

SLURC

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The Impossible Choices of Urban Futures: How African Cities are Forging a New Reality in the Face of Climate Change

Fasalie Kamara & Amadu Labor Kamara

The narrow, sandy streets of Thompson Bay, a coastal informal settlement in western Freetown, Sierra Leone, tell a story of profound vulnerability but also resilience. Homes are often constructed on land reclaimed from the sea using compacted dirt, bags filled with sand, and solid waste. This is a practice known as "banking." With the high cost of land and housing, securing individual housing for a family in the city leads to a desperate solution. Yet this measure for affordable housing and survival comes at a steep environmental cost. It involves the destruction of the Aberdeen Creek Mangrove ecosystem in a protected Ramsar site, eliminating a natural buffer against floods and storms and a breeding ground for fish, affecting the very livelihoods of those living in these coastal settlements.

Focusing on this compelling reality, partners of the Urban FUTURES Project convened in Freetown from 10 to 14 November 2025, bringing together researchers and practitioners from Sierra Leone, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Canada, and the UK to define the crisis and share insights. For five days, these researchers shared their experiences from three rapidly urbanising African cities: Freetown, Kampala (Uganda), and Bulawayo (Zimbabwe). The consensus was clear: climate change is not a new problem; it has become an amplifier of existing urban inequities, forcing the urban poor into a series of "impossible choices."



Credit: SLURC

The Great Amplifier

Across all three cities, a common thread emerged; climate hazards, such as intensified heat and flooding, do not affect everyone equally. Their impact is shaped by pre-existing structural fractures: exclusionary urban policies, weak governance, and deep-seated political and economic marginalisation.

Researchers from the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), painted in their presentations a picture of “overlapping risk traps.” In the coastal settlement of Thompson Bay, residents face a triple threat: extreme heat, fire, and flooding. In Pamoronko, which is an informal settlement in eastern Freetown located on a river estuary, residents face compounding problems from mangrove destruction, sand mining, and poor waste management. These activities lead to the clogging of waterways and expose the community to flooding from the sea, the river, and drainage systems, especially during the rainy season. Poor environmental management also leads to health crises by spreading vector-borne diseases like malaria, and waterborne diseases like cholera, typhoid, dysentery.

“These are not natural disasters” the team argued, “they are policy problems resulting from weak policy or the lack of its implementation.” These crises stem from a political economy where the voices of informal residents are systematically excluded. With weak and fragmented governance, and a rapidly warming climate, Freetown’s temperatures can now reach 40°C¹, placing immense strain on a chronically under-resourced health system.

Insights from Freetown revealed that urban management often focuses on enforcing building regulations to contain “illegality,” rather than addressing the root causes of informality: land cartels, elite capture of resources, and a complete lack of affordable housing. The criminalisation of informal settlements discourages investment, including access to bank loans. As a result, residents of these settlements are often forced to build homes using the cheapest materials available, frequently in precarious, flood-prone, and environmentally sensitive areas. This approach has contributed to the expansion of informality and has widened the unequal access to land and housing”.

The Kampala Paradox: Policy vs. Reality

While Freetown’s story is one of structural neglect and environmental degradation, Kampala’s (Uganda) presents a paradox.

The Makerere University team explained that Uganda boasts a relatively robust climate policy framework, yet deep settlement-level vulnerabilities persist. In places like Bwaise III, a low-lying informal settlement, the reality is one of blocked drainage, stagnant floodwaters, and recurrent outbreaks of malaria and cholera.

Additionally, the governance of Kampala’s vital wetlands is deeply politicised, where the environment becomes a tool for political actors, resulting in the reproduction of urban inequality. The Uganda National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) often evicts low-income residents using conservation mandates, while wealthier, politically connected actors operate unchallenged.

The discussion on Uganda highlighted the concept of “people as infrastructure,” where community-based Village Health Teams (VHTs) have become the de facto public health system, plugging the gaps left by the state, yet remaining critically under-resourced and overburdened.

Bulawayo: Adaptation in an Economic Decline

In Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, the story is refracted through the lens of a deep and prolonged economic decline. The informal economy is not a marginal sector; it is the most important contributor to the country’s economy. The Zimbabwean team from the Southern and Eastern African Trade Information and Negotiations Institute (SEATINI) described how political marginalisation and infrastructural neglect have created a uniquely challenging environment. In response, Bulawayo’s residents have innovated. They have given rise to a thriving night-time economy. By working and vending, informal traders reduce their exposure to debilitating daytime heat and, crucially, the harassment and confiscation of goods by city authorities. It is a brilliant, home-grown adaptation. Yet, as the researchers noted, it is deeply ambivalent.

This new night-time economy has its own risks such as fire from makeshift lighting, exposure to the cold at night, and physical exhaustion which can lead to long-term health stress.

Water scarcity is a foundational vulnerability, forcing women into impossible trade-offs between collecting water and earning a living. The evidence from Bulawayo is clear: communities can cope. However, community coping mechanisms are severely limited in the absence of supportive governance. “Risk here is best understood as cumulative and cascading,” the team noted, “rather than event-based.”

¹ Freetown Heat Action Plan

From Evidence to Action: The Path Forward

The Urban Futures consortium meeting was not merely a cataloguing of despair. It was a determined effort to chart a way forward. The five-day gathering, which included a field visit to the informal settlement of Thompson Bay, focused on understanding context-specific, real-time evidence in Freetown for a better insight into the situation.

- **Strong Consideration of Trade-offs:** Projects must acknowledge the “impossible choices” informal residents face. Interventions should aim to reduce flood risk while also mitigating land reclamation to limit ecological damage. In an effort to reduce heat exposure, encouraging night work can also create a new safety risk. This is why adaptation planning requires an iterative approach. Methods such as Photovoice and community-led mapping go beyond academic exercise.
- **Co-producing Knowledge for Uptake:** The project’s use of participatory methods like Photovoice and community-led mapping is not just an academic exercise. These tools generate powerful visual narratives that can translate complex vulnerabilities into compelling stories for policymakers, bridging the gap between community reality and policy action.

As the Urban Futures Research Project progresses, the challenge is to help build adaptation pathways that move beyond a short-term, fragile coping mechanism toward a durable, just, and inclusive transformation. The insight from the three cities of Freetown, Kampala and Bulawayo helps not just other fast-growing cities in Africa, but cities everywhere as the world gets hotter. The hard choices people are forced to make today should guide us toward fair solutions for everyone in the future.



Credit: SLURC

A Decade of SLURC: Survey Analysis of Perceptions and Aspirations

Joseph M. Macarthy

During the recent SLURC 10-year anniversary celebration at the Brookfields Hotel on 16th February, a Mentimeter live poll was conducted. This tool allows participants to provide real-time, anonymous feedback to a series of open-ended questions via their smartphones. It enabled the collection of a diverse range of responses from attendees about their perceptions, sources of awareness, inspirations, and future aspirations for SLURC. The responses, which were visually presented through graphs and descriptive statistics, reflect a multifaceted image of the organisation and highlight key areas of influence and growth.

Key takeaways were that participants mostly associate SLURC with research and urban focus, both receiving equal mentions, indicating that these are central to how the organisation is viewed. These are complemented by prominent associations with urban development, inclusivity, and community engagement. Additional notable descriptors include capacity building, academic rigour, data, and excellence, among others, illustrating a broad recognition of SLURC’s varied work in urban Sierra Leone.

The survey revealed that most respondents first learned about SLURC through friends or colleagues, while many others discovered the organisation via online platforms and social media channels. Events also served as an introduction for a number of attendees. This highlights the strength of personal networks and digital platforms as key channels for SLURC’s outreach and engagement.

The survey further shows that the most inspiring aspect of SLURC’s work is ‘Research’, emphasising the organisation’s strong identity as a research institution. Other influential areas highlighted include community engagement, policy influencing, and capacity building. This indicates that while research is central to SLURC, community and policy work also hold significant importance for respondents.

Regarding SLURC’s future work, respondents expressed diverse aspirations, with the most common theme being regional expansion. Many respondents agree that SLURC should aim for growth beyond working only in Sierra Leone and into international arenas. Some respondents suggested that SLURC should focus more on policy influencing aimed at shaping and transforming local and national policies. Several responses also envision SLURC as a regional research hub, a kind of regional centre of excellence on urban development and planning.

A few others hoped for SLURC to contribute to increasing Sierra Leone's urban planning expertise and to organise academic programs.

When asked to create suiting titles for SLURC as a movie, the following imaginative titles were provided amongst others by participants: Data Hunters, the Unpredictable Journey, and Planning the Unplanned, which reflect perceptions of SLURC as innovative, exploratory, and transformative in the urban research landscape.

"The Long Night": One Woman's Fight Against Climate Change in Moyiba from Rising Rain Water

Ibrahim Juldeh Sesay

When the heavy rain continues to fall on the hillside community of Moyiba, Fatmata doesn't just hear the storm; she lives it. While others sought shelter, she was ripped from sleep, grabbing buckets and containers to battle against heavier and prolonged rains for hours. Fatmata is a young mother and the primary caretaker for her husband, who is recovering from a serious construction injury. In the face of increasingly extreme weather, she is fighting this battle almost helplessly. Her rented apartment, which sits too close to an overflowing drainage line, offers little protection. As the rainy season peaks, it has become her greatest adversary.

"Whenever it rains, the water seeps in through the roof and even through the foundation," Fatmata explains in exhaustion, all over her voice. "My husband cannot help me, so I do everything myself. Sometimes I stay up all night, moving containers to catch the water before it ruins our belongings or floods our bed. I have no rest."

The rainy storms do not just steal Fatmata's sleep at night; they reveal Fatmata's daily life. The petty trading business she runs as her family's only source of income is frequently forced to close, as she scrambles to keep their home and her business from being swamped. This constant exposure to dampness and cold has taken a toll on her health, leaving her with persistent coughs and headaches. Medication offers a brief respite, but she lives in fear of falling deeper into a cycle of sickness and lost work that threatens to consume her household.

For Fatmata, true wellbeing is described as, "well body", which transcends physical health. It is a state of security and sufficiency. "Well body is when everything is comfortable in the house, when you have food, and nothing in your body is disturbing you," she says. It is a state she can rarely afford to be in. "Even if I am sick, I must work; otherwise, who will buy food or carry out chores?"

Her resilience is tested at every turn. The landlord refuses to authorise permanent repairs, and temporary fixes

with plastic sheets and old tarpaulin covers are rendered useless by the intensity of the rainy season. In a cruel twist, the landlord has even asked them to leave, forcing Fatmata to search for a new home at the worst possible time. "Finding a single room to stay in now is almost impossible," she says with a despairing shake of her head. "Even when neighbours help, it is never enough."

Fatmata has developed a local coping mechanism to the constant threat of flooding. She positions containers to catch rainwater, elevates furniture, and sits close to a coal pot for warmth. Yet these are temporary stopgap solutions, with the health risk posing a constant threat.

Amid rising water and uncertainty, Fatmata holds on to a clear, pragmatic dream. She envisions a solution that would grant her the mercy of the skies and independence from a landlord. "If I have money, I will grow my small business from home into a medium enterprise," she says. She is firmly focused on a future beyond the next storm: "I could pay for repairs when the roof leaks and provide for my family without depending on anyone."

Her business is not just an aspiration for wealth; it is a bid for autonomy. It is the key to withstanding the rains, safeguarding her family's health, and finally achieving the peace of a "well body" in a home that is truly a safe harbour.

Reflecting on SLURC's Research Engagements: The Role of Participatory Research

Joseph M. Macarthy

Urbanization in Sierra Leone is accelerating fast, presenting both opportunities and challenges for sustainable development. However, a significant obstacle remains: the lack of reliable, localized data to inform effective policies. Much of the available data on urban trends across Africa, (more especially, Sierra Leone), originates from global reports, leaving a critical knowledge gap for local researchers and policymakers. Relying on international datasets often leads to misguided policies that do not reflect the unique socio-economic, environmental and social realities of urban Sierra Leone. This misalignment hampers the country's ability to compete on the global stage and undermines efforts to address pressing urban issues effectively. A notable example is in the realm of housing and urban infrastructure. Without accurate, local data, governments struggle to plan for the growing demand for housing including water and energy, sanitation, and transportation. Our governments (local and national) do not usually see urban research as a priority, so it is very difficult to have urban development as a primary issue on their agenda.

To bridge these gaps, SLURC has been promoting participatory research as a promising approach. Participatory research involves the active involvement of participants/local residents in all stages of the research process, allowing them to contribute valuable insights that would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

Engaging participants in data collection and analysis can help fill critical data gaps, particularly at the local and community levels. Participatory research offers real-time, community-level insights that are vital for producing actionable results for improving the wellbeing of people. Nevertheless, participant recruitment, their sustained engagement, and ensuring data quality, are usually the main concerns of participatory research. But with careful design, participatory-generated data can be reliable, making research participants a powerful tool in addressing urgent urban issues.

Validation workshop on Sand Mining in Sierra Leone: Policy, Livelihoods, and Coastal Sustainability

Fasalie Kamara & Ansumana Tawawally

On December 16, 2025, the World Bank Office in Sierra Leone validated a crucial report on sand mining in Freetown, following a consultant-led study. The research, conducted by the Université de Genève/GRID-Geneva, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), brought together a diverse group of stakeholders. Participants included sand mining community members (miners, truck drivers, vehicle owners, headmen and women, chiefs), technical staff from MDAs, researchers, World Bank representatives, academics, engineers, and policymakers, including ministers and directors.

A Threat to Tourism and Coasts

Louise Twining-Ward, the World Bank's Global Tourism lead and co-lead for the Sierra Leone Economic Diversification Project (SLEDP), emphasised the study's importance. "We need to understand the volume of sand that's being lost, policies we're missing, the impact on coastal communities, and on tourism," she stated. She clarified that this was a rapid assessment to establish initial data. Highlighting Sierra Leone's reliance on beach tourism, she explained "Sierra Leone is primarily a beach tourism destination. First and foremost, you have the best beaches in West Africa." She stressed that without sand and beaches, tourism would severely decline.

William Dauda, Social Safeguarding Specialist, noted that

SLEDP invests in beach infrastructure as part of economic diversification. He acknowledged the country's focus on leisure tourism and said the study would help the Ministry of Tourism develop better beach governance policies.

The Need for Evidence-Based Action

Sheikh Tunis, Director of Research, Policy and Innovation at the Environment Protection Agency (EPA), expressed his institution's strong support in taking findings of the report forward to policy action. He revealed that the EPA had requested the World Bank study under the SLEDP, linking economic diversification to environmental stability. "Economic diversification cannot be achieved if humans can no longer live along the coastal lines as a result of continuous erosion," he warned. He pointed to accelerating coastal erosion, driven by sand mining, but admitted a lack of scientific evidence. "I can say all of these things anywhere, but there is no evidence to back my claim," He underscored the study's role in enabling evidence-based control measures.

Key Findings: Sources, Employment, and Oversight

Presenting the findings, lead researcher Arnaud Vander Velpen from Université de Genève/GRID-Geneva noted that while Sierra Leone's sand demand is lower than elsewhere in West Africa, its environmental impact is higher due to the prevalent use of sea and beach sand for construction. He emphasised the need to shift to quarry sand.

The study found that most sand used in Freetown is imported to the peninsula from Koya and Lungi, with more sand arriving via the port than from local beaches. Freetown has 16 landing sites in total. While a cumulative 14 smaller landing sites accounted for 25.8% of the sand used in Freetown, Bottom Oku Landing Site alone accounted for 22.4% and Murray Town Landing Site for 7.7%. John Obey is where with 15% the largest amount of beach sand is being mined, followed by Hamilton Beach with 9%. Other sand mining sites include Indian Quarry with 7.1%, Q1- China Railway with 5.1%, Mahera Beach mining with 4%, Gento Quarry with 3.6%, and Artisanal Quarry – Ancient CSE with 0.1%

The sand mining industry in the Western Area employs approximately 460 people, primarily as loaders and truckers, with vehicle owners capturing the bulk of revenue. The study reinforced the assumption of limited regulatory oversight over sand mining in Freetown.

Stakeholder Perspectives: Livelihoods vs. Sustainability

During deliberations, participants were divided into community, technical, and policy groups.

Community representatives acknowledged the environmental and tourism-related risk of their trade but defended it as their only source of livelihood “Without sand mining, some communities will perish”. They also credited the sand mining industry with reducing youth criminality by providing jobs. They disputed claims that sea sand is a major cause of building collapses, instead blaming poor-quality iron rods and contractors.

Daniella Dove, Head Woman for the Bureh Community, advocated for tourism over mining, citing the need for decent earnings and opportunities in the hospitality sector. All groups agreed on the urgent need for alternative livelihoods, community engagement, and collaborative policy design, including the formation of a dedicated committee.

Commitment to Action

Braima Koroma, Director of Research and Training at SLURC, urged participants to ensure the report’s accuracy and accountability, noting that their feedback would shape the final version to inform actionable recommendations and policy influence. The Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC), Honourable Mima Yema Sobba-Stephens, endorsed the report on behalf of all stakeholders. She praised the research, linking it to widespread concerns over recent housing collapses. “The validation of this research reinforced the need for raising awareness about the danger that beach sand mining poses to our society,” she stated.

The session concluded with the formal adoption of the report. The Deputy Minister announced the formation of a multisectoral and interdisciplinary committee to address the challenges of sand mining and its related impacts, signalling a committed step toward integrated solutions.

What Makes the Urban Focus Important to SLURC?

Joseph M. Macarthy

For many decades, Sierra Leone’s development efforts concentrated predominantly on rural areas. However, subsequent global population studies have demonstrated that neglecting urban growth was a shortsighted approach. Since the end of the civil war in 2002, Sierra Leone has experienced growth in its urban population.

Our research has focused on identifying and addressing the areas where evidence-based interventions can have the greatest impact, namely, informal settlements that lack essential risk-reducing infrastructure. In several parts of Freetown and other secondary cities, populations remain unserved by basic services such as piped water, drainage, paved roads, electricity, healthcare, and policing. Most of these communities also lack reliable waste collection services and access to sanitary toilets, elements that are fundamental to people’s well-being.

While traditional poverty metrics tend to emphasise income levels, they often overlook these critical basic needs that profoundly affect daily life. Recognising this gap has been central to our urban development efforts over the past decade. Our work is driven by a commitment to understand the impacts of deprivation on residents and to collaborate with partners serving informal settlements. We have consistently published detailed research on a broad range of urban challenges across Sierra Leone, with a particular focus on supporting and elevating the voices of urban poor communities.

Lessons from India: Adapting Community-Led, Climate-Resilient Housing for Sierra Leone and Kenya

Ibrahim Juldeh Sesay & Fasalie Kamara

From 5 to 13 December 2025, a team of researchers from Kenya and Sierra Leone within the Urban TRACS-Transformative Research for Adaptation to Climate Change in Informal Settlements project visited India on an exchange programme. The aim was to learn about the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centre’s (SPARC) Roof Over Our Heads (ROOH) campaign. In India, the ROOH initiative, aims to deliver resilient, low-carbon, and affordable homes to informal residents while improving public infrastructure in urban informal settlements.

The team visited informal settlements across five Indian cities: Ahmedabad, Surat, Bhubaneswar/Cuttack, Mumbai, and Delhi. The exchange provided critical insights into how participatory approaches, academic partnerships, and technical expertise converge to deliver scalable, climate-resilient intervention lessons directly relevant to Sierra Leone and Kenya.

Insights from India Learning Exchange: Integration of Academia and Community

In Ahmedabad, Surat, and Bhubaneswar/Cuttack, the team observed that ROOH’s effectiveness relied heavily on strong, long-term academic partnerships.



Credit: Nihar Johari (SPARC)

Universities contributed technical expertise and rigorous design approaches while also lending legitimacy and evidence-based insights, which strengthened community buy-in. This integration fostered innovative problem-solving, enabling students and faculty to co-create designs that address both the structural and social dimensions of housing in informal settlements. In the long term, the campaign has influenced academic curricula and encouraged future housing experts to think sustainably and consider the challenges faced by informal settlement communities.

Movement-Building and Policy Integration

In Mumbai and Delhi, it became clear that ROOH's success extended beyond construction. Housing interventions were embedded within broader social movements and linked to policy actors and municipal stakeholders to amplify impact and create advocacy avenues. In contrast, Sierra Leone and Kenya face limited municipal involvement, suggesting that successful adaptation requires strategic partnerships, advocacy, or alternative mechanisms to fill this gap.

The Compounding Challenges of Informal Settlements in Sierra Leone and Kenya

Informal settlements in Sierra Leone and Kenya face overcrowding, poor infrastructure, climate vulnerability, and limited municipal support. Traditional housing interventions often focus narrowly on individual households, overlooking settlement-level vulnerabilities and long-term governance. The ROOH campaign in India presented a compelling case for embedding incremental household upgrades within broader social, academic, and institutional frameworks. The Sierra Leone and Kenya teams are now contextualising these lessons to fit their specific situations.

Household-Level vs. Settlement-Level Approaches

The learning was timely for both teams. "We are currently

co-developing and refining housing and settlement-level interventions under the Urban TRACS project. The knowledge acquired is informing our programme choices and the balance between household-level upgrading and settlement-wide resilience action," said Ibrahim Juldeh Sesay, Research Officer for the Urban TRACS Project at the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC). He noted that the Sierra Leone team is working with communities, academia, and local government to institutionalise the housing intervention. "We are working to address municipal capacity constraints," he added.

While ROOH's methodology focused primarily on household-level upgrades, it was implemented with sensitivity to settlement-wide vulnerabilities, including drainage, communal spaces, and infrastructure connectivity. This dual focus is a key takeaway: incremental household improvements must be coupled with systemic settlement interventions to ensure sustainability and resilience

Community Participation and Co-Design Opportunities in Sierra Leone and Kenya

In India, a participatory approach was non-negotiable. Residents were actively involved in decision-making, prioritisation, and design refinement. This built trust and a sense of ownership, reinforcing that externally imposed interventions rarely achieve long-term impact. In Sierra Leone, previous projects like Accountability and Responsiveness in Informal Settlements and Equality (ARISE) have already established strong community relationships, providing fertile ground for adopting this principle. ROOH-aligned efforts in Kenya also follow this approach through co-design workshops in which community members and artisans contribute to the development of interventions.



Credit: Nihar Johari (SPARC)

Critical Reflections:

Several analytical observations emerged:

- Scalability depends on institutional frameworks: ROOH's success relied on universities, NGOs, municipal collaboration and technical experts working within a coordinated system. In Sierra Leone, aligning stakeholders and clarifying institutional roles will be critical.
- Financial and governance mechanisms are crucial: ROOH demonstrates that a flexible payment plan in installation for housing, and sustained oversight are as important as technical solutions.
- Local adaptation is necessary: While India's municipal support facilitated infrastructure upgrades, Sierra Leone may require advocacy, external funding, or hybrid solutions to compensate for limited formal government support.
- Knowledge transfer is not straightforward: Direct replication is unlikely; instead, lessons should be adapted as principles, emphasising participatory design, incremental interventions, and embedding housing upgrades within broader community and institutional systems.

Next Steps for Sierra Leone:

Urban TRACS is now considering translating these insights into context-specific, evidence-based interventions:

- Finalising a design brief that incorporates household- and settlement-level vulnerabilities.
- Engaging local universities to integrate the housing initiative into coursework, leveraging academic cycles for timely design input.
- Pairing students with local builders and community champions to ensure co-creation and contextual grounding.
- Developing strategies to compensate for limited municipal support, including advocacy and institutional partnerships.

The India exchange has reinforced the value of analytical, participatory, and adaptive approaches, providing a critical foundation for implementing housing interventions that are resilient, scalable, and socially embedded in Sierra Leone's informal settlements.

SLURC Recognises Five Staff for Postgraduate Achievements

Fasalie Kamara

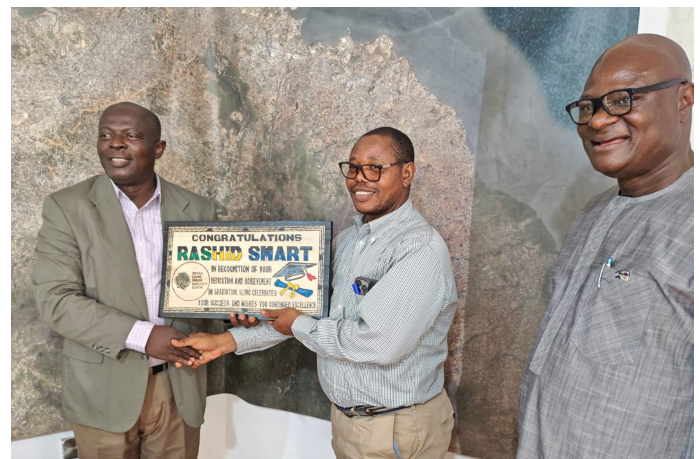
On 22 January 2026, the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) celebrated five staff members for their academic accomplishments—four for completing postgraduate degrees and one for beginning his PhD journey.

Dr Abu Conteh graduated with a PhD from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM). Dora Vangahun earned a Master's in Sustainable Development from the University of Makeni, Rashid Smart obtained a Master of Accounting and Finance from Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, and Fasalie Sulaiman Kamara completed a Master of Public Health at Njala University. In addition, Ibrahim Juldeh Sesay was recognised for gaining admission to pursue a PhD at the University of Glasgow, Scotland.

Joseph Macarthy, Executive Director, shared these words:

"We are proud of our colleagues who have successfully navigated their academic journeys. We know the challenges that come with such pursuits, and we honour their dedication and achievement. Management also takes this opportunity to encourage all staff to strive for greater heights. We truly value capacity building, and it is through our staff that we strengthen our work and impact.

This is also a moment to reaffirm that SLURC is an organisation committed to nurturing individual potential as a pathway to institutional growth. If we aspire to build a better SLURC and contribute to a better Sierra Leone, we must all be part of that journey, starting today. We celebrate our colleagues and look forward to seeing more staff take on new academic challenges. Keep moving forward."



Credit: Umar Buckus

Care Work, Community & Compounding Crises

Umar Buckus



Credit: IDRC

In October 2025, researchers, policymakers, and women's rights activists met in Johannesburg, South Africa, for the midterm workshop of the Scaling Care Innovations in Africa (SCIA) initiative. Funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Global Affairs Canada, the initiative has reached its fifth year, and the workshop offered an opportunity to share lessons learned and emerging insights from the 19 implementation projects spanning 15 countries across Africa.

The SCIA initiative recognises that development towards economic empowerment, gender equality and inclusive policy reform needs a care-centred lens, especially within sub-Saharan Africa, to respond effectively to the lived realities of marginalised women and girls. Within SCIA, projects are grouped into clusters, namely: Transforming Care in Rural Settings, Charting New Policy Frontiers in Care, and Re-Imagining Care & Creating Accessible, Inclusive and High-Quality Childcare. This allowed for easy sharing of cross-country knowledge exchange and encouraged peer learning.

Care Block:

SLURC attended the workshop as a research partner on the Freetown Caring City project in partnership with the Freetown City Council (FCC), City Hub Network for Gender Equity (CHANGE), Kore Global and Women Leadership Advancement for Democracy (WoLEAD). The project, situated in Susan's Bay, Freetown, aims to reduce the time poverty of women within informal settlements by providing access to services such as childcare, training, and healthcare at an anchor building in the community (Care Block). It builds on a model which saw significant success in Bogotá, Colombia.

The team presented findings from our baseline

report, which shows concretely that women commit significantly more time to care work compared to men. Importantly, it also indicated a multiplicity of factors that contribute to the current distribution of care, such as cultural beliefs and unequal access to economic opportunity, an openness to change in the unequal distribution. The Care Block will feature services that hope to directly combat this, such as financial literacy training and a care academy for men, with childcare services being added later once the Care Block building is completed. SLURC leads the research on the project, through quarterly caregiver feedback groups over the lifecycle of the project and a final endline assessment, which will aim to quantify the impacts of the project and support its replication across Sierra Leone and similar contexts.

Community of Practice:

Project summaries and panel discussions yielded a few common challenges experienced across a myriad of projects and contexts. The largest among them is the difficulty in accessing reliable and up-to-date data and the difficulty in engaging policymakers, with projects often requiring significant effort and adaptive strategies to develop relationships that sustain focus on care work policy. Other issues discussed ranged from managing community expectations and buy-in to obstacles limiting the securing of space allocation, which is vital to the sustainability of projects, and rapid political turnover, which leaves projects without sufficient support.

With these in mind, there was the establishment of a Community of Practice (CoP), facilitated by ActionAid and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The CoP will run for 33 months and aims to foster strategic collaboration, peer learning and incorporate a rapid help desk to support projects when needed. It will also aim to collect and amplify African voices on care work across various international platforms, such as global summits.

Care in the Era of Compounding Crises:

With a growing global pushback against gender equality, characterised by policy reversals and declining political commitment to gender equality, the workshop offered a moment for discussion on care work with speakers from diverse backgrounds, including research, policy and civil society. The speakers highlighted that despite progress and growing commitments to gender equality, unpaid care work largely remains overlooked within national and international frameworks.

They noted that there is a resurgence of focus on the care agenda globally following the COVID-19 pandemic, which offers an opportunity to challenge the entrenched norms that assign care work primarily to women and, through this answer the question: “How can we seize this moment to elevate care as a transformative force, one that drives equity, resilience and inclusive progress for all?”

The full report is available slurc.org

Exploring Climate Vulnerabilities through Participatory Methods in Freetown’s Informal Settlements

Ishmail Conteh

Climate change has become a critical global challenge affecting both human populations and the environment due to its unprecedented scale and impact. Across countries in the Global South, such as Sierra Leone, it has emerged as a serious concern, particularly in the urban areas. Rapid urbanisation and natural population growth in urban areas have led to the proliferation of informal settlements in hazard-prone areas such as steep slopes, mountainous terrain, and low-lying coastal areas. In these settlements, residents are often exposed to extreme climate events, including flooding, extreme heat, drought, and heavy rainfall, which are further intensified by poverty, poor housing and sanitation, and weak infrastructure. Climate hazards not only interact with these existing challenges but also cause significant health problems for residents, including vector-borne diseases (e.g., malaria), waterborne diseases (e.g., cholera and diarrhoea), heat-related illnesses (e.g., heat stress), and mental stress.

In Freetown, climate vulnerability is not a mental construct but an everyday reality. The city’s topography and intense rainfall contribute to frequent and severe flooding, exacerbating the spread of waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever, particularly in areas with poor sanitation and hygiene practices. Additionally, the urban heat island effect, compounded by inadequate housing, overcrowding, dense settlements and a lack of green spaces, increases the risk of heat-related illnesses among the city’s informal populations¹. However, there is limited evidence from Freetown and other urban cities in the global south on how these climate events affect health, housing, livelihoods, infrastructure, the environment, and social services in these settlements. The Spatialising

Climate Impacts on Health: A Focus on Vulnerable Settlements in Megacities of the Global South (KISS) project, funded by the Wellcome Trust, is a three-year project which seeks to address this knowledge gap. The project is structured as a consortium of six partners, led by the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) in India. The other partners include the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) both in the UK, the African Centre for Cities (ACC) in South Africa, the Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI) in Kenya, and the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC). In Sierra Leone, the project is being implemented in three informal settlements in Freetown: Cockle Bay, Colbot, and Moyiba.

Two key participatory methods - community-led Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping and transect walks, were employed to understand the spatial distribution of climate vulnerabilities, the linked social and environmental conditions, and the local adaptation strategies. These methods are essential to climate solutions because residents often possess a nuanced understanding of climate hazards and impacts, the existing support systems, and the local coping strategies needed to address the potential impacts that may not yet be captured in the literature or scientific explanations.

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings from the community-led GIS mapping and transect walks reveal several climate-related hazards and local adaptation strategies across Colbot, Cockle Bay, and Moyiba.

Key Climate Hazards

- Flooding was the most significant climate hazard reported across all three study sites. This is directly related to the poor drainage, inadequate housing and infrastructure, and the uncontrolled land use practices in the settlements. In Cockle Bay and Colbot, flooding is also caused by land reclamation and high tides.
- Heatwaves, fire incidents, and storms were reported less frequently; however, these are the main seasonal and episodic threats that climate change will intensify.
- In Moyiba, the most commonly reported climate hazards were rockfalls, mudslides, landslides, and structural/building collapse owing to the steep slopes, deforestation, and stone mining activities.

Drivers of Climate Vulnerability

- Intense rainfall and unpredictable weather patterns
- Poor drainage and limited sanitation facilities
- Livelihood extraction activities such as stone mining and sand mining
- Use of poor materials and limited technical skills for housing construction
- Deforestation and land clearing

Impacts on Communities

- Damage to houses, roads, business premises, and water points during extreme weather events
- Disruption of access to services such as healthcare, schools, community centres, and markets
- Increased risks of waterborne diseases (e.g. cholera, typhoid, diarrhoea), vector-borne diseases (e.g. malaria) and heat-related illnesses (e.g. skin rashes, dehydration, heat stroke)
- Forced displacement from home

Children were identified as the most affected group, followed by women, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.

Local Adaptation Strategies

- Community awareness raising on climate hazards
- Drainage improvement and waste management practices
- Strengthening or elevating housing foundations to reduce flood impacts
- Tree planting, embankment reinforcement, and small-scale environmental protection measures
- Formation of Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMCs) to act as first responders
- Relocation to a safer area during climate events

Although residents show strong climate resilience, most of these local adaptation strategies are largely informal and under-resourced, requiring institutional support. Also, city or national responses are reactive and inadequate.

Transforming Data into Solution: The ReMapRisk Platform

Looking ahead, the GIS survey and transect walk data will be integrated into our proposed Remap Risk Platform, which provides timely, context-specific information for communities and policymakers. The platform will be interactive and provide digital tools to help spatialise these risks and profile those most affected at the city and informal settlement levels of Freetown. The platform is an opportunity for community ownership of the project as it will ensure inclusive participation in designing locally led, sustainable solutions to climate change hazards and vulnerabilities.

¹ Sam-Mbomah, Edwin, et al. "Investigating disaster risk management and climate change adaptation effectiveness in Freetown, Sierra Leone." *Jambá-Journal of Disaster Risk Studies* 17.1 (2025): 1904.

10 Years of Evidence: SLURC Research Became the Bridge Between Informal Settlements in Freetown and State Policy Action

Fasalie Kamara

The Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) celebrated its 10th anniversary on February 16, 2026, at the New Brookfields Hotel in Freetown, marking a decade of producing urban knowledge and shaping policy discussions and decisions in Sierra Leone.

In his opening address, Braima Koroma, Director of Research and Training, described the centre as a bold idea that brought together research and community voices to understand the daily realities and challenges of informal settlements. Since its founding, the institution has grown into a premier urban research centre in Sierra Leone, one that informs policy, strengthens resilience, and inspires a new generation of urban thinkers.

"This journey has never been ours alone," Koroma said, emphasising that the milestone was made possible through collaboration with partners. "We have learned that evidence matters most when it is shared," he continued, adding that research is only useful if it is utilised. "Policy action emanates from the evidence that must be on our streets and in our homes. It must shape our future. That is the vision that guides us on our journey."

Dr Joseph Macarthy, Executive Director of SLURC, reflected on the centre's origins, explaining that it emerged from a desire to generate evidence on urban Sierra Leone through a higher education institution based in the country. Established as a partnership between University College London (UCL) and Njala University, the centre was created to guide urban knowledge production and support change by making information accessible to decision-makers for implementation.

"A feasibility study conducted before the establishment of the research centre identified limited data on informal settlements in Freetown," Dr Macarthy said. Unlike many other cities in Africa, Sierra Leone lacked adequate data to reveal clear urbanisation patterns and the associated challenges. Without reliable data it was difficult to fully understand the spatial and economic realities or even the demographic dynamics of Sierra Leone's towns and cities.

While acknowledging that some data did exist, Dr Macarthy explained that it was insufficient to inform better policies on informality. To start filling the data gap, therefore, the organisation's earliest research initiative was the "Pull Slum Pan Pipul" initiative, funded by Comic Relief UK.

The keynote address was delivered by Francis Reffell, a board member of SLURC and the Director of the Centre of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation (CODOHSAPA. He praised the institution for its guidance across community engagement, policy domains, and academia, reinforcing Dr Macarthy's earlier remarks about the scarcity of data before SLURC's establishment. Mr Reffell noted that

while early community data and settlement profiles produced by CODOHSAPA and other organisations were valuable, the impact was limited. He described them in retrospect, as "children's drawings" in terms of influence, until SLURC was established.

"SLURC has been the bridge between community knowledge and academia," he said. "These efforts became the architectural plan recognised within the academic space". Mr Reffell added that SLURC has sharpened the tools for urban research through joint projects, fieldwork, and capacity building for its partners, including CODOHSAPA and FEDURP.

"SLURC has been more than an institution; it is a pioneer of urban knowledge in Sierra Leone," he continued. Its research has sparked conversations within policy corridors and provided organisations like FEDURP and CODOHSAPA with the opportunity to work with a credible actor in the urban space. Today, SLURC maintains a wide range of partnerships worldwide.



Credit: Umar Buckus

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

