DISASTER RESILIENCE ANALYTICS AND POLICY DIALOGUE IN SIERRA LEONE

Impact of Disasters on Poverty and Inclusion

1.1. Relationship Between Fast-Onset Disasters and Poverty

Rapid onset events such as the landslide and floods experienced in recent years have had a large detrimental impact on the well-being of the Sierra Leoneans affected. For the most recent landslide and floods of 2017, over 3,000 people lost their homes; but only a third of the households in the affected areas owned their own dwellings (the rest was mostly rented). Nonetheless, for many living in these areas, housing also constituted a source of livelihood as two of the most common livelihoods are small-scale traders and those working as carpenters or masons (World Bank, 2017). According to data from the registration of affected households, more than two weeks after the event, two thirds of the affected adults had still not returned to their normal economic activity.

Past floods have had a larger impact on poor households in Sierra Leone than the 2017 event, as the latter was rather localized in space. During the 2015 rainy season, there was intensive flooding in some areas in Freetown and the Western Rural Area, and more widespread flooding in the Pujehun and Bonthe Districts which affected more than 24,000 people (CRED, 2021). Following the floods, a comparison was made between the people in the Western Area who had been affected by the event and those who had not. Overall, those affected had lower quality housing, fewer durable goods, and higher levels of food insecurity. The value of durable goods owned decreased by 23% and food insecurity increased by 0.65 points (on a scale from 0 to 8) in those households that had experienced flooding.[1] Within Freetown, however, the areas most affected by the 2015 floods were low-lying informal housing areas that were likely significantly poorer than other parts of Freetown before the floods.

In the Western Area, poor households are often more exposed to floods and likely more susceptible to suffer losses from such events. While poverty rates remain well below the rest of the country, Freetown was the only area to experience a significant increase in poverty between 2003 and 2011, from 14% to 21%. The increase in poverty in Freetown was driven by rural-out migration, the slow creation of well-paid jobs, and inflation. Poor households are typically pushed to hazard-prone areas (that is, steep land) due to land ownership and market factors, but also have housing materials of poorer quality, and the livelihood activities conducted by the majority are typically unsafe or less resilient to floods. The relationship between disasters and poverty is bidirectional: the poor live in areas that are less desirable due to the risk of flooding, and flooding makes the households poorer than they would be otherwise (World Bank, 2017).
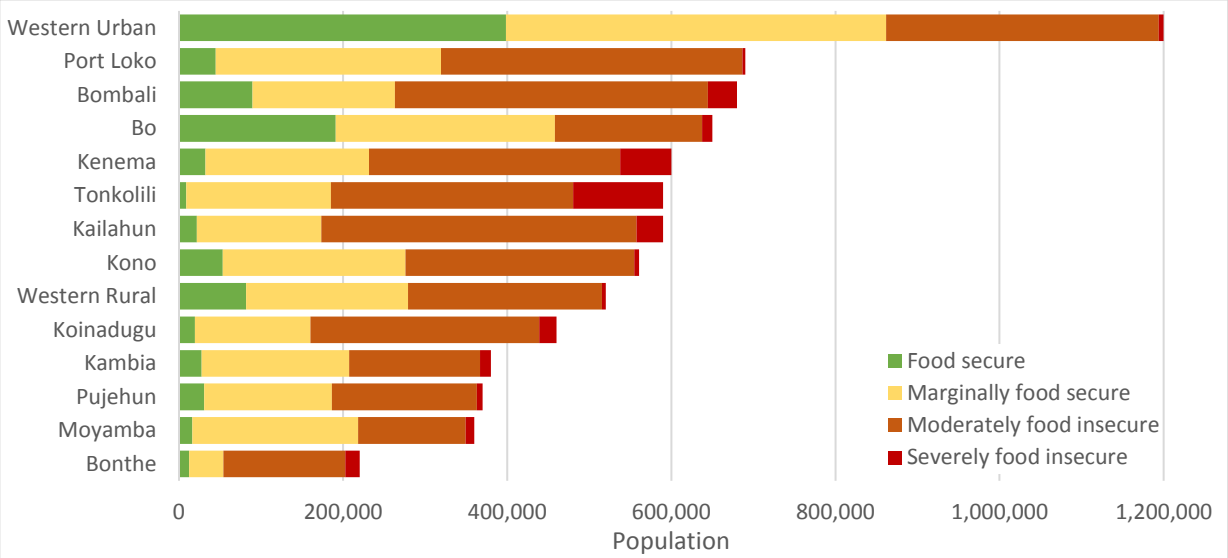
1.2. Food Insecurity in Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, a large part of the population has been chronically food insecure, at least since the Ebola Virus Disease Epidemic in 2014. While in September[2] 2018 43.7% of the population was food insecure, by August 2019 this figure reached 53%, with all districts of the country suffering to a considerable extent

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[1] 2015 Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Survey.

[2] September corresponds to the end of the lean season when access to and availability of food is constrained by the peak of the heavy rains and low local agricultural production levels.

from food insecurity (Figure 1). Food insecurity has remained high since the Ebola Virus Disease epidemic that hit the country: the previous comparable food security data collection exercise dates back to September 2015, when half of the population was food insecure (Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis — CFSVA). Food insecurity has also been considerably high even in post-harvest period (January – February) when access to and availability of food is supposedly higher. The food insecure population reached 47.7% in February 2020, rising from 34% in February 2019. These figures point at the prevalence of chronic food insecurity in Sierra Leone.

Figure 1. Food Insecurity by District in August 2019

Source: Authors with data from WFP (2019).

Food insecurity is driven by multiple factors well beyond adverse drought events, as is the case in many other countries of the region. Sierra Leone has a climate that brings considerable precipitation during the rainy season from May to November. However, even if the overall precipitation over the rainy season remains at normal levels, erratic rainfall patterns—including the late onset of the rainy season, unevenly distributed rainfall throughout the season and flooding as happened in both 2018 and 2019—can negatively affect the already significantly low agricultural productivity levels, reducing yields, food availability, and depleting household food stocks, with a detrimental impact on food security. Other drivers of food insecurity listed in the 2015 CFSVA include shocks related to the Ebola Virus Disease, poor market accessibility, lack of access to safe water, gender inequality, lack of education opportunities, and lack of income generation diversification among farming households.

Rural people who rely on subsistence agriculture directly suffer from the effects of adverse weather conditions, but economic shocks also determine food insecurity levels in urban areas. Food insecurity in Sierra Leone has increased due to economic shocks—high inflation, increased food prices, and reduced income generating opportunities—, particularly for urban dwellers who rely on wage labor opportunities and market purchases to meet their food needs. In 2019, for instance, economic shocks were the main driver of food insecurity, as the national currency depreciated by 10% compared to 2018 levels (CILSS, 2019; SWAC, 2020). In January 2020, the food security monitoring survey revealed that while food insecurity was highest in rural districts, Sierra Leone experienced a sharp increase in the number of urban residents living in food insecurity.