charter, outlining commitments from local governments and stakeholders to prioritise inclusive policies. Additionally, proposals for micro-financing instruments, such as low-interest loans for entrepreneurs with disabilities in Solo, Indonesia, and a Global Inclusion Index to track progress on metrics like accessible public spaces and employment equity, were introduced. These tools aim to provide tangible benchmarks for cities pursuing inclusion goals.

At the World Urban Forum (WUF) in Cairo, Egypt, in November 2024, the inclusive infrastructure framework developed in response to the summit was presented. This initiative continues to frame people with disabilities as active agents of urban development and offers comprehensive guidance aligned with WUF 12's ambitions. It directly addresses Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11.3 by providing critical data to support inclusive urban planning, such as mapping accessible transit routes in Freetown and Ulaanbaatar.

Looking ahead, cities must adopt a holistic approach that tackles existing barriers while integrating essential elements for inclusion. Achieving this requires not only policy changes but also grassroots efforts where community members collaborate to identify local challenges and solutions. For instance, in Solo, youth-led disability advocacy groups partnered with city planners to co-design parks with sensory gardens and wheelchair-friendly pathways.

By leveraging data-driven policies, promoting participation from individuals with disabilities, engaging the private sector (e.g., tech firms in Medellín developing navigation apps for visually impaired users), and fostering global cooperation, cities can dismantle obstacles and create urban spaces that celebrate diversity and empower all residents.

It is imperative for all stakeholders, policymakers, urban planners, community organisations, and citizens, to commit to ensuring that inclusive cities become the standard. Together, we can create an environment where no one is left behind, paving the way for equitable urban development that respects the rights and dignity of every individual.

<https://www.disabilityinnovation.com/publications>
<https://at2030.org/publications>

Uncovering the True Cost of Sand Mining in Sierra Leone's Western Area Peninsula

Ansumana Tarawally & Dora Vangahun

Sand mining has become a critical sustainability issue globally. The surge in demand, driven by construction and infrastructure development, has led to widespread extraction activities, often without adequate environmental and social safeguards. In Sierra Leone's Western Area, this trend is accelerating. While sand mining offers economic benefits, it also poses serious risks to coastal ecosystems, community wellbeing, and governance structures. A balanced approach is urgently needed—one that recognises the livelihood value of sand while safeguarding the environment for future generations.

To address these challenges, the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), in partnership with the University of Gothenburg and University College London (UCL), convened a multi-stakeholder workshop on September 19, 2023, at the Freetown City Council. The workshop brought together actors from international and national NGOs, MDAs, local councils, CBOs, academia, and the private sector. Using a systems-based approach, participants explored the sand mining landscape, identifying extraction hotspots, transportation routes, power dynamics, and the environmental and social implications of current practices. Key concerns raised included:

- Rapid environmental degradation
- Disputes over land use and community exclusion
- Weak regulatory enforcement and governance gaps

Participants emphasised the need for stronger policies, community engagement, and a more sustainable model of sand resource management.

Following the workshop, SLURC and UCL facilitated Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in Lakka, Hamilton, John Obey, and Bureh—coastal communities deeply impacted by sand mining. Each FGD brought together sand miners, truck drivers, fishermen, tourism workers, women's leaders, youth representatives, chiefs, and community elders. Key findings from the FGDs include:

- Sand mining provides essential income for many families.
- Erosion and habitat loss are worsening, especially in Hamilton and John Obey.
- Even in Bureh and Lakka, where large-scale mining is not officially permitted, residents feel the effects of nearby operations.
- Reports of tensions were widespread, not only between miners and local authorities but also between neighbouring communities.



Sand Mining in John Obey Village. Photo credit: Adrea Klingel

To bring community insights into the policy space, a fifth FGD was held at the SLURC office in Freetown. This session convened policymakers, government (both central and local) officials, civil society actors, and community representatives. The dialogue focused on:

- Policy gaps and enforcement challenges
- Pathways for inclusive governance
- Collaborative strategies to balance livelihoods and environmental protection

As urbanisation and infrastructure growth continue, the pressure on sand resources will intensify. The findings from the workshop and FGDs reinforce the urgent need for equitable and sustainable sand governance. Reports Available at: <https://linktr.ee/slurcft>

From Risk to Resilience: Empowering Cities Against Flood Disasters

Ansumana Tarawally

Flooding is an increasingly severe threat facing Sierra Leonean cities, driven by rapid urbanisation and intensified by the impact of climate change. To address these challenges, the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), in collaboration with ARS Progetti (the lead partner), is developing comprehensive flood risk assessment and management plans. With funding from the World Bank through the Resilient Urban Sierra Leone Project (RUSLP), the initiative targets eight key cities: Bo, Kenema, Makeni, Koidu New Sembehun, Port Loko, Bonthe, Waterloo, and Lungi.

To develop effective and context-specific strategies, SLURC and its partners conducted field visits to all eight locations. These visits facilitated direct engagement with city officials and community members, allowing the project team to gather valuable insights into localised flood challenges. A national stakeholder workshop further deepened engagement by fostering dialogue among urban actors, technical experts, and government representatives. These discussions helped to shape a collaborative framework for managing flood risk in Sierra Leone's

secondary cities. The project advanced into a technical phase, now fully completed, which was crucial in generating evidence-based recommendations tailored to the unique conditions and capacities of each city. This phase involved:

- Conducting comprehensive hydrological analyses in each city and developing customised hydrological models to understand flood behaviour in various urban contexts.
- Identifying and prioritising investment options for flood risk reduction and long-term urban resilience
- Collecting and analysing geospatial flood risk data from an aerial LiDAR & socioeconomic survey to inform planning.

The assessment identified several cross-cutting challenges that hinder effective flood risk management. These systemic issues emphasise the need for an integrated, multi-stakeholder approach to building flood resilience.

- Collaborative strategies to balance livelihoods and environmental protection
- Population growth and unplanned development have increased vulnerability in flood-prone areas.
- More intense and erratic rainfall patterns are amplifying flood risk.
- Clogged drainage systems due to poor waste management practices exacerbate urban flooding.
- The removal of natural flood buffers, such as forested areas & mangroves, has increased exposure.
- Many cities face limitations in funding, technical expertise, and equipment.
- Weak collaboration among institutions undermines the effectiveness of flood risk strategies.

As part of the final phase of the project, two high-level stakeholder workshops were held to validate and secure ownership of the proposed investment options. The workshop brought together city authorities and national actors, resulting in a shared commitment to advancing flood resilience through coordinated and sustainable action. Key insights included the importance of aligning local priorities with national policies, the need for improved data systems to guide investment and a call for stronger institutional collaboration to support long-term implementation.



Flooding in Waterloo, Sierra Leone Photo credit: A.R.S. Progetti S.P.A.

Freetown Caring City: Recognition of the Value of Unpaid Carework

Dora Vangahun

In recent years, there has been growing awareness of the significant yet often invisible burden that unpaid carework places on women, particularly in low-income and informal settlements. Domestic work and caregiving are fundamental to the functioning of our societies, yet those who engage in these activities, primarily women, receive little or no formal recognition, support, or financial compensation. In many informal settlements of Freetown, including Susan's Bay, the role of women and girls is overwhelmingly defined by caregiving responsibilities that are both unpaid and unacknowledged. From looking after children and elderly relatives to supporting sick family members, managing household chores, and engaging in livelihood activities, these women perform multiple roles to sustain their families and communities. Despite their immense contributions, they continue to be overlooked and receive little to no institutional support. This lack of recognition and assistance has far-reaching consequences, not only for the women themselves but also for the overall development and well-being of their communities.

The impact of this disproportionate workload extends beyond the home. The constant demands of carework limit women's opportunities to pursue education, participate fully in the labour market, and access personal development opportunities. This cycle of unpaid labour leaves them physically exhausted, financially vulnerable, and socially marginalised. Moreover, the heavy burden of carework increases their exposure to various risks, including sexual & gender based violence (SGBV), transactional sex, and exploitation. Many women and girls in informal settlements face restricted access to healthcare services due to time poverty and societal stigma, preventing them from seeking the medical attention and psychosocial support they need, especially in cases of SGBV and early pregnancies. Addressing gender inequity in carework requires a concerted effort to recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work. To make carework responsibilities more visible, providing accessible services to ease the burden and actively shifting social norms to encourage men and boys to share care responsibilities are crucial steps toward achieving gender equity.

It is on this note that the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) and its partners Freetown City Council, the City Hub and Network for Gender Equity (CHANGE), Women's Leadership for the Advancement of Democracy (WoLEAD), and KoreGlobal, launched the Freetown Caring

City project in Susan's Bay. It is a three year project that replicates the "Care Block" concept already introduced in Bogota, Colombia. Our research aims to assess the extent to which unpaid caregiving affects women in informal settlements and to gain a deeper understanding of how they manage their daily responsibilities. Our research revealed that women in Sierra Leone, particularly those in informal settlements, have significantly less time for leisure, personal care, and rest compared to their male counterparts. The overwhelming demands of domestic work exacerbate time poverty, leaving them with little room to improve their socio-economic standing. In response to these challenges, our team recently conducted a rapid needs assessment and baseline survey. This research involved key stakeholders from within the community, government agencies, and NGOs to gather insights into the lived experiences of unpaid caregivers and their perceptions of unpaid care work in Sierra Leone. The findings from this study will help inform the development of a targeted intervention, including the establishment of a Care Block structure in Susan's Bay. This facility, led by the Freetown City Council (FCC), will serve as a dedicated space where community members, especially women and girls, can access essential services, receive psychosocial support, skills training to empower themselves and find relief from their caregiving duties.

Our research confirmed that carework in Susan's Bay is a daily and inescapable responsibility for women and girls. From cooking and cleaning to nursing the sick, educating children, and providing emotional and physical support, these women juggle multiple roles while contending with poverty, inadequate housing, and limited access to basic services. Despite their relentless efforts, they remain unrecognised and uncompensated. The heavy burden of carework forces many girls to drop out of school at an early age, limiting their future opportunities and often leading them to become housewives without formal employment or engaging in small-scale trading as a means of survival.



Spatial Mapping Exercise. Photo credit: Dora Vangahun

By addressing these pressing challenges in Susan's Bay, the Freetown Caring City project seeks to empower women and girls, alleviate the burdens of unpaid care work, and create a more equitable society where caregiving responsibilities are shared and valued. Recognising, supporting, and redistributing care work is not only a step toward gender equality but also a crucial element in fostering social and economic development within informal settlements.

Empowering Portee-Rokupa: The Community Kitchen Initiative for Sustainable Cooking Solutions

Amadu Labor & Dora Vangahun

In a collaborative effort to improve urban service delivery, researchers from the University of Bristol (UK), in collaboration with Loughborough University, the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), Makerere University (Uganda), and the University of Cape Town (South Africa), have been working on the Beyond the Networked City Project. This initiative explores essential infrastructure, including water, sanitation, and energy, in Freetown and Kampala, Uganda. As part of this research, SLURC conducted a survey of over 360 households in Portee Rokupa to assess their access to energy services, particularly electricity and cooking methods.

The finding revealed a pressing issue: traditional cooking fuels such as firewood and charcoal pose significant health and environmental hazards in Portee-Rokupa. Household air pollution from these fuels is a major contributor to respiratory diseases, disproportionately affecting women and children who spend the most time near cooking areas. Furthermore, reliance on biomass fuels contributes to deforestation, exacerbating climate change.

To combat these challenges, SLURC introduced a Community Kitchen Initiative, designed to provide a sustainable cooking alternative for the residents of Portee Rokupa. Cooking in this community is primarily done by women and young girls, either for household consumption or as a source of income. However, traditional cooking methods that utilise inefficient metal stoves, known as coal pots, significantly contribute to indoor air pollution and environmental degradation.

The Portee-Rokupa Community Kitchen represents more than just a shared cooking space; it embodies the community's collective vision for a healthier and more sustainable future.

This community kitchen is designed to mitigate health risks associated with indoor air pollution, ensure the safe use of energy, and reduce time inefficiencies linked to individual cooking setups, offering a practical and accessible solution.

SLURC played a pivotal role in managing this initiative, facilitating community dialogue to ensure active participation in the design, construction, and management of the kitchen. SLURC has fostered partnerships with key stakeholders, including the Government Technical Institute (GTI), the Electricity Generation and Transmission Company (EGTC), and Afrigas, a national LPG supplier. Initial discussions on improving cooking service delivery in informal settlements evolved into the creation of the Platform for Energy Safety, Innovation, and Access Consortium (PESIA)—a collaborative effort advocating for a deeper understanding and enhanced cooking solutions in underserved communities.

Building the Portee-Rokupa Community Kitchen has been a remarkable collaborative effort, actively involving diverse stakeholders, including technical experts, to integrate their knowledge in community development, clean energy solutions, and innovation.

The SLURC BNC Team, in partnership with PESIA, continuously engaged community stakeholders—residents and local organisations—to gather insights on their energy usage patterns, ensuring that project objectives align with community needs. Following extensive engagement, a comprehensive site inspection was conducted by experts from GTI, EGTC, and Afrigas. This inspection assessed factors such as land conditions, safety, environmental impact, and regulatory compliance. Community members played an active role in this process, providing invaluable input that guided decision-making.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of the kitchen, selected community members were trained as Community Energy Champions by project stakeholders.



Community Kitchen in Portee-Rokupa
Photo credit: Dora Vangahun

These champions received training on the use, maintenance, financing, and safety of different cooking technologies, equipping them to provide tailored support within the community kitchen while advising the broader community on energy choices.

Community involvement has been integral at every stage of the project, from kitchen design and site selection to choosing preferred stoves and fuels, as well as managing the kitchen.

For instance, recognising that Portee Rokupa is predominantly a fishing community, larger stoves and ovens were incorporated to facilitate fish smoking, preservation, and processing. Beyond providing improved cooking facilities, the community kitchen serves as a vital hub for social interaction and engagement, reinforcing its importance to the community.

Initially launched as a pilot initiative driven by the community's desire for alternative cooking services, the Portee-Rokupa Community Kitchen has now become a beacon of knowledge, empowerment, and sustainability. This initiative exemplifies how targeted training and community engagement can drive meaningful change, paving the way for a more sustainable and resilient future.

As the Energy Champions continue their work, they are not just transforming community kitchens, they are transforming lives and building a brighter, greener future for their community.
<https://www.slurc.org/policy-briefs.html>

First SLURC Management Board and Staff Retreat: Implementation of SLURC's new 5-year Strategy Plan and Book Launch

Andrea Klingel

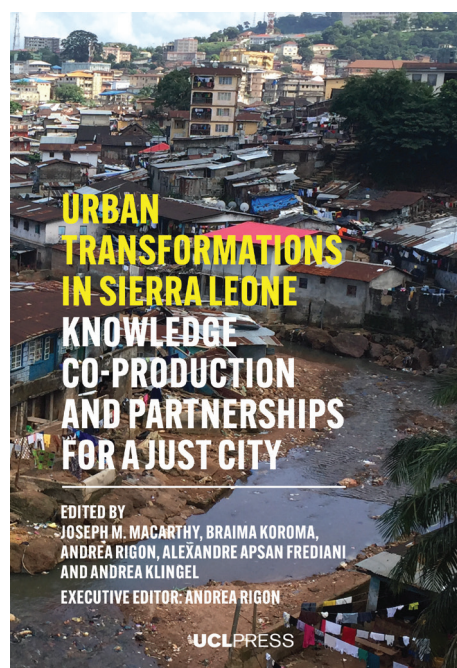
SLURC is maturing and soon celebrating its 10th birthday, which is an apt time to set out the vision for the next 5 years. At the last staff retreat, the team reflected on the goals laid out in SLURC's first 5-Year Strategy Plan, spanning 2019 to 2024. Staff identified areas of achievement, as well as those requiring further focus. In addition, there have been significant developments in the urban landscape, with new challenges and realities emerging, such as the increasing prominence of climate change and its impact on cities. This has created a need for targeted knowledge creation and capacity building, while also opening new opportunities for SLURC's involvement.

SLURC is now working in partnership with consultancies on several World Bank and African Development Bank

projects, focusing on flood risk, climate action plans, and spatial development in Sierra Leone's secondary cities as well as conducting academic research. The insights and vision generated through the staff retreat have shaped SLURC's new 5-Year Strategy Plan, which will guide our work through to 2029.

In June this year, SLURC will, for the first time, hold a joint Management Board and staff retreat. The aim is to strengthen bonds between board and staff, build mutual understanding and foster productive discussion. This gathering will also serve to formally adopt the 5-Year Strategy Plan with updated strategic objectives, and to collaboratively develop a clear implementation pathway to ensure SLURC's continued progress, growth, and success in working towards its vision of an inclusive, socially and environmentally just urban Sierra Leone.

While the strategic objectives have not changed significantly in principle, reflecting SLURC's core role as an urban research centre, they have been reframed to respond to identified gaps and new developments. The objectives for 2024–2029 include: Research Excellence and Impact, Influencing Urban Policy and Practice, Community Empowerment and Participation, Strengthening of Knowledge Management and Dissemination, and Ensuring Sustainability and Diversifying Funding. SLURC added new research priority themes such as Urban Agriculture and Food Security, Youth Capabilities and Civic Engagement, and Fragility, Violence and Safety, as well as the core values that permeate all our interactions with partners, key stakeholders and communities.



Urban Transformations in Sierra Leone: Knowledge co-production and partnerships for a just city
Source: UCL Press

A Monitoring and Evaluation framework aligned with our Theory of Change will support the tracking of progress.

We are excited to welcome some of SLURC's international and local board members to the retreat and start the week on 2nd June with a launch in Freetown of our new SLURC book 'Urban Transformations in Sierra Leone: Knowledge Co-Production and Partnerships for a Just City'. The book reflects the story of SLURC so far, articulating the key findings generated by its main earlier research projects, while also reflecting on the partnerships that defined our work. It features anecdotes and insights from early partners of SLURC, including its first funder (Comic Relief), members of the International Advisory Committee, and civil society partners, who were critical to the organisation's success. The book is available via the UCL Press website for purchase and open access: <https://uclpress.co.uk/book/urban-transformations-in-sierra-leone/>

with an emphasis on knowledge exchange between staff and the UCL fellow.

Sadly, the UCL fellowship is coming to an end and SLURC is currently hosting its last UCL Fellow, Umar Buckus from South Africa. Umar is an Urban Designer with two BScs and he completed his MSc in Building and Urban Design in Development at UCL. His strong foundation in participatory research and urban resilience aligned well with SLURC's mission to advance inclusive development. His passion and energy convinced the interview panel and it translated into his daily work from the moment he arrived in Freetown early February. He is working on various communication aspects such as a new website, newsletter, social media presence and supports the team on different research projects. SLURC greatly appreciates this UCL initiative and the fantastic work Umar currently delivers. SLURC is now recruiting a Knowledge Management/Information and Communication Officer who will be working together with Umar during the remainder of his time at SLURC with the aim of knowledge transfer and maximising the impact of their roles.

SLURC Welcomes its Final UCL Fellow

Andrea Klingel

The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU) at University College London embarked in 2018 in partnership with SLURC on a fellowship programme. The fellowship aimed to offer graduates post completion of their DPU MSc programmes experiences in-country in Sierra Leone and on-the-job-training. These invaluable opportunities are not just beneficial to the students but SLURC has also benefitted immensely from their contributions throughout their 8-months placements tapping into a wide range of work and academic experience. While applications were open to fellows from all over the world, the countries of origin of those that had been selected varied from UK, Germany and Greece in Europe to Egypt and South Africa from the African continent. The different backgrounds of the fellows varied which enriched the experience of SLURC and its staff. Focusing on aspects at SLURC that required support such as Communication, Fundraising and Research Support



Umar Buckus, the DPU Fellow who operates as the Communication and Research Officer at SLURC
Photo credit: Anusmana Tarawally & UCL DPU Logo

This newsletter is also available on our website: slurc.org

