

# Sierra Leone

## Sierra Leone: Current Path

## Table of contents

Sierra Leone: Current Path	3
Sierra Leone: Current Path forecast	3
Demographics: Current Path	4
Economics: Current Path	5
Poverty: Current Path	7
Carbon Emissions/Energy: Current Path	8
Endnotes	9
Donors and Sponsors	9
Reuse our work	9
Cite this research	9

## Sierra Leone: Current Path

- [Sierra Leone: Current Path forecast](#)
- [Demographics: Current Path](#)
- [Economics: Current Path](#)
- [Poverty: Current Path](#)
- [Carbon Emissions/Energy: Current Path](#)

## Sierra Leone: Current Path forecast

### Chart 1: Political map of Sierra Leone

This page provides an overview of the key characteristics of Sierra Leone along its likely (or Current Path) development trajectory. The Current Path forecast from the International Futures forecasting (IFs) platform is a dynamic scenario that imitates the continuation of current policies and environmental conditions. The Current Path is therefore in congruence with historical patterns and produces a series of dynamic forecasts endogenised in relationships across crucial global systems. We use 2019 as a standard reference year and the forecasts generally extend to 2043 to coincide with the end of the third ten-year implementation plan of the African Union's Agenda 2063 long-term development vision.

Located in sub-Saharan Africa, Sierra Leone is bordered by Liberia and Guinea to the south-east and north-east, respectively, and the Atlantic Ocean on its western border. The nation belongs to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The official language of the country is English, although Krio is the most common indigenous language spoken by the majority of the population.

Geographically, the country covers a total area of 71 740km<sup>2</sup> and has a tropical climate that features a range of ecoregions from savannah to rainforests. There are two main seasons, as in many sub-Saharan African countries: the rainy season from May to November, and the dry harmattan season from December to May. Sierra Leone is divided into five administrative regions: the Northern Province, the North West Province, the Southern Province, the Eastern Province, and the Western Area. Four of the provinces are further divided into 14 districts, but the Western Area is divided into only two districts. Freetown, the capital city, is also the most populous in the nation. The country is rich in natural resources and earns a significant amount from its mineral deposits, especially diamonds, gold, bauxite and aluminium. Sierra Leone also has the largest natural harbour on the African continent.

Until the outbreak of Ebola in 2014, Sierra Leone was seeking to attain middle-income status by 2035, but the country still carries its post-conflict attributes of high youth unemployment, corruption and weak governance. The country continues to face the daunting challenge of enhancing transparency in managing its natural resources and creating fiscal space for development.

## Demographics: Current Path

Sierra Leone is the 11th most populous country in West Africa and the 34th most populous in Africa. The country had an estimated population of 7.9 million in 2019, up from 4.3 million in 1990 — an 82.6% increase in the population size over the past 29 years. In the Current Path forecast, the population of Sierra Leone is forecast to increase to 13.1 million — an increase of 66.3% within the 23-year period to 2043. The relatively slower increase in the population growth rate can be attributed to the adoption of improved birth control methods such as the use of contraceptives.

Sierra Leone has a large youthful population with a youth bulge of 47.9% and a median age of 19.4 years in 2019. The youth bulge, defined as the ratio of the population between the ages of 15 and 29 to the total adult population, will remain above 40% in the Current Path forecast. The large youth bulge raises concern about youth unemployment in the country that together with underemployment stands at about 70%. This poses an existential threat to the peace and security of the country.

In addition, 40.3% of the population is below the age of 15 years and 28.6% under the age of 30 years. The relatively large cohort of children under the age of 15 constrains the materialisation of the demographic dividend. With an expected decline in the fertility rate from 4.3 births per woman in 2019 to 2.9 births in 2043, it is projected that the proportion of people below the age of 15 years will fall to 32.6% over the next 24 years. This signals the likelihood of a more adult population, increasing the share of people under the age of 64 years from 28% in 2019 to 35.7% in 2043. The average life expectancy in Sierra Leone was 60 years in 2019 but is estimated to increase to 70 years in 2043. The relatively low life expectancy is mainly due to a high disease burden emanating from communicable and non-communicable diseases. With an expected decline in communicable diseases over the period, life expectancy is also projected to increase within the same period.

Over 2.6 million people were displaced during the civil war (1991–2002). In 1990, the majority of the Sierra Leonean population (66.8% of the population) resided in rural areas. However, over the past 29 years, the proportion of people residing in rural areas has marginally declined by 8.8 percentage points from 66.8% in 1990 to 58.0% in 2019, suggesting an increase in urbanisation. A factor that explains rural–urban migration in the country is the search for employment and improved livelihoods in the mining towns. However, Sierra Leone has a lot of slums in the urban centres. In 2014, it was estimated that 75.6% of the total urban population resided in places classified as slums. [1] In the Current Path forecast, this trend is projected to continue such that by 2043 almost 49% of the Sierra Leonean population will live in urban areas.

### Chart 4: Population density map for 2019

The total land area for Sierra Leone is approximately 71 740 km<sup>2</sup>. In 2019, Sierra Leone was the 6th most densely populated country in West Africa and 15th most densely populated country in Africa. The population density of Sierra Leone was estimated to be about 1.09 people per hectare, which is higher than the average of 0.45 for Africa and 0.65 for West Africa. Generally, the Temne region in the north and the Mende region in the south are the most densely populated areas. The most densely populated city is the national capital Freetown, due to its role as the financial, cultural, political and educational centre of the country, followed by Bo and Kenema. Sparsely populated areas in the country are located within the north-east and south-west regions.

## Economics: Current Path

The GDP of Sierra Leone increased by nearly US\$2.4 billion from 1990 to 2019, from US\$2.1 billion in 1990 to US\$4.5 billion in 2019, representing an increase of 114.3% over the 29-year period. The Sierra Leonean economy is mainly driven by agriculture and mineral production. Since the end of the civil war, which greatly destabilised the economy, the economy has rebounded and seen steady growth, peaking at 20.7% in 2013. This impressive growth was however disrupted by two major shocks to the economy: in late 2013 there was a decline in international prices of iron ore that Sierra Leone largely depends upon, and the outbreak of Ebola in 2014. The economy recovered in 2016, mainly as a result of international debt relief and donor assistance. The government has also launched the Medium-term National Development Plan (MTNDP, 2019–2023), which is aimed at transforming the economy. However, the country's economy contracted by 2% as the COVID-19 pandemic led to a slowdown in all sectors following global supply chain disruptions and lockdown measures. By 2043, Sierra Leone's GDP is estimated to nearly triple to US\$12.8 billion from its level in 2019. The increase in GDP reflects the higher rate of economic growth expected to occur within the next 22 years compared to previous years.

Although many of the charts in the sectoral scenarios also include GDP per capita, this overview is an essential point of departure for interpreting the general economic outlook of Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone has had an unstable GDP per capita over the past years. From 1990 to 2001, the GDP per capita declined from US\$1 360 to US\$895. The main factor accounting for this decline was the civil war that occurred during this period. After the civil war, the GDP per capita assumed an upward trend, increasing to peak at US\$1 861 in 2014, reflecting higher growth mainly as a result of the resumption of mining production in the country. Afterwards, the GDP per capita started declining due to the twin shocks of the fall of commodity prices and the Ebola crisis on the international market. This caused the GDP per capita to decline to US\$1 601 in 2019. The GDP per capita fell by 4% in 2020, reversing some of the recent gains in poverty reduction. However, with an expected increase in GDP and decline in fertility rates, it is projected that the GDP per capita will rise over the next 22 years, such that by 2043 the GDP per capita will have more than doubled to US\$2 464. Although Sierra Leone's GDP per capita in 1990 was slightly higher than the average for low-income countries in Africa, the trend reversed by 1997 so that in 2019 Sierra Leone's GDP per capita was US\$59 lower than the average for low-income countries in Africa. This gap is expected to widen to US\$1 326 by 2043, suggesting that Sierra Leone either has a higher population growth rate or slower economic growth compared to the average low-income country in Africa.

The size of the informal sector in Sierra Leone was equivalent to 33.4% of GDP in 2019. This is expected to decline to 28% by 2043, constituting a 5.4 percentage point decrease over the 22-year period. In 2019, the number of people employed by the informal economy constituted 63.6% of the total labour force, though this is expected to decline to 54% in 2043, which is also consistent with the expected decline in the level of informality within the same period. Women make up a larger proportion of workers in the informal sector, constituting about 57%. There is also quite a significant number of children engaged in unpaid work in the informal sector. Informal sector workers are highly concentrated in the Northern Area and the rural areas of the country. Throughout the period under consideration, the size of the informal sector in Sierra Leone is higher than the average for low-income African countries. This suggests that Sierra Leone has performed poorly in formalising its economy compared to the average for other African countries within its income group.

The IFs platform uses data from the Global Trade and Analysis Project (GTAP) to classify economic activity into six sectors: agriculture, energy, materials (including mining), manufactures, services and information and communications technology (ICT). Most other sources use a threefold distinction between only agriculture, industry and services with the result that data may differ.

The three largest contributors to GDP in Sierra Leone are the agriculture, service and manufacturing sectors, respectively. In 2019, the agriculture sector's contribution to GDP was about US\$1.9 billion, representing 42.2% of GDP. However, the contribution of the agriculture sector is projected to decline over the period so that by 2043 the sector's contribution to GDP will be 19.4%, indicating the structural transformation of the economy. The service sector is currently the second biggest contributor to GDP with a total contribution of US\$1.7 billion, constituting 38% of GDP. In the Current Path forecast, it is projected that the service sector will increase its contribution to GDP and overtake agriculture as the largest contributor to GDP by 2027. By 2043, the contribution of the service sector to GDP is projected to be 49.4%, which will be 30 percentage points more than the contribution of the agriculture sector. The industrial sector, however, will steadily increase its contribution to GDP from 12.4% in 2019 to 21.3% by 2043, overtaking agriculture as the second largest contributor in 2042. Whereas these developments are consistent with the structural transformation and growth trajectory of an economy, the decline in agricultural contributions to the economy may be a concern for food security in the country.

The data on agricultural production and demand in the IFs forecasting platform initialises from data provided on food balances by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). IFs contains data on numerous types of agriculture but aggregates its forecast into crops, meat and fish, presented in million metric tons. Chart 9 shows agricultural production and demand as a total of all three categories.

The average crop yield for 2019 was 5.1 metric tons per hectare. In 1990, Sierra Leone's demand for agricultural products outstripped domestic production by 0.17 million metric tons; this increased to 0.95 million metric tons in 2019. This can partly be attributed to the declining interest in the agriculture sector reflected in the share of total employment, as the sector's contribution to total employment declined from 71.9% in 1990 to 54.9% in 2019. Although the yield per hectare for crops is expected to increase from 5.1 metric tons per hectare in 2019 to 6.7 metric tons per hectare in 2043, the gap between demand and production will widen. By 2043, demand will outstrip domestic production by about 5.1 million metric tons, representing a 400% increase over the period. This raises concerns about food security in the country within the next 22 years. Many Sierra Leoneans engaged in agriculture do so on a subsistence basis, providing little or no value addition to agricultural products. Problems with agriculture in the country include the inability to add value to agricultural products due to the lack of modern processing equipment. Poor transportation networks linking farms to markets as well as the lack of access to credit facilities for farmers also inhibit agricultural growth in the country.

## Poverty: Current Path

There are numerous methodologies for and approaches to defining poverty. We measure income poverty and use GDP per capita as a proxy. In 2015, the World Bank adopted the measure of US\$1.90 per person per day (in 2011 international prices), also used to measure progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 1 of eradicating extreme poverty. To account for extreme poverty in richer countries occurring at slightly higher levels of income than in poor countries, the World Bank introduced three additional poverty lines in 2017:

- US\$3.20 for lower middle-income countries
- US\$5.50 for upper middle-income countries
- US\$22.70 for high-income countries.

As a low-income country, Sierra Leone uses the US\$1.90 per person per day benchmark. The country is one of the poorest in Africa and the world. In 2019, 3.9 million people, constituting 49.7% of the Sierra Leone population, lived on less than US\$1.90 per day. This increased to 4.8 million people (58.4%) in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated economic crisis, before marginally declining to 4.7 million people (55.3%) in 2022. Thereafter, it continues an upward trend so that by 2043 there will still be 5.5 million people (42.2% of the population) living on less than US\$1.90 per day. This means that although the proportion of the extremely poor population will reduce by 7.5 percentage points, the absolute number of poor people in the country will be 1.6 million people more than its level in 2019 due to the population growth. Throughout the period under consideration, the proportion of poor people in Sierra Leone is higher than the average for low-income countries in Africa, and the gap widens over time. By 2043, the extreme poverty rate in Sierra Leone is estimated to be 17 percentage points above the projected average for low-income countries in Africa. Poverty is widespread in Sierra Leone, with the majority of the population being multidimensionally poor. Much of the poor population resides in rural areas, with a quarter of them unable to afford a basic diet. Investment in agriculture remains one of the surest ways to reduce poverty in the country as most of the poor population is informally employed in this sector.

## Carbon Emissions/Energy: Current Path

The IFs platform forecasts six types of energy, namely oil, gas, coal, hydro, nuclear and other renewables. To allow comparisons between different types of energy, the data is converted into billion barrels of oil equivalent (BBOE). The energy contained in a barrel of oil is approximately 5.8 million British thermal units (MBTUs) or 1 700 kilowatt-hours (kWh) of energy.

The most widely produced energy source in Sierra Leone is gas, followed by hydro and nuclear. In 2019, the total amount of gas produced in the country amounted to 0.5 million BOE, constituting 90.9% of total energy production. Hydropower accounts for 59% of installed grid-connected electricity generation capacity. By 2043, the total amount of gas produced is projected to increase to 9 million BOE, constituting 92.7% of total energy production in the country. Hydro production constituted 7.3% of total energy production in 2019 but is projected to decline to about 2% in 2043. Likewise, nuclear power, which in 2019 constituted about 2% of total production, is projected to decline to 0.5% by 2043. The country has potential for renewable energy through the use of biomass from agricultural waste and hydro and solar energy. Sierra Leone will begin the production of other renewable energies such as solar and wind energies, which will constitute about 5% of total energy production in 2043.

Carbon is released in many ways, but the three most important contributors to greenhouse gases are carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), carbon monoxide (CO) and methane (CH<sub>4</sub>). Since each has a different molecular weight, IFs uses carbon. Many other sites and calculations use CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent.

Sierra Leone is one of the countries in Africa with significantly low levels of carbon emissions. Regardless, carbon emissions have increased steadily from nearly zero in 1990 to 1 million tons of carbon in 2019. In the Current Path forecast, carbon emissions are projected to increase to 2 million tons by 2043.



## Endnotes

1. Future Learn, [Informality in Freetown](#), Sierra Leone

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### Cite this research

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