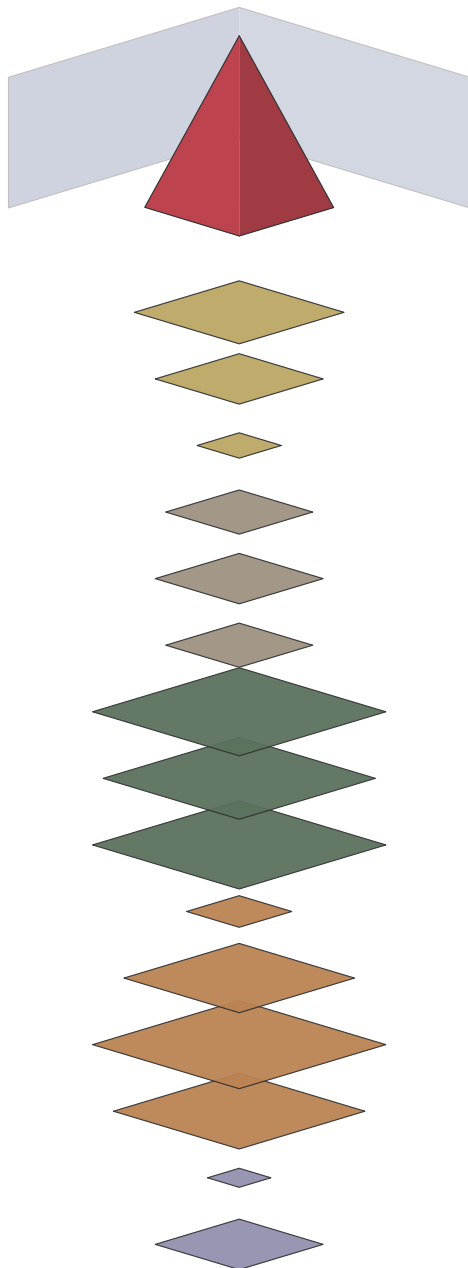


 **SIERRA LEONE**



 **4.95  
CRIMINALITY SCORE**

**30<sup>th</sup>** of 54 African countries  
**12<sup>th</sup>** of 15 West African countries

 **CRIMINAL MARKETS 4.6**

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	5
HUMAN SMUGGLING	4
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	2
ARMS TRAFFICKING	3.5
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	4
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	3.5
FLORA CRIMES	7
FAUNA CRIMES	6.5
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	7
HEROIN TRADE	2.5
COCAINE TRADE	5.5
CANNABIS TRADE	7
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	6
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	1.5
FINANCIAL CRIMES	4

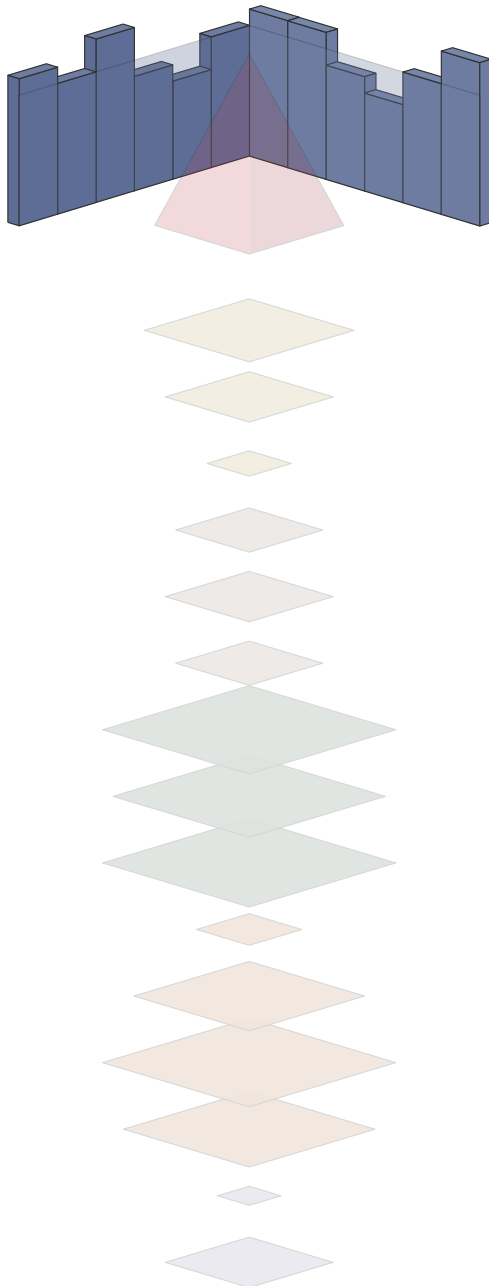
 **CRIMINAL ACTORS 5.3**

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	2.5
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	6
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	6.5
FOREIGN ACTORS	7.5
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	7.5

 **4.04  
RESILIENCE SCORE**



 **SIERRA LEONE**





 **4.04  
RESILIENCE SCORE**

25<sup>th</sup> of 54 African countries  
8<sup>th</sup> of 15 West African countries

<b>POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE</b>	<b>4.5</b>
<b>GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS</b>	<b>3.5</b>
<b>JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>LAW ENFORCEMENT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY</b>	<b>4.5</b>
<b>ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING</b>	<b>4.5</b>
<b>ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY</b>	<b>3.5</b>
<b>VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PREVENTION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>NON-STATE ACTORS</b>	<b>5</b>

 **4.95  
CRIMINALITY SCORE**

 <b>CRIMINAL MARKETS</b>	<b>4.6</b>
 <b>CRIMINAL ACTORS</b>	<b>5.3</b>



# CRIMINALITY

## Criminal Markets

### PEOPLE

Sierra Leone is both a source and destination country for human trafficking. Men, women, and children are all exploited by traffickers, who mainly recruit people from rural areas and take them to urban centres and mining sites for the purposes of sex trafficking, forced labour in mining and domestic service, and street crime. Child sex trafficking is fuelled by local demand, with traffickers deceiving parents into handing over their children under the pretence that they will provide them with education. A staggering number of children in Sierra Leone's eastern province have experienced trafficking, mainly for child labour. The illicit diamond mining industry exacerbates the trafficking problem, with women and girls disproportionately affected. These women and girls are often coerced into marrying foreign nationals who pay locals to mine on their behalf, and are thus subjected to labour exploitation and potential sexual abuse by those wielding power in the industry. In addition to domestic exploitation, Sierra Leonean children are also trafficked to neighbouring countries such as Mali, Niger, and Guinea. Trafficking networks are reported to exploit Sierra Leonean women in domestic servitude across Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar, as well as in other countries such as Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon.

Sierra Leone has experienced significant migration flows as a result of conflict and natural disasters. Although being part of the ECOWAS has helped reduce intra-regional smuggling, smuggling activities do continue to occur, with many Sierra Leoneans migrating to countries outside of ECOWAS, particularly Libya, en route to Europe, where they become vulnerable to human trafficking. The dynamics of human smuggling in Sierra Leone have remained steady in recent years.

While there have been sporadic reports of criminal gangs engaging in extortion and protection racketeering in Sierra Leone, this criminal market remains limited.

### TRADE

Although the civil war in Sierra Leone ended over 20 years ago, arms trafficking remains a significant concern in the country. Despite government efforts to eliminate illegal weapons, firearms continue to resurface. Military

officers and government officials are known to have been involved in the trafficking of government weapons and ammunition, and cross-border arms smuggling is a confirmed trend, with weapons primarily flowing to Liberia. There are also suspicions that illegal arms depots exist in the border region shared with Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. The proceeds from illicit activities such as illegal logging are used to purchase these weapons.

Counterfeit goods, including toothpaste, batteries, and medicines, dominate the Sierra Leonean market. Although the country has some manufacturing facilities for these items, the vast majority of the products are imported from China. As a result, the extent and scale of counterfeit goods smuggling in Sierra Leone may be greater than currently estimated.

The porous borders between Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia have facilitated the proliferation of smuggling routes between these countries. Many people in these border areas move between the countries daily and do not consider the smuggling of products a crime. Cigarette smuggling has been a problem in Sierra Leone since the 1980s, and currently a significant number of untaxed cigarettes enter the country. Kambia District, on the northern border with Guinea, is the main point of departure for the smuggling of goods.

### ENVIRONMENT

Illegal logging is an enduring challenge to Sierra Leone's forests. Reports have referred to timber as 'the new diamonds'. Chinese criminal actors dominate the illicit logging trade, and there is evidence of political corruption and violations of national trading moratoriums. The Gola Rainforest National Park on the southern border with Liberia in particular is under threat, the main target being rosewood. Despite government efforts to combat the issue, allegations of political connections and support for illegal logging persist. Additionally, widespread deforestation for commercial charcoal production is a serious concern, and the Western Area Peninsula National Park forest reserve, located immediately south of Freetown, has been heavily impacted. A connection between Chinese illegal mining and logging activities has been exposed in certain regions, and concerns have been raised about the destructive impact of these criminal activities on Sierra Leone's natural resources. Temporary declines in illegal logging have occurred, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, but indications



suggest a resurgence as demand from China for rosewood increases. International trade restrictions have been imposed, but Sierra Leone remains a major exporter of rosewood.

Fauna crimes are also a persistent issue in Sierra Leone, enabled by weak legislation and inadequate enforcement. The illicit wildlife market targets illegal harvesting and trafficking of pangolin scales, rare animal parts, and endangered species. These items are often smuggled to East Asia through various transit countries, with large shipments being disguised among timber in containers destined for China and Vietnam. Poaching poses a significant threat to species such as the white-necked rockfowl, pygmy hippopotamus, forest elephant, and various monkeys, while chimpanzee poaching for bushmeat and the illegal pet trade remains widespread. Despite the declaration of the chimpanzee as the country's national animal, outdated and poorly enforced protective laws allow for the unchecked growth of this illicit market. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing has also escalated in recent years, primarily driven by foreign fishing vessels. With the fisheries sector employing a significant portion of the population and contributing significantly to the economy, the decline in fish stocks poses a threat to livelihoods and food security.

Illicit non-renewable resource trade in Sierra Leone is significant, particularly in the case of artisanal and small-scale gold mining and gold smuggling. Most of the country's gold is mined, bought, sold, and exported through informal networks that bypass formal supply chains, with limited amounts entering local communities and some being smuggled to Guinea. Violence is not prevalent in this area. Efforts to regulate the industry have been hindered by weak legislation, slow registration processes, and a lack of effective legal implementation. Artisanal diamond mining also occurs, primarily in Koidu, where diamonds are illegally traded in open-air markets. Local communities believe these activities to be justified, as they feel exploited by foreign companies and aggrieved at not benefiting from their country's resources. Tax differentials with neighbouring countries, such as Guinea, contribute to gold smuggling, but the loss of gold is less significant than in other West African countries, owing to smaller deposits. The illegal oil trade between Sierra Leone and Guinea persists, with price differentials driving the illicit flow of oil across the border.

## DRUGS

Sierra Leone has long played a key role in the drug trade, but there is no evidence to suggest widespread heroin trafficking in the country. The cocaine trade, however,

has shown signs of increasing in recent years, following a growing regional trend. Criminal organizations from South America and West Africa use Sierra Leone as a distribution and transit zone for cocaine destined for European consumption markets. Sierra Leone also operates as a transit point for other drugs to North American, and increasingly, East and South East Asian markets. Freetown has become a primary hub for drug trafficking operations, particularly through maritime routes. Widespread corruption at the port and vulnerabilities within law enforcement contribute to the lack of seizures and inadequate application of laws. In the past, high-level government officials have been implicated in cocaine trafficking, suggesting a link between insecurity, drug trafficking, and the weakening of institutions. Additionally, significant consumption of cocaine in the form of crack has been observed in recent years.

Sierra Leone is now a major producer and exporter of cannabis, with the illegal trade of the drug reaching significant proportions. Cannabis cultivation and consumption has surged across various districts, including the capital city of Freetown and the northern region, particularly Kambia District. The ease with which it is possible to smuggle cannabis across the border into Guinea, Liberia, and other African nations, as well as the Middle East, Europe, and the US, has contributed to the drug's widespread cultivation in the country. Sierra Leone's law enforcement bodies have been implicated in illicit cannabis trade, with some sectors allegedly cooperating or intentionally overlooking these activities. The current situation makes Sierra Leone a significant player with regards to cannabis production in the Mano River Union region, and a key exporter of the drug in West Africa.

Tramadol is a commonly abused synthetic drug in Sierra Leone. It is predominantly transported via the waterways between Guinea and Sierra Leone, with Kambia serving as a local smuggling hub owing to its strategic location on both a waterway and a main road connecting Guinea's capital of Conakry and Sierra Leone. Street hawkers play a major role in the sale of opioid drugs, while benzodiazepines and inhalants are commonly used by children and young people. Tramadol and LSD markets in Sierra Leone primarily relies on supplies from China and Vietnam, facilitated by Indian importers. These drugs are used to control the mood and enhance the physical stamina of young people involved in illegal logging, and are also trafficked to European and Asian markets. A new synthetic drug called kush – not to be mistaken with the synonymous label for some forms of marijuana – has surfaced in Sierra Leone in recent years, and quickly captured a significant proportion of the drug use market. Consumption is widespread,



particularly among the youth, inflicting significant damage on local communities. 'Kush' is manufactured at various laboratories in Freetown.

## CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

There are no indications that cyber-dependent crime related to organized crime is widespread.

## FINANCIAL CRIMES

Sierra Leone is grappling with various types of financial crime, with corruption in the public sector being the primary source of criminal proceeds. A lack of resources to combat financial crime, a large informal and cash-based economy, as well as a lack of supervision in non-bank financial institutions, all contribute to create a favourable environment for corruption and financial crime. In addition, instances of financial fraud have been reported in the private sector. While tax fraud and petty financial crime occur occasionally, this is not considered systemic or linked to criminal gangs.

## Criminal Actors

Foreign criminal actors play a significant role in various illicit markets in Sierra Leone. Colombian cartels have established connections with corrupt government and military officials, and make use of Sierra Leone as part of their cocaine trafficking routes. Nigerian criminal networks are also gaining influence, particularly in the informal security space, which is related to drug smuggling. Additionally, Chinese companies, citizens, and organized crime groups are involved in illegal activities such as wildlife trafficking, facilitated by their investment in mining and infrastructure projects. Human trafficking and smuggling operations involve cooperation with

Kuwaiti gangs, while Middle Eastern businesspeople, some with connections to Hezbollah, dominate the legal and illegal trade of gemstones and diamonds.

There is no evidence to suggest the existence of consolidated mafia-style groups in Sierra Leone. However, criminal networks are heavily involved in illicit activity in the country, particularly in illegal mining, drug trafficking, illegal logging, and robbery. These networks often involve corrupt government officials, police, and intelligence officers, who will accept bribes to overlook illegal activities. Sierra Leonean criminal groups often collaborate with foreign nationals and establish front companies or small business ventures to conceal their illicit operations. In Freetown, gangs engage in petty crime and street-level drug dealing. However, they also maintain relationships with politicians and political parties and are sometimes employed as enforcers during election periods. The overall crime rate has risen in recent years, particularly in Freetown, and robberies, home invasions, assaults, and petty street crime are becoming more common throughout the country.

Corruption is an ongoing problem in Sierra Leone, from low-ranking officials to the highest government levels. In some cases, it is difficult to disentangle the state's lack of capacity to control corruption from the protection or collusion that officials provide to criminals. Private sector actors also rely heavily on political connections to establish successful businesses, underscoring the intertwined nature of business and governance in the country. For instance, private sector actors with opaque ownership structures connected to government officials are often awarded contracts from ministries. Private actors are also involved in more significant and lucrative organized criminal enterprises, specifically illegal artisanal mining. These companies are reported to recruit local gangs to intimidate and attack the owners of surrounding land.

# RESILIENCE

## LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Sierra Leone continues to face persistent challenges with regards to corruption, poverty, and youth disaffection, despite successful post-war elections and peaceful transfers of power. Efforts to combat these issues and bring about meaningful change are hindered by the vested interests of government officials and limited

resources, while the impact of the Ebola and COVID-19 pandemics further impeded the country's political and economic transformation. Power is mainly concentrated within the executive branch, with the president and Parliament determining government policy. Additionally, Sierra Leone's various state institutions struggle to impose adequate checks and balances on the executive, hampering their effectiveness. Despite government



efforts to tackle corruption, this remains a significant challenge. Over half of Sierra Leoneans report having paid a bribe for government services. High-profile corruption cases often do not result in convictions, with the focus frequently shifting to asset recovery rather than prosecution. While the government has pledged to combat corruption, concerns exist about selective prosecution and political interference. Transparency in public procurement processes and government expenditure has also been questioned, and political appointments are often based on loyalty rather than competence. Achieving transparency and accountability in governance is a challenge owing to the need to balance various political factions linked to past civil wars. It is difficult for the general public to report misconduct by government officials, despite the existence of institutions tasked with handling these matters.

Sierra Leone recognizes the significance of international cooperation and actively engages with various organizations and initiatives, including ratifying international conventions to combat transnational organized crime. Foreign assistance, particularly from the US and Europe, plays a vital role in supporting Sierra Leone's development efforts in areas such as healthcare, governance, and economic growth. Although the country has embarked on a series of reforms to address development challenges, its legal framework against organized crime is considered weak, underfunded, and understaffed. While legislation against illegal drugs, corruption, and money laundering is in place, enforcement continues to be a challenge. Sierra Leone has, however, made strides in addressing human trafficking and cyber-dependent crime.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The judicial system in Sierra Leone faces significant challenges that hinder its independence and effectiveness. Insufficient funding, professionalism, accountability, and oversight make the judiciary susceptible to manipulation by the executive branch. Limited access to justice is a problem outside the capital owing to a lack of lawyers, courtrooms, and infrastructure, as well as widespread poverty. Judges are appointed by the president, blurring the separation of powers, and corruption and law-breaking often go unpunished, undermining the judicial system's integrity. There have been successful prosecutions for human trafficking, but there are no specialized judiciary units dedicated to organized crime cases.

Effective law enforcement in Sierra Leone is hindered by significant challenges with regards to the capacity and professionalism of the police force. Police lack resources, sufficient remuneration, and adequate training, and

even basic supplies such as paper for reports, which impedes their daily operations. The slow and unreliable response of the police, coupled with corruption and political interference, has undermined public trust in the force. Reports indicate that some corrupt elements of the police and other officials facilitate trafficking and drug consumption, and accountability for police misconduct remains limited, despite existing provisions for complaint mechanisms and internal investigations.

Sierra Leone also faces significant challenges in maintaining its territorial integrity and border security. Its long borders, both land and sea, are highly porous, allowing for widespread smuggling. The lack of security force presence and enforcement of customs and immigration laws in border areas further exacerbates the problem. The country's long coast and limited naval capacity make it vulnerable to maritime imports of illicit products. While the government maintains a monopoly on the use of force in certain urban areas and accessible territories, large parts of the country remain isolated with limited public infrastructure. During the rainy season, many roads become impassable, with only a small percentage of roads being paved.

## ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Sierra Leone faces significant challenges in combating money laundering due to the loose oversight of financial institutions, weak regulations, pervasive corruption, and the limited enforcement of laws against financial crimes. The country is at high risk of money laundering and terrorist financing, although it has made some improvements in this area. One key weakness is the inability of law enforcement agencies to confiscate the proceeds of crime, highlighting the absence of effective financial investigations to track illicit funds and deprive criminals of their profits. Money laundering activities are linked to drug proceeds, illicit mineral transactions, and casinos and high-end hotels. Despite some reforms and digital initiatives, Sierra Leone's controls in this sphere remain underdeveloped and underfunded.

Sierra Leone's regulatory environment faces significant challenges in ensuring the effective enforcement of regulations and promoting economic development. Despite abundant natural and mineral resources, regulatory instruments are not adequately enforced, and weak human capital and infrastructure further hinder policy implementation. The economy relies heavily on subsistence agriculture, with limited market-based competition. Macroeconomic stability is fragile, and the economy is vulnerable to external shocks. Inflation rates have been volatile, and a redenomination of the currency raised



concerns about the competence and independence of the central bank. Limited infrastructure, including power generation deficiencies, and corruption hinder non-mining sectors and discourage foreign investment. Non-mining activities, such as the nascent tourist industry, face infrastructure constraints, which have been exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cash flow shortages have resulted in delayed payments to private contractors and government service providers.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

The government of Sierra Leone has made efforts to identify and protect victims of trafficking; however, support for victims and witnesses remains inadequate. While the government has established procedures to identify victims and refer them to services, the implementation of the referral mechanism is inconsistent, leading to delays in assistance. Some victims have had to sleep at police stations owing to a lack of appropriate housing, particularly for men. There have also been instances where officials did not uniformly follow standard protocols for referring victims to NGOs for specialized care. NGOs have played a crucial role in providing victim assistance, and the government relies heavily on them.

Sierra Leone's efforts to prevent crime have been mixed, although there have been some improvements in recent years. The establishment of an anti-trafficking task force and the signing of a memorandum of understanding with Guinea have been positive steps. However, efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex and forced labour have been lacking. The government has committed

to addressing wildlife crime and strengthening law enforcement activity in this area, with the adoption of a new plan and an increased funding allocation. However, in terms of corruption, the anti-corruption commission has focused on short-term asset recovery rather than building long-term prosecution capacity.

Sierra Leone's media landscape is characterized as pluralist and independent, with community radio stations playing a significant role in reaching the population. In recent years, there have been positive developments in press freedom, including the repeal of laws that criminalized defamation and false news. The government has also enacted an act aimed at professionalizing journalism and safeguarding freedom of expression. Concerns remain about the potential impact on media activities of certain provisions of cybercrime legislation, although some of the restrictive regulations have been removed. Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Sierra Leone play a crucial role in filling gaps in public service delivery and raising awareness about issues such as human trafficking and sex crimes against women and vulnerable individuals. CSOs collaborate with the government on initiatives and lobbying efforts to combat these issues, but limitations exist owing to capacity constraints, including weak organizational governance and financial control. Some CSOs have faced accusations of political bias, and there are growing concerns about a shrinking space for criticism and activism. While cooperation between CSOs and the government in addressing organized crime appears to be relatively cohesive, a slight decrease has been observed in this area in recent years.

