



The International Rescue Committee in Sierra Leone – Fact Sheet

Summary

Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war caused huge displacement, loss of life and widespread destruction to buildings, roads and other infrastructure. The International Rescue Committee began providing emergency services in 1998 to respond to the enormous humanitarian needs, and after the signing of the peace agreement in 2002, has shifted its efforts to post-conflict development, with a focus on education and child protection, gender-based violence and health.

Background

Sierra Leone's war began in 1991 with a series of cross-border attacks from neighboring Liberia by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF). In the following years, the guerilla group swept through the eastern diamond-mining region, terrorizing civilians and causing widespread displacement. In 1997 elected President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was overthrown by a junta calling itself the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). The group, under the leadership of Johnny Paul Koroma, suspended the constitution and joined forces with the RUF. In 1998, West African peacekeeping troops, ECOMOG, forced the junta to flee the capital Freetown and returned President Kabbah to office. But ECOMOG control was tenuous and the AFRC/RUF rebels held the east and north. Civil strife reached its peak in 1999 when the two rebel groups stormed Freetown, while the RUF looted and destroyed communities across the country's eastern province, murdering, raping and maiming villagers. The RUF also abducted children, turning them into fighters, workers and sex slaves. Hundreds of thousands of people fled their homes.

ECOMOG eventually quelled the uprising and the United Nations brokered a peace accord, but the war continued into 2000. Rebels took several hundred UN peacekeepers hostage. Attacks on civilians escalated as did cross-border fighting between the rebels and Guinean troops. More displacement in Sierra Leone and Guinea ensued. A third peace agreement was signed by President Kabbah and the rebel RUF in 2001 and disarmament and demobilization of troops and abducted children was resumed. The UN declared the disarmament process complete in April 2002, and on May 14, 2002, the country peacefully re-elected Kabbah president of Sierra Leone.

The United Nations estimates that 400,000 Sierra Leonean refugees fled to neighboring countries during the conflict. Another 450,000 were internally displaced (IDPs) within Sierra Leone. The vast majority of Sierra Leonean refugees and internally displaced people have now returned to their homes, and are facing the great challenge of rebuilding their lives and communities.

Sierra Leone has already made significant strides in reconstruction, peacebuilding and development. In 2004, the Government of Sierra Leone established local councils to strengthen local governance and decentralize control of development resources, an initiative that has enabled local actors to undertake a range of successful reconstruction projects. Sierra Leone is also one of two countries receiving post-conflict recovery advice and assistance from the new United Nations Peacebuilding Commission. And in September 2007, Sierra Leone made further progress with the completion of its first democratic presidential election after the withdrawal of

peacekeeping forces and transfer of power from the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) to the All People's Congress (APC).

Meanwhile, with the end of two decades of war in Liberia, refugee camps in Sierra Leone have been closed and Liberians have returned home, with a small residual Liberian population integrating into Sierra Leonean communities.

The Role of the IRC

The IRC began emergency operations in Sierra Leone in 1999. With its headquarters in Freetown and three field offices in Kono, Kenema and Kailahun districts, IRC brings post-conflict development services to Sierra Leoneans struggling to rebuild their lives after more than a decade of civil war, as well as to the residual Liberian refugee population in Sierra Leone. Programs include child protection, education, health, gender-based violence prevention and response, and governance. Drawing on IRC's Program Framework Model, IRC Sierra Leone works to increase local participation in project activities, build local capacity, promote and protect human rights, partner with local communities and organizations, and holistically address relief and development needs.

Programs

Education: The IRC works together with the government Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS) to support children's general psychosocial well being through education programming, focusing on meeting the educational needs of marginalized and disaffected children and youth, transforming existing educational systems so that avenues for accessing a range of quality learning opportunities are available to the most marginalized.

Currently the IRC provides educational support to over 9,000 children engaged in or at-risk of becoming engaged in exploitative child labor through holistic interventions. Through this program IRC provides children and youth with educational or skills training opportunities, school materials, uniforms, and tuition vouchers. The program mobilizes and sensitizes communities to child labor and the importance of education for children and the community. To strengthen national and local systems for monitoring and eliminating exploitative child labor and supporting education, the IRC advocates for issues of child labor, children's rights, promotion of education and skills training in policy.

In a recently launched initiative focused on improving access and quality education for marginalized youth the IRC is supporting rural Junior Secondary Schools in Sierra Leone through the capacity building of local education authorities, school institutions and teachers. To foster the improvement of education quality, IRC supports MEYS officials in the monitoring and supervising schools and supports teacher training. IRC also facilitates teacher training in participatory methodologies, curriculum development, school and classroom management, health education, and financial management, and how to provide appropriate educational and psychosocial support to children and youth withdrawn or prevented from worst forms of child labor.

Finally, the IRC supports 125 Sierra Leonean primary school teachers enrolled in a rigorous distance learning program which is enabling them to work towards obtaining teaching certificates. The IRC is also working on the development of a distance education teacher training curriculum for Junior Secondary School teachers.

Health: Sierra Leone's maternal mortality rates are among the world's highest and a third of all infants do not live to see the age of five. The IRC works to increase child and maternal survival rates by training public health staff and traditional birth assistants and clinic aides on basic reproductive health care, and working with health staff to improve services for common childhood illnesses, safe motherhood and immunizations.

In order to build a sustainable health care system and slowly phase full responsibility for health care delivery over to local structures, IRC strives to build the capacity of clinic staff, the District Health Management Teams and communities themselves to address local health needs. In Kenema district, IRC works closely with the District Health Management Team to improve management practices within drug supply and distribution, health information systems and financial and administrative practices.

In an effort to prevent disease and reduce the country's high child mortality rate, IRC conducts outreach programs to promote reproductive health, disease prevention, feeding and weaning and HIV/AIDS prevention.

IRC also undertook a major Lassa fever prevention campaign in all eight refugee camps, and surrounding host communities aimed at eradicating this potentially deadly hemorrhagic disease, which is spread by rats. The project successfully controlled the incidence of Lassa fever per camp per month to below the target level, and documented improvements in hygiene behavior of the refugee and host community populations. Currently, project activities encompass hygiene promotion, surveillance, outbreak investigation and response activities in host communities where the remaining refugees are living and the strengthening institutional capacity of the District Health Management Team and other partners to run similar projects.

Gender based violence prevention and response: The gender-based violence (GBV) program started in 1999 and has evolved into a vital program assisting thousands of survivors of gender-based violence across the country. IRC works closely with local communities to raise awareness about GBV, in order to facilitate a change in attitudes and behavior that condone and perpetuate gender-based violence. Local women's and men's action groups are empowered to actively engage in prevention activities and to provide support and referral services to survivors. At the national level IRC advocates for policy reform addressing gender-based violence.

IRC operates three Sexual Assault Referral Centers in Freetown, Kenema and Kono, where survivors of sexual assault can access free comprehensive counseling, medical care, follow-up support and legal support services. IRC is currently working towards embedding the sexual assault referral centers within government structures, and encouraging the government of Sierra Leone to gradually roll out sexual assault response services across the country. With Parliament's passage of the Gender Bills, IRC is now working with the grassroots organizations involved in drafting the bills to facilitate roll-out and implementation.

Governance: Working in collaboration with Management Systems International, Christian Children's Fund and World Vision, IRC is working on an initiative in Kailahun aiming to build broader community based political participation and facilitate community participation in national dialogue. IRC organizes regular forums and meetings where communities can discuss local issues among themselves and with their elected councilors. Communities are working to develop community action plans, thereby receiving hands-on experience in social and political mobilization and organization. Local community groups and elected leaders are also receiving training to build their capacity to engage in national dialogue.