

These fact sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with information on areas of professional concern. They provide a summary as well as identifying some annotated references that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding. These references can be obtained through the AMEP Resource Centre at rescentr@nceltr.mq.edu.au

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Context

People from Sierra Leone are emerging in recent immigrant intakes. Sierra Leone is situated on the coast of western Africa, bordered on the north and northeast by Guinea and on the southeast by Liberia. It is a little larger than Tasmania, and has a population of about 5.5 million people. Its coastal zone, which is to the west of the country, is swampy. The inland gradually rises to the highest mountains in the country, which are in the northeast, near the border with Guinea. Sierra Leone has some valuable natural resources, but the lack of political stability that has characterised it for the past 30 years means that the standard of living remains very low. Sierra Leone is ranked last of 175 nations by the United Nations Development Programme in its 'Human Development Index' – a statistical ranking which combines measures of life expectancy, access to schooling and average income (see the Annotated bibliography).

A civil war that began in 1992 has displaced millions of people, but peace seems to be returning to the country. After a number of failed attempts to resolve this conflict, the fighting ceased in 2002, and now the government and international agencies are trying to restore stability and rebuild the country.

Historical background

Sierra Leone derived its name from sightings by Portuguese navigators in the 15th century, who reported that from the sea, the mountains in the area looked like a lion.

Sierra Leone sits on the edges of the former medieval Islamic kingdom of Mali that extended across western and central Africa. There is a continuing Islamic legacy in the area, and today about half the population of Sierra Leone are Muslims.

Like its neighbour Liberia, Sierra Leone's existence as a modern entity derived from the settlement of freed slaves from the Caribbean (Sierra Leone) and North America (Liberia). The freed slaves were

settled in 1787 by an English philanthropist in what is now the capital, Freetown. The freed slaves were originally from the West Indies, but they were later joined by slaves who had been found aboard slave ships intercepted by the British after the British Government declared the slave trade illegal in 1807.

The descendants of these freed slaves are known as 'Krios'. Throughout colonial times they were traders and civil servants, often forming a pro-British elite in Sierra Leone as traders or in public administration. The area around Freetown became a British colony in 1787, and the hinterland of Sierra Leone became a British Crown protectorate in 1896.

Sierra Leone was granted independence from Britain in 1961 and a democratic state was established. This democracy produced an unstable parliamentary regime that was overthrown by a military coup in the late 1960s. The party that emerged from this coup (the All People's Congress) had strong links to the military, established a one-party system and ruled for another 20 years. Towards the end of the 1980s, when the commander of the armed forces Major General Joseph Momoh became President, economic problems increased and the popularity of the regime began to wane.

Opposition to Momoh came from two sources. A group of rebel soldiers, led by Corporal Foday Sankoh and supported by rebel forces in Liberia, began an armed rebellion in the eastern part of the country, closest to Liberia. However, a competing group of military officers, led by Captain Valentine Strasser, overthrew Momoh early in 1992. After Strasser overthrew the previous government, the diverse groups that formed Sankoh's RUF (Revolutionary United Front) rebels continued to fight the new military government. By the mid-1990s, Sankoh's forces held control over most of the interior of Sierra Leone, including the diamond mines. The wealth generated from the diamond mines enabled them to rearm and maintain their war with government forces. There were a number of coups in the government-controlled territories. The coups and the fighting between

government and rebel forces resulted in the displacement of thousands of people at this time. The fighting and associated activities of both sides were often quite brutal. In particular, the rebel groups gained a reputation for cutting off the hands of those who opposed them.

The fighting caused enormous disruption to the economy, particularly since one facet of the fighting was that the rebel groups had come to control Sierra Leone's most valuable economic assets, the diamond and rutile mines of the interior. This led to an international embargo on diamonds from Sierra Leone, unless they bore the official mark of the government.

In 1996, multiparty elections were held in areas controlled by the government. The Sierra Leone People's Party won, and their leader, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, became President. However, less than a year later, in 1997, this government was overthrown in a military coup by soldiers who had previously been aligned with the government, and the government went into exile. In order to consolidate its power, the new military junta invited Sankoh's rebels to join them. In 1998, peacekeeping forces from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) led by Nigerian troops were able to defeat the military junta and enabled the elected government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah to return. Associated with this return to power, there was widespread fighting between rebel groups and ECOWAS forces around Freetown in 1999, in which, again, both sides committed human rights abuses.

A ceasefire was arranged between government and rebel forces in 1999, and United Nations peacekeepers were called in to replace the ECOWAS peacekeepers. However, this move failed, partly because the international community would not endorse the ceasefire as it had granted amnesties to those who had been responsible for atrocities and brutality during the fighting, and because rebels continued to attack government forces.

In 2000, the British military intervened and took control of the Freetown airport, in order to evacuate British citizens and to enable more UN peacekeepers to arrive. This swung the balance of military power in favour of the government, and the rebel leadership was arrested and imprisoned.

In 2001, UN forces succeeded in re-establishing government control over the country. Some areas had been controlled by rebels for up to 10 years, but most parts of the interior had experienced little stability as they had been controlled alternately by government and rebel forces during that time. Consequently, 2002 was the first year of peace in Sierra Leone for over 10 years.

International agencies are trying to assist in the establishment of a secure and effective government,

but progress is slow. There are still a million displaced people in the country, and problems such as the world's highest infant mortality rate, a rising HIV infection rate, as well as the destruction of infrastructure caused by war mean that it will take some time for the country to rebuild.

People and culture

Sierra Leone is linguistically and culturally diverse. Ninety per cent of the population are descended from the 30 or so tribes indigenous to the country. However, the majority of the population come from the tribes that dominate the two halves of the country. The Tenme are the main tribe in the north, and make up about 30% of the population of the country.

The Mende dominate the south, and also make up about 30% of the country's population. The 'Krios', the descendants of the freed slaves who are settled in and around Freetown, make up about 2% of the population.

Although various sources give different figures, life expectancy is very low by Australian standards. Estimates of life expectancy across the population range from 35 years for a child born in 2001, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) website to about 46 years (43 years for men and 49 years for women) on the CIA World Factbook website (see Annotated bibliography).

About 60% of the population are Muslim, about 30% follow indigenous beliefs, and about 10% are Christian. These religions are followed by members of each of the tribal groups, though the Krios are mostly Christian.

The indigenous languages of the Tenme and Mende are the most widely spoken languages. However, most of these are mutually unintelligible, and the English-based Creole of the Krio people is the lingua franca of the country, being spoken as a second language by an estimated 95% of the population. Krio is the language usually used in the towns and in workplaces, and is the dominant language of younger people. English is the official language of Sierra Leone, but it is spoken only by small numbers of people in the urban elite.

Economy and education

Despite some valuable natural resources, Sierra Leone is a very poor country. Two-thirds of the population are engaged in subsistence agriculture. There is some commercial forestry and fishing, and a small-scale manufacturing sector involved in processing agricultural products and meeting domestic demand.

At the moment, Sierra Leone is dependent on foreign aid, but an end to the war may see the resumption of

exports of mineral resources of diamonds, bauxite and rutile, which had largely fallen into the hands of rebel forces during the civil war, and gave them resources that enabled them to prolong the war.

Overall literacy rates are low, with an estimated 31.4% of the population being literate in English, Tenme or Mende. Literacy rates are much lower among women, at 18.2%, than among men, 45.4%.

Access to schooling is low, with only about 50% of children under 15 attending school according to the UNDP. Schooling is not compulsory for children.

Refugees in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is grappling with a number of refugee issues. First, there is the return and resettlement of Sierra Leonean refugees. Because the end of the war has come about more quickly than many expected, many refugees have returned to the country from asylum in neighbouring countries, and those who were internally displaced have sought to return to their home districts. This has also occurred more quickly than expected, and has placed considerable pressure on resources and the agencies attempting to support the refugees.

Sierra Leone is also a haven for refugees fleeing civil war in neighbouring Liberia. There are several thousand long-term Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone's urban areas, and more recent refugees from Liberia have also been accommodated in refugee camps.

Classroom issues

People from Sierra Leone are new to Australia, and there is no established community of compatriots for them to move into. They may experience more isolation and lack of understanding of the details of their situation from other providers of support than is the case for AMEP clients from larger or more established migrant communities.

Because of the length and brutality of the civil war in Sierra Leone, refugees are likely to have experienced considerable trauma and disruption over a long period of time, and may experience after-effects.

Low literacy rates, low access to education and the disruption of schools over a long period of time may mean that students from Sierra Leone may require additional assistance in learning literacy in English, and may have relatively little prior experience of formal education. They may well have limited or no literacy in any language.

The language environment of Sierra Leone may mean that English has been encountered as an official language. This may engender familiarity with some terms used in government and administration, but

may not extend beyond knowledge of some vocabulary and phrases. One consequence of this is that learners could have very mixed reactions to AMEP classes. There could be a sense of familiarity with English because of their recognition of vocabulary. Equally, there could be a sense of distance because of a lack of more complete comprehension, when recognition of vocabulary might have led either students or teachers to expect greater degrees of communication. The Creole-based nature of the variety spoken in Sierra Leone could mean that approaches to teaching English should take into account the nature of teaching English as a second dialect, acknowledging an identity already established in an English variety.

There is also a need to develop command of a range of additional registers that will incorporate those valued within Australian institutions.

Annotated bibliography

British Foreign and Commonwealth Office website
<http://www.fco.gov.uk>

Follow the link to Country Profiles, then select Africa and Sierra Leone for a comprehensive overview of important statistics (including links to the United Nations Development Programme statistics), as well as a description of the recent history of Sierra Leone. Not surprisingly, this site emphasises Britain's connections with Sierra Leone.

BBC World Service website
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1061561.stm

This site includes a timeline of significant events in Sierra Leone's history.

CIA World Factbook 2003 website
www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html

Use the index to select Sierra Leone. This link provides basic information and statistics about Sierra Leone.

Ethnologue website
http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=Sierra+Leone

This site provides information about the languages spoken in Sierra Leone

Human Rights Watch (HRW) website
<http://www.hrw.org/wr2k3/africa10.html>

This site has an extensive description of recent events in Sierra Leone, including reports of human rights abuses by all sides to the conflict – rebels, the government, and ECOW-AS peacekeepers. There are also reports on abusive treatment of refugees from Sierra Leone by the governments of neighbouring countries, such as Guinea.

Lonely Planet. (2001). *Africa on a shoestring*. Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd.

The Lonely Planet budget travel guide to Africa has a section providing tourist information and background on Sierra Leone. A map of the region is accessible on the Lonely Planet website at:

http://www.lonelyplanet.com/mapshells/africa/sierra_leone/sierra_leone.htm

Sierra Leone News website
<http://www.sierra-leone.org/slnews.html>

This site is maintained by the Sierra Leone Government and includes extensive news coverage of events in the country.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) website
www.undp.org

This site contains a link to the most recent Human Development Report and the Human Development Index,

which can be downloaded.

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) website
<http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>

This site contains annual reports for UNHCR activities in countries around the world. Click on the 'Global Report' link and you can download the most recent report for the country of interest.

Other Internet resources

There is extensive material on Sierra Leone on the World Wide Web. A search using Google provides over 2 million items – many relating to news stories over the past 13 years.

Compiled by Alan Williams
Senior Researcher
Adult Migrant English Program Research Centre
La Trobe University