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**TOWARDS MEETING THE KNOWLEDGE AND
CAPACITY BUILDING GAPS FOR EQUITABLE
URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN FREETOWN**



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1. Introduction

In Freetown, Sierra Leone, urban informal settlements reflect ongoing processes of marginalisation and exclusion. The dynamics of social and spatial marginalisation are complex, and poorly understood. In part this lack of understanding stems from inadequate knowledge about structures and processes that lead to the proliferation of urban informal settlements, as well as from significant knowledge gaps regarding the social, economic, and environmental factors that lead to the marginalisation of the urban poor.

Building on SLURC's 2014 report, "An Assessment of Existing Information on Freetown Slums", the latest report, "Framing The Research Agenda And Capacity Building Needs For Equitable Urban Development In Freetown (2016)", critically reviews existing data and evidence on Freetown's informal settlements, in order to identify knowledge and capacity gaps, as well as opportunities and priorities for future research and engagement. Additionally, this report identifies capacity-building opportunities, and describes potentials for urban research in Sierra Leone.

In Freetown, urban informal settlements are characterised by insecurity of tenure, inadequate housing, and squalid living conditions. Currently a significant proportion of the city's population lives in urban informal settlements, which continue to grow and multiply. In order to address these complex challenges, it is critical to develop an urban research agenda that reflects the magnitude and the specificity of challenges facing inhabitants of urban informal settlements. The key question is: what knowledge do urban stakeholders, including city authorities, need if they are to improve the wellbeing of inhabitants of informal settlements and promote inclusiveness and equality in cities?

Firstly, new forms of data collection and analysis need to be prioritised by local and national governments, non-governmental organisations, and local communities. Secondly, research needs to be conducted in partnership with local actors and institutions; research priorities will ultimately be identified through increased collaboration and exchange.

This data will be invaluable for informing policymakers and guiding interventions to reduce inequality and poverty, and address processes of marginalisation in Freetown. Working closely with residents and community-based organisations is critical for collecting this type of information. Household data, community produced maps and profiles should inform and guide local and national government, give voice and visibility to inhabitants of informal settlements, and facilitate dialogue and exchange between urban stakeholders.

To facilitate the development of evidence-based policy, planning and programmes at the local and national level, emphasis should be placed on building the capacity of urban stakeholders. This is critical in order to implement research and produce knowledge that is relevant to Sierra Leone's urban development policies and practices. In order to ensure that Sierra Leone's urban agenda receives adequate recognition and support, local research agendas should be supported by international, high-level dialogue.

2. Trends in Existing Research

Whilst there exists a wealth of knowledge and evidence on Freetown's informal settlements, critical knowledge gaps remain. Of the evidence and data that exist, few studies are sufficiently disaggregated to give a true and dynamic picture of the geographical and demographic heterogeneity that characterises urban informal settlements. There exists also a paucity of recent, relevant and available data on informal settlements in Freetown. Given the rapid, dynamic shifts in the informal settlement populations much of the existing data should be considered inappropriate for guiding future policy.

The available research, reports and datasets on informal settlements in Freetown can be approximately divided into four categories:

- Geo-historical characteristics: historical background, physical location, general living condition, housing situation, tenure situation;
- Demographic characteristics: population (composition and growth rate), ethnic composition, age distribution, religious composition, marital status, sex and occupational compositions;
- Socio-economy and Influence: socio-cultural structures, economic activities, internal inequalities;
- Environmental health, Infrastructure and Services: environmental condition, disease prevalence, disaster, facilities available, access to social services

Broadly, research exists on community profiling, assessing community needs, capacities, vulnerability to risk and disasters, settlement conditions, youth volunteerism, and household-level nutrition. However available reports and data only relate to 19 out of 34 major informal settlements in Freetown, and only four settlements have been investigated deeply. In the vast majority of literature, the primary unit of analysis was the household.

One complicating factor was found to be that different area sizes were assumed by each study. The lack of formal demarcation means that researchers often collected data in the same informal settlement, but produced a very different

picture of the settlement and community. Additionally, it was usual for different names to be associated with the same settlement, or for the same informal settlement to be considered as two separate settlements with different names ascribed to each. In part this reflects a lack of coordination between governmental and non-governmental organisations and research partners.

One noticeable finding across numerous reports is that Sierra Leone does not have a specific policy for urban informal settlements. Government interventions in informal settlement areas are broadly limited to recurrent demolitions, as well as emergency response and humanitarian relief in the event of severe flooding or the outbreak of disease. It is also not clear whether a forum for dialogue on informal settlement matters has been established, as outlined by the Presidential Taskforce on Slums in 2015.

Overall there exists a lack of evidence for and understanding of the dynamics and drivers of change; how and why individuals, households, and informal settlements become marginalised, or fall into or climb out of poverty. Also there exists little data on how social structures and processes interact with material infrastructure and urban spatial planning in the city.

3. What we know and what we don't know about informal settlements in Freetown

Existing research has produced a comprehensive understanding of the geospatial characteristics of informal settlements in Freetown. Much of the existing geospatial data provides a description of the physical site, as well as information about land ownership, access to housing, and a description of the general living conditions in the informal settlements.

“Most of the occupied structures are limited in space to provide enough room for 4 persons, such that most household are crammed in these tiny space they call their home...the nature of dwelling houses are poor partly also because the land is owned by the state and the people are in perpetual fear of evictions” (YMCA and FEDURP-SL, 2009: 4-12).

What is lacking however is an understanding of how households access land and housing as well as other informal coping mechanisms.

Sierra Leone's National Census data is usually reported by wards, chiefdoms, districts and regions, making it difficult to determine the actual population living in informal settlements. However, research shows that informal settlement

populations have a relatively even gender balance, and that levels of education range from a few years of primary education to completion of higher education degrees. Research also shows that approximately 60% of the population is Muslim, whilst the remainder is Christian.

Many studies have found that social structures within informal settlements are critical to household coping strategies. This is supported by claims from individuals and households relating specifically to the reasons and benefits for joining such groups. A number of studies also provide detailed information on household financial assets and livelihood profiles including sources of income, earnings, expenditure patterns, and access to credit.

However, we still lack a nuanced understanding of existing informal structures of dominance, power and influence that affect individual and household access to resources and opportunity in informal settlements. There exists also a real lack of information on community representation and participation in decision-making processes at different scales.

Various studies have explored the relationships between environmental health infrastructure and services in informal settlements, particularly regarding health and educational facilities, drinking water facilities and the food status of households. However, the availability of services and infrastructure in informal settlements is not sufficient to understand how these services are accessed, and by which groups. Such information is critical to inform urban policy and planning decisions.

Many reports acknowledge the impacts of risk and vulnerability in producing and reproducing cycles of poverty and insecurity in Freetown. Vulnerability is explored primarily in terms of physical risks, such as flooding. It has been found that widespread poverty, high unemployment, and prolonged economic stagnation are the main vulnerability factors that lead to the proliferation of informal settlements. Overall however the role of social and economic factors in increasing or mitigating household and individual vulnerability requires further research.

4. Key Knowledge Gaps

Within the limitations described above, there exist substantial profiles of informal settlement communities in Freetown. However, a number of critical information gaps must be addressed to support evidence-based urban policy and planning. These knowledge gaps relate to four main themes: vulnerability; livelihoods; land and housing; and health.

Various reports have identified the significance of vulnerability and shocks in reproducing cycles of poverty. However, it is critical that future research attempts to better understand how city-wide trends manifest as shocks and/or opportunities in informal settlement communities. In order to address the drivers of urban poverty and the proliferation of informal settlements, it is important to understand how individuals and households become vulnerable to shocks, including the specific challenges facing female-headed households.

We know that the majority of inhabitants of informal settlements also work within the informal labour market. But what is not understood is what forms of work are carried out, who the operators are, the labour conditions, or how different forms of livelihood relate to specific settlements. Similarly, there is a significant knowledge gap on how different livelihoods relate to different areas within the city. Understanding these dynamic will allow for more targeted policies and planning that build on existing livelihood strategies to address the on going needs and aspirations of inhabitants of informal settlements.

There exists a significant knowledge gap regarding plot sizes and the ways in which the diverse housing needs in informal settlements are addressed and negotiated within the limitations of the settlement density and size. There exists also an important knowledge gap regarding the relationship between informal settlement tenants and structure owners, including the rights and entitlements of inhabitants of informal settlements, and how security or insecurity of tenure relates to individual and household vulnerability. Such information is critical for developing urban informal settlement policy and has important implications for future urban development planning.

Finally, there exists a significant knowledge gap around the social determinants of health in informal settlements. Moving beyond a purely spatial, GIS-oriented assessment of health services and infrastructure is critical for developing targeted and effective policies and interventions that address health issues in informal settlement communities; one of the primary drivers of risk and vulnerability.

5. Capacity Building Gaps and Needs

An assessment of training practices of various organisations in Freetown shows that most have relied on funding partners to provide for their training needs. Organisations often hire external consultants to do in-house training for staff, especially in Monitoring and Evaluation activities. There exists little coordination across urban stakeholders for identifying capacity gaps or capacity building.

A review of training practices found that training programmes amongst urban stakeholders are frequently developed in response to organisational and staff needs rather than in response to planning priorities or research. Moreover, much of the training acquired externally was observed to be generally driven by the wider market with rarely any consideration of the specific contexts within which organisations work. There also exists no appropriate institutional framework to support capacity building for urban planning and management. Given the lack of overall capacity, many urban stakeholders are not in a position even to articulate their demands for training.

6. Next Steps: Developing a Capacity Building Strategy

The capacity building of the urban actors and their stakeholders has to be carried out in both short-term and long term. In the short-term, the main approach to capacity building will be through designing training courses tailored to respond to the needs of the urban stakeholders (including NGOs, Local authorities and public sector agencies), and managed over a three-year period.

The long-term capacity needs shall be addressed through academic and professional institutions, for instance the Urban and Regional Planning Unit of the Institutes of Geography and Development Studies (Njala University) and other existing public institutions suitable for the capacity building of urban stakeholders.

7. The Role of SLURC

SLURC aims to become a platform to facilitate collaboration between NGOs, private sector, city authorities, government and universities in order to influence the national agenda for effective policy reforms for urban development. The Centre will work to support the generation of specific and relevant information to support evidence-based policy and planning decision-making in Freetown.

SLURC will be able to attract external grants and opportunities for international partnerships in ways that enable universities and research organisations to play an active role in civic engagement and urban policy dialogue. SLURC also aims to become a National Urban Research Resource Centre for education, training, cutting-edge research and public discussion on issues facing informal settlements and the broader urban environment.

SLURC is expected to provide capacity building support in terms of identification of training needs, preparation of training materials, training of trainers, international knowledge exchange visits, and through the documentation and dissemination of information amongst urban stakeholders.

References

YMCA and FEDURP-SL (2009). “Household Socio-Economic Survey and Enumeration of Kroo Bay Community, Freetown, Sierra Leone”

YMCA (YEAR?) “A report of Needs Assessment Survey on Livelihood education for Youths in five Slum communities in Freetown”

ABOUT UCL/DPU

The Development Planning Unit, University College London, is an international centre specialising in academic teaching, research, training and consultancy in the field of urban and regional development, with a focus on policy, planning management and design. It is concerned with understanding the multi-faceted and uneven process of contemporary urbanisation, and strengthening more socially just and innovative approaches to policy, planning management and design, especially in the contexts of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East as well as countries in transition.

The central purpose of the DPU is to strengthen the professional and institutional capacity of governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to deal with the wide range of development issues that are emerging at local, national and global levels. In London, the DPU runs postgraduate programmes of study, including a research degree (MPhil/PhD) programme, six one-year Masters Degree courses and specialist short courses in a range of fields addressing urban and rural development policy, planning, management and design. Overseas, the DPU Training and Advisory Service (TAS) provides training and advisory services to government departments, aid agencies, NGOs and academic institutions. These activities range from short missions to substantial programmes of staff development and institutional capacity building.

The academic staff of the DPU are a multi-disciplinary and multi-national group with extensive and on-going research and professional experience in various fields of urban and international development throughout the world. DPU Associates are a body of professionals who work closely with the Unit both in London and overseas. Every year the student body embraces more than 45 different nationalities.

To find more about us and the courses we run, please visit our website: www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu

ABOUT IGDS/NU

The Institute of Geography and Development Studies (IGDS) represents one of the four innovative academic structures of the School of Environmental Sciences at Njala University (NU). The Institute runs both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as well as provides opportunities for professional development and research. Its main concern is about promoting sustainable forms of development in Sierra Leone.

The IGDS has a remarkable experience in the delivery of world leading research and teaching in Geography and development (urban and rural) issues. Its staff have engaged with practitioners, organizations and UN agencies through consultancies and other community outreach activities. It was as a result of the initiative of the IGDS to establish an urban planning unit to further their work on issues affecting people living in informal settlements that the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) was formed.

ABOUT SLURC

The Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), based in Freetown, is a globally connected research centre created through a partnership between the Bartlett Development Planning Unit (University College London) and the Institute of Geography and Development Studies (Njala University) with funding by Comic Relief. SLURC aims to strengthen the research and analysis capacities of urban stakeholders in Sierra Leone; make urban knowledge available and accessible to those who need it, prioritizing residents of informal settlements; and, deliver world-leading research in order to influence urban policy and practice.

However, SLURC was established as a financially independent centre within Njala University with a view of further integration in future. It was also thought that the SLURC could become a model of good practices that other part of the university could adopt.

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