

Analyzing the Shortcomings of Sierra Leone's Electoral Reform Committee's Mandate

Charting New Paths: An Interview with IPAM's First Female Deputy Vice-Chancellor



SiERRAEYE

March 2024 Digital Issue No. 004

A Period of Reform

THE ACTING CHIEF JUSTICE'S IMPACT ON SIERRA LEONE'S JUDICIARY

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CONTENTS

Contents..



Basita Michael
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Chernor M. Jalloh
Contributor



Dr. Manal Ghazzawi
Contributor



Chukwu-Emeka Chikezie
Contributor



Aminata Kondeh
Contributor

04 **Editorial**
March Spotlights Politics, Protests and Progress in Sierra Leone

06 **Cover Story**
A Period of Reform:
The Acting Chief Justice's Impact on Sierra Leone's Judiciary

08 **Justice**
Celebrating a Milestone in Police Accountability: ECOWAS Court's Judgment in Sierra Leone

12 **Politics**
Analyzing the Shortcomings of Sierra Leone's Electoral Reform Committee's Mandate

15 **Exclusive Interview**
Charting New Paths:
An Interview with IPAM's First Female Deputy Vice-Chancellor

19 **Education**
The Quest for Academic Freedom in Sierra Leone's Higher Education Institutions (A Call for Vigilance and Reform)

23 **Corruption**
Strengthening Accountability:
Why Corrupt Officials Must Face Jail Time in Sierra Leone

25 **Business**
Caught in the Crossfire:
Exploring the Dual Struggle of Consumers Facing Inflation and Exploitative Business Practices

27 **Finance**
Charting New Horizons:
Sierra Leone's Tax Transformation in the Finance Act 2024

30 **Cybersecurity**
Sierra Leone's Cybersecurity Evolution and Rokel Commercial Bank's Pioneering Role

32 **Sanitation**
Contrasting Realities:
The Clean International Image Versus the Dirty City Dilemma of Freetown's Mayor

35 **Immigration**
Allegations of discrimination against Sierra Leoneans of Lebanese descent under New Leadership at the Immigration Department

37 **Security**
The"F"word - Déjà vu?

42 **Health**
Demystifying Stigma Related to Hepatitis B and the Urgent Need to Tackle This Silent Epidemic

46 **Entertainment**
From Bars to Beats:
Rapper LAJ's Journey of Prison, Pardon and Redemption

48 **Sports**
Propelling Leone Stars to Footballing Glory

Dear readers,

Welcome to the fourth edition of Sierraeye Digital Magazine, where we delve into the heart of Sierra Leone's pressing issues with curiosity, insight, and a commitment to truth. In this edition, we bring you a diverse array of articles that reflect the multifaceted tapestry of our nation's journey.

Our cover story shines a spotlight on the pivotal moment in our judicial system with "Judicial Reforms Under the New Acting Chief Justice - A Period of Reform." We explore the transformative impact of Justice Nicholas Colin Browne-Marke's tenure and the strides taken toward enhancing the integrity and efficacy of Sierra Leone's judiciary. His proactive approach and unwavering commitment to justice stand as a beacon of hope for a brighter future.

In an exclusive interview, we sit down with Mariam Conteh Morgan, the trailblazing first female Deputy Vice-Chancellor at one of the University of Sierra Leone's constituent colleges, IPAM. Her remarkable journey through academia and leadership roles inspire us all, while her vision for empowering young girls and promoting diversity within the university sets a powerful example for future generations.

Our pages also dissect the complexities of governance with articles like "SLPP Government's Policies: Eroding Anti-Corruption Efforts" and "Allegations of Discrimination Against Sierra Leoneans of Lebanese Descent." We examine the challenges faced by our institutions and the imperative need for accountability and inclusivity.

Moreover, we delve into the realm of education with "The Quest for Academic Freedom in Sierra Leone's Higher Education Institutions" and explore the dynamic landscape of cybersecurity in "Sierra Leone's Cybersecurity Evolution." These articles provoke critical thought and underscore the importance of nurturing knowledge and safeguarding information in the digital age.

As we navigate the socio-political landscape, we also celebrate milestones such as "Assessing the Impact of Female Representation in Sierra Leone's New Parliament," highlighting the strides towards gender equality while acknowledging the challenges that lie ahead.

Furthermore, we delve into the cultural fabric of our nation with features like "Ending Stigmatization in the Fight Against Hepatitis B" and "Sierra Leone Football and Afcon," which celebrate our heritage and explore avenues for growth and excellence.

Lastly, we bring you a story of resilience and redemption - "From Bars to Beats: Rapper LAJ's Journey of Prison, Pardon, and Redemption."

There are many more captivating articles waiting to be explored within these pages. We invite you to immerse yourself in the richness of Sierra Leone's stories, to engage with diverse perspectives, and to join us in our quest for knowledge, justice, and progress.

Happy reading!
Sincerely,
Editor-in-Chief
Sierraeye Digital Magazine



ALIEU TUNKARA
Editor

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A Period of Reform: The Acting Chief Justice's Impact on Sierra Leone's Judiciary

In a significant turn of events on December 7, 2023, Justice Nicholas Colin Browne-Marke (JSC) assumed the role of Acting Chief Justice following the departure of his predecessor, who had been asked to proceed on leave. His appointment garnered widespread approval from various sectors, including the legal community, civil society, and the media. Since assuming office, Justice Browne-Marke's tenure has been marked by decisive actions to enhance the effectiveness and integrity of the justice delivery system.



Shortly after assuming office, the Acting Chief Justice wasted no time in implementing necessary reforms. One of the first initiatives Justice Browne-Marke undertook was the strategic reassignment of judicial staff. He recognised the importance of maintaining a dynamic workforce and swiftly implemented transfers and postings based on data-driven assessments. Pursuant to section 5(1) of the Courts Act, 1965, he initiated the swift transfers and postings of judicial staff for the year 2024, aligning with the constitutional mandate outlined in section 120(2) of the Sierra Leone Constitution of 1991. These transfers were based on data indicating prolonged postings of magistrates in specific locations, a move aimed at reinstating best practices within



the institution. This proactive approach ensured that magistrates were not entrenched in one location for an extended period, thereby promoting fairness and efficiency within the judiciary.

Recognizing the pressing need to address backlog cases, the Acting Chief Justice promptly assigned pending cases in the interest of justice. This decision was communicated through the Judiciary Communications Unit to ensure transparency and fairness in the process. Additionally, measures were put in place to prevent unjust reassignments of case files between judicial officers, further enhancing accountability and integrity within the judiciary.

In fostering collaboration with key stakeholders in the criminal justice system, including the Office of the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Legal Aid, and the Police, the Acting Chief Justice facilitated the prompt execution of court orders, thereby improving overall efficiency.

Efforts were also made to streamline administrative processes, including the timely monitoring and submission of monthly returns from clerks and registrars assigned to judges and magistrates. Moreover, innovative solutions were implemented to address challenges faced by magistrates, such as the activation of Justice of the Peace Courts and reassignment of magisterial duties in response to medical absences.

To address the surge in cases from the Western Area Rural District, a needs assessment tour was conducted at various judicial facilities, with a particular focus on the feasibility of establishing a High Court in Waterloo. This initiative, driven by data gathered from magistrate's courts across the country, underscores the commitment to improving access to justice for all citizens.

Furthermore, strict adherence to legal provisions, such as those outlined in the Courts Act of 1965, was enforced to maintain magisterial jurisdiction and uphold the rule of law. Additionally, vigilant monitoring of adoption applications aimed at preventing child trafficking highlighted the Acting Chief Justice's dedication to protecting vulnerable populations.

In January 2024, the Acting Chief Justice welcomed an expert delegation from the Dutch Document Investigation Unit to enhance understanding of Sierra Leone's legal frameworks related to adoption and the prosecution of offenders.

As Sierra Leone continues on its journey towards judicial reform, the leadership of Acting Chief Justice Nicholas Colin Browne-Marke serves as a beacon of hope. His proactive approach, commitment to transparency, and tireless advocacy for justice reaffirm the judiciary's role as a cornerstone of democracy and a protector of rights. Through his leadership, Justice Browne-Marke is shaping a brighter future for Sierra Leone, where the rule of law reigns supreme and justice is truly accessible to all.



Celebrating a Milestone in Police Accountability:

ECOWAS Court's Judgment in Sierra Leone

As Sierra Leone continues its journey towards justice and accountability, a recent ruling by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Community Court of Justice stands out as a beacon of hope. In the case of "Mohamed Morlu v. Republic of Sierra Leone," the court found Sierra Leone responsible for violating Mr. Morlu's rights under international human rights treaties, marking a significant victory in the fight for police accountability.

We welcome this judgment with open arms, recognizing its profound implications for our nation's legal landscape. This ruling not only addresses the specific grievances of Mr. Morlu but also sets a crucial precedent regarding the conduct of state law enforcement agencies, particularly in the context of protests.

The case, championed by Mr. Morlu with the support of AdvocAid and the Institute for Human Rights Development in Africa (IHRDA), sheds light on the injustices faced by individuals striving for justice in our society. Kudos to AdvocAid and IHRDA for their tireless efforts in bringing this case to light. Mr. Morlu's courage in seeking accountability serves as an inspiration to all who have endured police brutality and human rights violations.

However, this victory is not merely about Mr. Morlu; it's about instigating a systemic change within the Sierra Leone Police Force, especially on the use of force. The judgment in the Morlu case carries several crucial lessons for law enforcement agencies across the country.

First and foremost, it underscores the paramount importance of respecting and upholding human rights at all times, especially during protests or other law enforcement activities. The police must be reminded of their obligation to protect the rights of individuals, even in the most challenging situations.

Furthermore, the judgment emphasizes the need for accountability within the police force. Officers who engage in misconduct or violate human rights must be held accountable for their actions. This includes conducting thorough investigations into allegations of abuse and ensuring that

appropriate disciplinary measures are taken.

One of the most glaring failures highlighted in the Morlu case was the state's inability to effectively investigate and prosecute those responsible for Mr. Morlu's suffering. This serves as a stark reminder that justice delayed is justice denied. Therefore, the police must ensure that all allegations of misconduct are promptly and thoroughly investigated, and that perpetrators are brought to justice through fair and transparent legal processes.

Moreover, the case underscores the importance of adhering to international standards and best practices regarding the use of force by law enforcement officers. Clear guidelines and training on the use of force should be provided to all officers to ensure that force is only used when absolutely necessary and in proportion to the threat faced.

Civil society organizations such as AdvocAid and IHRDA played a crucial role in bringing the case to the ECOWAS Court and securing a favourable judgment. The police should recognize the valuable role that civil society can play in promoting accountability and transparency within law enforcement agencies and should be open to constructive engagement and collaboration with these organizations.

As we celebrate this milestone in our collective pursuit of justice, we urge the Sierra Leone Police to heed the lessons from the Morlu case and commit to meaningful reform. The government of Sierra Leone must also demonstrate its commitment to justice and accountability by welcoming the ECOWAS Court's decision and fully implementing its findings.

While the ECOWAS Court's rulings are legally binding on member states, including Sierra Leone, instances of non-compliance have tarnished the country's reputation in the past. It is imperative that Sierra Leone breaks from this pattern of non-compliance and upholds its obligations under regional and international human rights law.

Civil society organizations, the media, and international partners must play a crucial role in holding the government accountable for its compliance with ECOWAS Court judgments. Our continued monitoring and advocacy efforts are essential to ensure that Sierra Leone honours its commitments and upholds the rule of law.



Ultimately, Sierra Leone's adherence to the ECOWAS Court's rulings is not only a legal obligation but also a moral one. By complying with the judgment in the Morlu case, Sierra Leone can reaffirm its commitment to human rights and justice and pave the way for a future where the rights and dignity of every individual are respected and protected. Together, let us continue to strive for a society where accountability, transparency, and justice

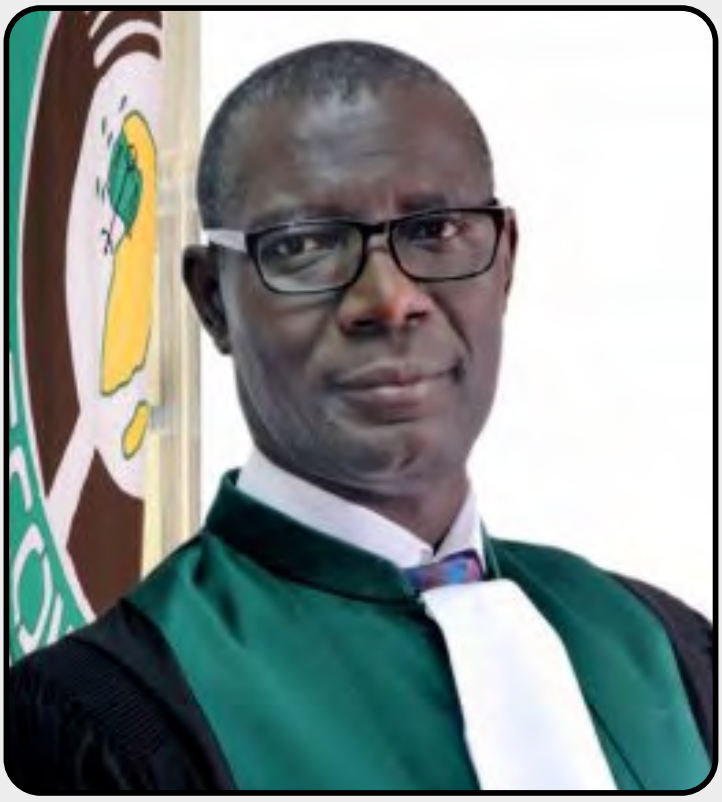
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The case, championed by Mr. Morlu with the unwavering support of AdvocAid and IHRDA, sheds light on the injustices faced by individuals striving for justice in our society. Kudos to AdvocAid and the Institute for Human Rights Development in Africa (IHRDA) for bringing this action. Mr. Morlu's courage in seeking accountability serves as an inspiration to all who have endured police brutality and human rights violations.

The judgment in the "Mohamed Morlu v. Republic of Sierra Leone" case carries several important lessons for the Sierra Leone police. The case underscores the importance of respecting and upholding human rights at all times, especially during protests or other law enforcement activities. Police officers must be trained and reminded of their obligation to protect the rights of individuals, even in challenging situations.



The judgment emphasizes the need for accountability within the police force. Officers who engage in misconduct or violate human rights must be held accountable for their actions. This includes conducting thorough investigations into allegations of abuse and ensuring that appropriate disciplinary measures are taken.

One of the key grievances in the case was the failure of the state to effectively investigate and prosecute those responsible for the shooting of Mr. Morlu. The police must ensure that all allegations of misconduct are promptly and thoroughly investigated, and that perpetrators are brought to justice through fair and transparent legal processes.

The case highlights the importance of adhering to international standards and best practices regarding the use of force by law enforcement officers. Police officers should only use force when absolutely necessary and in proportion to the threat faced. Clear guidelines and training on the use of force should be provided to all officers.

The involvement of civil society organizations such as AdvocAid and IHRDA played a crucial role in bringing the case to the ECOWAS Court and securing a favorable judgment. The police should recognize the valuable role that civil society can play in promoting accountability and transparency within law enforcement agencies and should be open to constructive engagement and collaboration with these organizations.

the Sierra Leone police force should view this judgment as an opportunity to reflect on their practices and policies and to make necessary improvements to ensure that they are effectively fulfilling their duty to



serve and protect the rights of all individuals in Sierra Leon

This case serves as a reminder to the state of its obligations under international human rights treaties. The significance of this judgment cannot be overstated. It reaffirms the principle that no entity, including law enforcement agencies, is above the law. By holding Sierra Leone accountable for violations of human rights, the ECOWAS Court sends a clear message that impunity for police violence and misconduct will not be tolerated. The police can

As we celebrate this milestone in our collective pursuit of justice, let us also recognize the indispensable role played by civil society organizations like AdvocAid and IHRDA. Their tireless advocacy and commitment to upholding human rights have been instrumental in securing this victory.

We commends the efforts of all involved in this landmark case and reaffirms our commitment to promoting transparency, accountability, and justice in Sierra Leone. Together, let us continue to strive for a society where the rights and dignity of every individual are respected and protected.

While the ECOWAS Court's rulings are legally binding on member states, including Sierra Leone, instances of non-compliance undermine the integrity of the regional justice system and erode public trust in the government's commitment to upholding human rights.

In light of this history, the recent judgment in the "Mohamed Morlu v. Republic of Sierra Leone" case presents a critical opportunity for Sierra Leone to break from this pattern of non-compliance and demonstrate its dedication to respecting international human rights norms. The government must recognize that compliance with the ECOWAS Court's rulings is not merely a legal obligation but also a moral imperative that reflects its commitment to justice and accountability.

Furthermore, Sierra Leone should take proactive measures to ensure compliance with the ECOWAS Court's judgment in the Morlu case. This includes promptlyimplementingthecourt's directives, such as providing monetary compensation to Mr. Morlu and conducting thorough investigations into the human rights violations he suffered. Additionally, the government should take steps to address systemic issues within the police force to prevent similar violations from occurring in the future.

Civil society organizations, the media, and international partners play a crucial role in holding the government accountable for its compliance with ECOWAS Court judgments. Their continued monitoring and advocacy efforts are essential to ensure that Sierra Leone honors its obligations under regional and international human rights law.

Ultimately, Sierra Leone's adherence to the ECOWAS Court's rulings is not only a reflection of its commitment to human rights but also a testament to its respect for the principles of democracy and the rule of law. By complying with the judgment in the Morlu case, Sierra Leone can reaffirm its position as a responsible member of the international community and pave the way for a future where human rights are upheld and protected for all its citizens.

Analyzing the Shortcomings of Sierra Leone's Electoral Reform Committee's Mandate



The recent establishment of the Independent Committee for Electoral Systems Review in Sierra Leone has been heralded as a step towards strengthening democratic processes in the nation. However, a closer examination of the committee's terms of reference reveals several flaws that raise concerns about its effectiveness and legitimacy.

Firstly, the assertion within the terms of reference that no comprehensive analysis of Sierra Leone's electoral architecture has been conducted is misleading. Since 2005, various reviews, evaluations, and analyses have been undertaken by the ECSL through the Office of the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, the Law Officers Department and in collaboration with the Law Reform Commission. ECSL undertook a variety of activities during the legal electoral reform process and worked with a wide range of stakeholders during the entire legal electoral reform process. This included research on legal framework, post-election review/audit and EOM reports, collaboration with relevant legal institutions, drafting of electoral legal bills in collaboration with relevant authorities, consultations with targeted stakeholders, Sensitization, consultative workshops and the work of the Technical Committee established in 2011. These reforms led to significant reforms such as the Public Elections Act of 2012 and the shift to a Proportional Representation system. The existence of prior comprehensive reviews undermines the notion that the committee's work is groundbreaking or revolutionary.

Furthermore, the committee's focus on addressing operational and communication challenges within the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) ignores the fundamental issue of political interference in the electoral process. The erosion of public trust in elections stems not solely from operational inefficiencies but also from the deliberate actions of political stakeholders to manipulate outcomes for their own benefit. By failing to acknowledge this reality, the committee's mandate is fundamentally flawed.



Basita Michael



The timeline set for the committee to deliver its recommendations within six months is also unrealistic given the complexity of the task at hand. It's stated methodology is by its nature a very lengthy and demanding process which includes to develop rules and procedure, conduct desk reviews, data collection and its assessment, conduct plenary sessions, public engagement and consultation, recruitment of experts through to the production of the final report and reform roadmap. Such a heavy loaded exercise cannot be carried out professionally and competently within 6 months. Previous electoral reform processes, spanning from 2005 to 2012, took seven years to complete, highlighting the extensive time and effort required for meaningful reform. Rushing the process risks producing superficial results and undermines the credibility of the committee's work.

Additionally, the composition of the committee raises questions about its impartiality and inclusivity. While efforts have been made to include representatives from political parties not in parliament and civil society groups like NEW, the absence of adequate representation from smaller political parties undermines the legitimacy of the committee's deliberations. Excluding voices from across the political spectrum risks perpetuating the dominance of established parties and marginalizing alternative perspectives.

The recent press briefing held by the committee's co-chairs further highlighted disagreements over the scope and limitations of the committee's mandate. Differences in interpretation regarding the review of past election results underscore the need for clarity and consensus among committee members. The exclusion of other political parties from participating in the briefing further calls into question the committee's commitment to transparency and inclusivity.

Ultimately, the success of electoral reform in Sierra Leone hinges on fostering trust in the rule of law and ensuring the participation of all stakeholders in the process. Addressing the flaws within the committee's terms of reference is essential to restoring confidence in the electoral system and promoting genuine democratic principles. Without meaningful engagement and collaboration, the committee risks becoming yet another ineffective mechanism for political maneuvering rather than a catalyst for positive change.



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Charting New Paths:
An Interview with IPAM's First Female Deputy Vice-Chancellor

Congratulations on your historic appointment as the first female Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone. How does it feel to hold such a significant position?

Thank you very much. But just to clarify things a bit – I am the first female Deputy Vice-Chancellor at one of University of Sierra Leone's constituent colleges, the Institute of Public Administration and Management, better known as IPAM. The College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences (COMAHS), another constituent college, holds the honour of having the first female DVC ever at USL.

That said, I am deeply humbled by and proud of my appointment. I see it as USL's recognition of competence in leadership, regardless of gender, and as me setting the pace for early and mid-career women in academia. But more importantly, I am fervently hoping that more young girls see this and look into their future with more confidence and determination to be all they can be.

You've had an impressive journey through academia and leadership roles. Could you share with us some of the pivotal moments that have shaped your career path?

I really cannot think of a pivotal moment that shaped my career path, though a personal event did. You see, I did not start off thinking about academia as my chosen career; I had always dreamed of a career in the foreign service but this event caused me to switch to secondary school teaching after college, as a stopgap. Here I am, 43 years later, still in the business of education! I simply continued in that line of work so that even after 19 years of teaching at secondary and

tertiary levels, when I reskilled and made the career change into librarianship, it was a no-brainer that I would become an academic librarian.

But during my career, there was another event that I know that gave me the impetus and zeal to push myself beyond my own expectations. In 1996, I saw an ad for summer school lecturers in English at Harvard University. On a whim, I applied, not once thinking I stood a chance. Well, I got hired, taught there for three summers, and even won a teaching award in 1998. That taught me a valuable lesson that one should not underestimate oneself. Similarly, when I finally made the decision to apply for the position of Deputy Vice Chancellor, I knew I had to go beyond my pre-set boundaries, outdo myself and lead with passion and integrity.

As the Coordinator of the University Development Committee and the University Endowment Fund, what are your primary goals for enhancing the university's infrastructure and intellectual development?

A few years ago, I was asked by the then Vice Chancellor and Principal of USL, Professor Foday Sahr, to lead this effort as part of his agenda for expanding the financial base of the University to allow for greater institutional development. The campuses and units shared their development aspirations which were distilled into projects and presented to potentially strategic partners such as financial institutions,



international development agencies and embassies at a symposium held in 2021. Projects such as classroom expansion, targeted programme investments and various funding strategies were outlined. This committee laid the groundwork for the smooth segue way to the Endowment Fund which was launched by the then-Chancellor, Dr. J. Sanpha Koroma, in early 2023. The expectation is that potential donors, especially alumni of all three colleges, will choose to fund college-specific or general projects.

You've been described as an outstanding scholar with numerous contemporary publications. Can you tell us about some of your recent research interests and projects?

My recent research interests have been on positioning libraries as leading agents of change on the wider campus, using the initiatives I have been pushing as case studies. I am also very interested in how knowledge flows from and to the so-called Global South so that research and researchers from those regions are not overlooked. Modern technology has made it easier for information and knowledge to be shared, so getting researchers from countries such as Sierra Leone to participate in that global academic space is crucial. Therefore, open access publications (journals, books), open science, open syllabi and open data and how Sierra Leonean researchers can join global academic conversations through their publications are some of the topics I write and speak about.

My earlier research merged my linguistics and library science backgrounds. I have publications on sociolinguistics (for example, on whether there is what could be termed "Sierra Leonean English") and the intersection of second language learning theories and information literacy instruction to learners of English. I am amazed that even twenty-plus years after

their publication, they are still being cited to this day. I've also written on the role of libraries in expanding the African literary canon. Along those lines, as the library subject specialist for African Studies at The Ohio State University, I developed and edited an interactive bibliographic map, the Literary Map of Africa (https://kb.osu.edu/items/fc9b188f-9e9d-4801-9813-ca2dff685fca/full, now inactive) aimed at African Literature researchers. Though I left that project behind when I returned to University of Sierra Leone in 2013, I still maintain the Facebook group of the same name.

Mentorship seems to be an integral part of your leadership approach. Can you share with us some of your strategies for motivating and supporting aspiring leaders, especially women, in academia?

Even before I became DVC, I was very interested in motivating and supporting emerging scholars, and I continue to do so. As the IPAM campus librarian, I tried to know their research interests, guided them on how to search for research materials, understand the research process and to evaluate resources and publication outlets so that they could use good research in their work and publish in reputable outfits. I also help lecturers put together their dossiers for promotion, sometimes offer books from my own personal library, edit manuscripts and continually touch base with them to see where they are in their research journey.

For women specifically, I was instrumental in setting up an online USL group called "Women in Academia" where we share research and publication news and grant information so an interested person can apply for them. We also share pertinent articles, or be informed about new publications. Since becoming DVC, I urge our female lecturers to not shy away from leadership positions and work diligently so that they can aspire and rise to higher office.

By the way, I do not only work with academics. I love sharing books and articles on leadership with senior administrative staff as well. And it has given me immense pleasure to see some of those mentees climbing up the ladder and performing creditably.

In what ways do you envision promoting diversity and inclusivity within the University of Sierra Leone, particularly in leadership positions?

First off, I think USL should make more effort to recruit female academics and create a more conducive environment for them to do well. We all know our social context where women are still the home keepers, regardless of whether they have their own professional careers. In such circumstances, it is difficult to juggle teaching, research and home, so for example, creating adjusted timelines for promotion for women who ask for it could be one way to ensure their success and ultimately build a pool of eligible women leaders. Also, our campuses are currently not disabled friendly in terms of accessibility. This could be one of the reasons why it is hard to see staff with physical disabilities at USL. And because classroom teaching is predominantly whiteboard and lecture based, we cannot currently effectively educate the hearing and visually impaired, and are therefore not graduating students with these disabilities who could potentially be hired at the University.

Diversity of opinion is what academia thrives on, but we sometimes see colleagues with strong personalities crowding out others with opposing ideas and this usually leads to toxic situations where people disengage from decision making and resort to sniping and rumour sharing.

In short, a lot needs to be done. But there are green shoots, at least on the gender front, although recent actions in the tussle between the University and its supervising ministry threatens to erode those gains as two top-level women have been removed from office.

Given your background in Library and Information Science, how do you see the role of libraries evolving in the digital age, especially in the

context of African literature and knowledge management?

In the digital age, libraries have become powerful aids to lifelong learning, where they are well equipped and used. However, they are woefully stocked and underutilized in Sierra Leone. Many of our students have either not used their campus libraries at all or see it only as a place of refuge in between classes. More conscious effort needs to be made to get young people to see digital libraries as being of service to their academic and personal advancement. Our librarians themselves need to upgrade their technology skills to be able to help students.

Could you highlight some of the challenges you've faced as a woman in academia and leadership, and how you've overcome them?

Interestingly, as I look back at the challenges I have had in academia, I would say that those occurred in my years teaching in the United States. Being a woman, and a Black African one at that, had its own set of problems. And to be teaching predominantly white and Asian students English / Communication Skills and Literature seemed like an "anomaly" to many, so I often had students challenging my ability to correct them on language use. Well, they had to deal with it, I guess.

In university leadership in Sierra Leone, I was for a number of years the only woman sitting in decision-making meetings and that bothered me then. Thankfully, that situation has improved, though a lot more needs to be done. But I can recall some amusing and tense instances where my being a woman was definitely obvious. For example, at a meeting of institutional heads when my turn to make my presentation came, I started off with: "Good afternoon, gentlemen". Twenty-two pairs of eyes popped out amid low laughter, in a sort of embarrassed recognition of the fact! Men do not always see that they dominate spaces. However, I have also had to go toe-to-toe with a few senior male colleagues because I refused to be browbeaten in discussions. Or, there have been instances where some male colleagues persistently refer to me by my married title but give other male colleagues with whom I have the same rank their academic title. Happily, these experiences have diminished, but I jokingly say that because I grew up the only girl among five brothers, I was well prepared to look chauvinism in the eye.

Looking ahead, what do you see as the most pressing priorities and opportunities for higher education institutions in Sierra Leone, and how do you plan to address them in your role as Deputy Vice-Chancellor?

There's no running away from the fact that the youthquake in Sierra Leone is real. The large numbers exiting secondary schools and their demand for higher education far outstrips the available spaces in institutions. Accommodating as many qualified applicants as our infrastructure can hold is one of our biggest headaches. And for those admitted, how can we ensure quality teaching and learning, provide rich extra-classroom experiences that shape students' worldviews, choices and future professional lives?

My four-point agenda developed when I was appointed DVC speaks to these, especially the second: "Promote student enrichment activities so as to produce graduates who are intellectually, socially, morally and culturally prepared to be national and global citizens."

A task force comprising of various student representative groups and led by a faculty member was formed to come up with suggestions of how they can actualize these. Students were encouraged to own their projects and together with the administration, find ways of executing them. I also personally hold small groups chats where I encourage students' questions, challenge their thinking, give advice and discuss wide ranging issues such as ethics, personal responsibility, dress and behaviour. That's one of my favourite things to do, although my schedule does not allow me to hang out with students as much as I would love to.

I think being a commuter school and running on shifts all make it difficult to engage students more, but at least we will try to do our best for them to be their best.



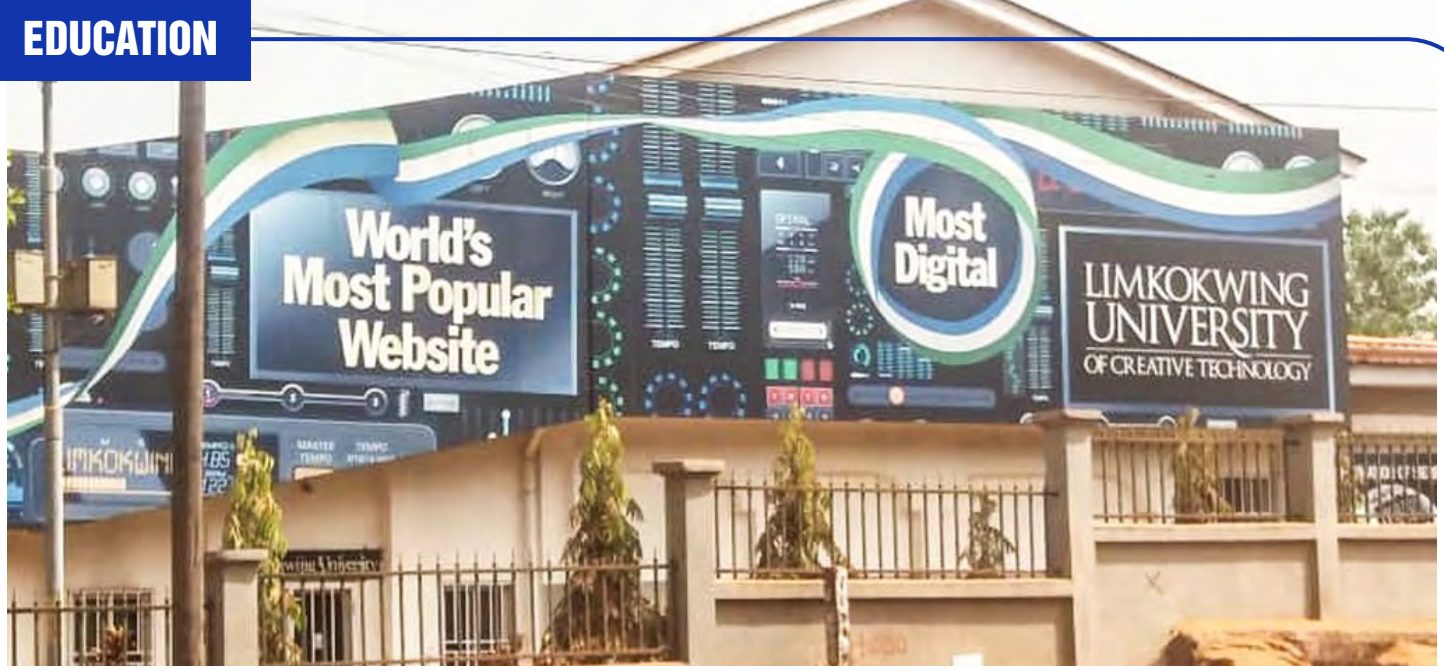
The Quest for Academic Freedom in Sierra Leone's Higher Education Institutions (A Call for Vigilance and Reform)

The recent dissolution of the University Court by the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education in Sierra Leone has once again brought the critical issue of academic freedom to the forefront within our educational institutions. Universities, conceived as bastions of knowledge and learning, ideally serve as domains where ideas flow freely, critical thinking is nurtured, and research flourishes without the looming threat of external interference. However, the prevailing reality often veers away from this ideal, as exemplified by the persisting leadership quandary at the University of Sierra Leone (USL). Given the unique challenges faced by Sierra Leone's higher education institutions, it is crucial to place the pursuit of academic freedom within the broader African context.

Academic freedom, rather than a mere abstract notion, serves as the linchpin of intellectual advancement and societal progress. It encompasses the unfettered liberty of scholars to pursue truth, engage in research, and disseminate knowledge without apprehension of censorship or retaliation. Both individual and institutional academic freedoms are imperative for universities to effectively fulfill their historical missions, as underscored by the Association of African Universities. However, apprehensions regarding their decline, as evidenced within both Western and African academic institutions, resonate profoundly within Sierra Leone's context.

The menace to academic freedom, exemplified by phenomena such as political correctness, identity politics, and a prevailing culture of conformity, rings alarming bells about the conditions of intellectual exploration and scholarly endeavors within our educational framework. Nevertheless, the curtailment of academic freedom, whether through governmental interference, administrative overreach, or cultural inhibitions, stifles intellectual inquiry and hinders the cultivation of a vibrant academic milieu. Academic freedom, therefore, emerges as a pivotal value for higher education institutions globally.

The historical underpinnings of academic freedom, dating back to the notions of Socratic intellectual liberty and the enlightenment, offer a foundational context for grasping its profound significance. The seminal contributions of the American Association of



University Professors (AAUP) in delineating the concept of academic freedom in the United States underscore its critical role as a bulwark against censorship imposed by external forces, (whether political or financial in nature.) Furthermore, in the nascent stages of independence, leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah underscored the intrinsic connection between academic freedom and social responsibility, establishing a precedent that reverberated throughout the continent. However, the evolving landscape of international economic doctrines has redefined the roles of states in financing higher education and presenting novel challenges. This paradigmatic shift necessitates a thorough reevaluation of existing provisions to ensure their pertinence in contemporary contexts.

Despite its historical significance, academic freedom in Sierra Leone faces contemporary challenges. Over the past few decades, there has been a noticeable shift away from this core principle towards a stifling culture of conformity. This shift has led to self-censorship among faculty members, particularly those navigating the tenure process and has limited the scope of acceptable discourse within academic circles. The erosion of academic freedom has broader implications for intellectual exploration and the advancement of knowledge. It undermines the ability of scholars to challenge existing paradigms, explores heterodox theories and engage in rigorous debates. This stifling of dissenting voices not only inhibits the scientific method ,but also threatens the very essence of intellectual inquiry.



Like many other African nations, Sierra Leone faces obstacles to academic freedom due to limited state funding and administrative hurdles. The integration of international economic doctrines exacerbates these challenges; prompting the exploration of inventive strategies to uphold academic integrity. Additionally, Sierra Leone's higher education framework contends with bureaucratic constraints inherited from colonial legacies, which obstruct the complete realization of academic freedom. Addressing these structural barriers warrants comprehensive reforms. Moreover, the complexities introduced by globalization and market forces underline the imperative for nuanced approaches. Recognizing

the influence of international economic doctrines underscores Sierra Leone's imperative to assert sovereignty whiles fostering collaborations that advance academic freedom and facilitate intellectual exchange.



The Kampala Declaration, while reflecting African perspectives, requires revisiting to address evolving dynamics and complexities in Sierra Leone. One primary challenge lies in balancing state support for higher education with institutional autonomy. While state funding is crucial, it can sometimes lead to interference, which can undermining academic freedom. Striking a balance allowing universities to uphold academic principles while meeting societal needs is paramount. Drawing inspiration from the Kampala Declaration's emphasis on autonomy and social responsibility, Sierra Leone can strengthen institutional structures, foster transparent governance, and advocate for scholars' and students'rights. Academic freedom, as a cornerstone of intellectual progress, embodies scholars' freedom to pursue truth, engage in research, and disseminate knowledge without fear of censorship.

Moreover, the widespread acceptance of relativistic views on knowledge, especially in fields like the humanities and social sciences, complicates the quest for academic freedom. This viewpoint, which suggests the existence of equally multiple valid truths, undermines the quest for objective truth and scientific rigor, thereby presenting additional hurdles to maintaining the integrity of academic discourse. Given these challenges, it is imperative for Sierra Leonean universities to proactively safeguard academic freedom within their academic environments. Faculty members, including those affiliated with institutions like USL, Njala University MMTU, and Makeni University, etc., should actively engage in dialogues concerning the threats posed to academic freedom and advocate for its preservation. Through these efforts, they can ensure that institutions of higher education in Sierra Leone remain bastions of intellectual inquiry, shielded from external censorship, and conducive to the advancement of knowledge.

Ultimately, despite the challenges facing Sierra Leone in realizing academic freedom, including inadequate funding, bureaucratic obstacles, and societal pressures that undermine scholarly pursuits and compromise academic integrity, avenues exist for safeguarding academic freedom and institutional autonomy within the country's higher education system. Therefore, as we confront these obstacles, it is imperative that we heed the wisdom of Kwame Nkrumah who once said: "true academic freedom is not incompatible with serving the community; rather, it is integral to fostering vibrant and engaged academic communities that address societal needs while upholding the highest standards of intellectual inquiry."

In conclusion, Sierra Leone's pursuit of academic freedom necessitates concerted efforts to overcome financial constraints, bureaucratic impediments, and societal pressures. By fostering intellectual inquiry, nurturing transparent governance structures, and advocating for the rights of scholars and students, we can take significant strides toward advancing academic freedom and fostering the development of a knowledge society.



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Strengthening Accountability:

Why Corrupt Officials Must Face Jail Time in Sierra Leone



Corruption has long been a scourge in Sierra Leone, undermining trust in government institutions and impeding socio-economic progress. Despite promises by President Bio's administration to combat corruption, the implementation of 2019 amendments to the anti-corruption law has raised concerns about accountability and the efficacy of anti-corruption efforts.

The watering down of Section 89 of the Anti-Corruption Act in 2019, allowing the Commissioner to enter into non-prosecutorial agreements with suspects, represents a significant setback in the fight against corruption. Rather than pursuing prosecutions in court and allowing due process to take its course, corrupt individuals are being offered lenient deals, effectively evading justice.

The recent case involving Emmanuel Smart and Ibrahim Musa Bangura, who diverted funds intended for a critical infrastructure project, underscores the urgency of addressing corruption more effectively. While they have returned the embezzled funds with a nominal interest and are banned from holding public office for a limited time, this lenient outcome fails to reflect the gravity of their actions.

To truly tackle the deep-seated corruption in Sierra Leone, there must be harsher consequences for those found guilty of corruption. Merely requiring repayment of stolen funds with interest and temporary bans



from public office is insufficient. Instead, corrupt officials must face jail time as a direct consequence of their actions.

Amending Section 89 (1) of the ACC Act 2019 to mandate jail time for corrupt public officials would send a powerful message that corruption will not be tolerated. It would demonstrate a firm commitment to upholding the rule of law and restoring public trust in government institutions.

Furthermore, holding corrupt officials accountable through the criminal justice system serves as a deterrent to others who may be tempted to engage in similar misconduct. It ensures that justice is served for the victims of corruption and contributes to rebuilding faith in the integrity of government institutions.

The demand for corrupt officials to face jail time reflects a growing consensus among Sierra Leoneans for greater accountability and transparency in governance. Strengthening anti-corruption measures and imposing harsher penalties for corrupt acts are essential steps towards fostering a culture of integrity and restoring public trust in the nation's leadership. It's time for Sierra Leone to reaffirm its commitment to fighting corruption and ensuring that those who betray the public trust are held accountable to the fullest extent of the law.





Caught in the Crossfire:

Exploring the Dual Struggle of Consumers Facing Inflation and Exploitative Business Practices

In Sierra Leone, the battle against inflation has intensified, leaving consumers grappling with soaring prices and exploitative business practices. As inflation rates continue to rise, citizens are caught in a precarious situation, struggling to afford basic necessities while facing unfair pricing tactics from traders.

According to data from Trading Economics, Sierra Leone's annual inflation rate slowed marginally to 52.16% in December 2023, marking a slight reprieve from previous months. However, the overall trend remains alarming, with inflation averaging 28.10% over the years, posing significant challenges for consumers.

Posseh Kamara, a mother of two, recently experienced the impact of inflation firsthand when she was charged Nle 450 for a water kettle priced at Nle 400 just a day prior. Kamara expressed her embarrassment and frustration at the sudden price hike, highlighting the financial strain it placed on her. Similar sentiments were echoed by Mohamed Sallieu Sesay, who lamented traders' dishonest pricing practices, citing a lack of government intervention.

On the other hand, traders attribute the price hikes to external factors such as fluctuating exchange rates. Amara Bangura, a trader dealing in personal wear, emphasized the role of the exchange rate in determining commodity prices, urging the government to stabilize it to mitigate market challenges.

Foday Sahid Kamara, President of the Traders Council in Freetown, shed light on the complexities of pricing in Sierra Leone, where traders source





goods from various countries and set prices accordingly. Kamara emphasized the absence of a price control system, with prices determined by supply and demand dynamics.

Despite these challenges, there are glimmers of hope on the horizon, notably with the introducing of a metric and measurement system aimed at protecting consumers from unscrupulous practices. However, concerns linger regarding its effectiveness, particularly as it only applies to certain commodities.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry has yet to comment on the possibility of implementing price control measures. At the same time, former Finance Minister Dr. Kaifala Marrah expressed concerns about the country's economic challenges exacerbated by traders' exploitation.

In a recent address to the nation, President Julius Maada Bio vowed to address the economic situation, emphasizing efforts to stabilize the economy and attract foreign investments. However, doubts remain about the government's ability to deliver on its promises amid political tensions between ruling and opposition parties.

A 2023 World Bank report suggests that sound domestic policies and fiscal measures are crucial for reducing inflation and rebuilding the economy. Yet, achieving these objectives is contingent upon addressing exploitative business practices that further exacerbate inflationary pressures.

As consumers navigate these turbulent economic waters, they remain hopeful for meaningful interventions to alleviate their financial burdens and restore economic stability. However, the path ahead remains uncertain, requiring concerted efforts from all stakeholders to address the root causes of inflation and foster sustainable economic growth.



Charting New Horizons: Sierra Leone's Tax Transformation in the Finance Act 2024

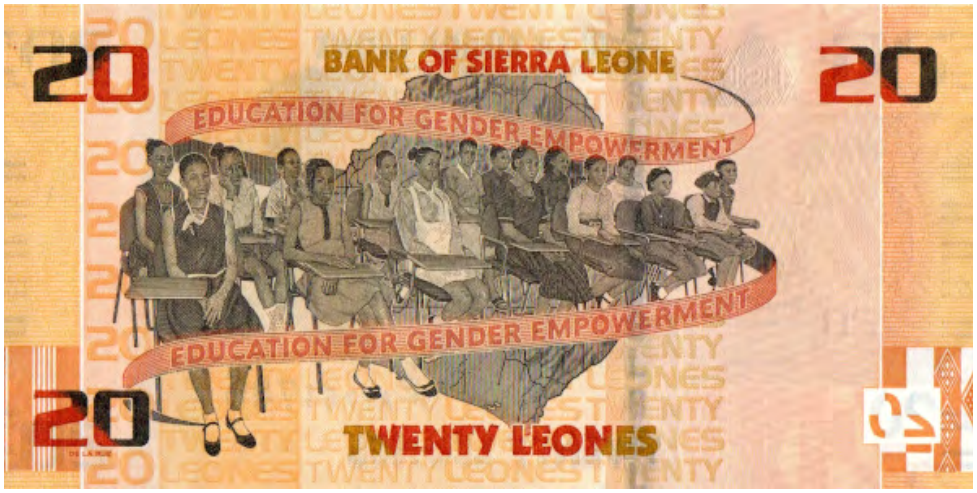
In a bid to bolster economic growth through improved revenue mobilization, the Sierra Leone Parliament enacted the Finance Act 2024 on November 9, 2023. This comprehensive legislation, pending Presidential assent and publication in the Government Gazette, introduces a multitude of fiscal adjustments and clarifications. Set to take effect on January 1, 2024, the Act encompasses various tax provisions poised to reshape the country's financial landscape.

Notable provisions encapsulated within the Finance Act 2024:

1. Stamp Duty Reduction: Stamp duty rates for properties and financial instruments have been slashed to 1% and 0.2%, respectively, from the previous 2% stipulated in the FA 2023.



2. Import Duty Adjustments: Import duty rates for key commodities such as cement, rice, iron ore, and cooking gas have been revised, with proposed increases set to come into effect from January 1, 2025.



3. Excise Duty Revisions: The Act introduces new excise duty rates for various beverages, spirits, and tobacco products, alongside adjustments for imported raw materials.
4. Minimum Alternate Tax (MAT) Changes: MAT now applies solely to companies with allowable losses, with reduced rates of 2% on turnover, down from the 3% previously introduced.
5. MAT Credit: Companies subject to MAT are eligible for a non-refundable credit, which can be utilized for up to ten years to offset income tax liabilities when applicable.
6. MAT Exemptions: Specific

exemptions from MAT have been outlined for certain periods and industries, including newly established entities and operations within the mineral or petroleum sector.

7. Expanded Income Sourcing: The definition of income sourced in Sierra Leone has been broadened to include insurance premiums, service fees, and income derived from digital products and services.
8. Withholding Tax Adjustments: Proposed increases in withholding tax rates have been tabled for interest, dividends, professional fees, rent, and lottery winnings.
9. GST Threshold Increase: The GST registration threshold has been raised from SLe 100,000 to SLe 500,000, thereby excluding small businesses from mandatory registration.
10. GST Exemptions: Specific sectors and services, including plant and machinery for agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and petroleum, have been granted exemptions from GST.
11. Education Levy: A 1% education levy has been introduced on contracts for goods, services, and works to support educational initiatives.
12. Royalty Return in Extractive Industry: Provisions have been made for companies in the mining sector to file royalty returns alongside payments, with revised rates and valuation methods.
13. Telecommunications Surcharges: Telecom operators will now be subject to charges on various services, including voice calls and mobile data sales.
14. Tax Incentives & Reliefs: Duty-free waivers on machinery imports for specific sectors and revisions of demurrage free d



importers and exporters are among the incentives introduced.

15. Digital Taxation: Tax liabilities have been imposed on entities providing digital products and services, extending to non-resident entities with a minimum alternate tax on turnover.
16. Shipping Agent Requirements: Increased fines have been set for failure to submit electronic manifests within 24 hours post-arrival of vessels in the shipping industry.
17. General Provisions: Non-tax revenue, fees, and charges for services related to various government agencies have been outlined.

In conclusion, while the Finance Act 2024 heralds significant changes aimed at bolstering Sierra Leone's economic landscape, it's crucial to acknowledge the potential challenges ahead. The increases in various taxes and duties outlined in the Act may indeed pose hardships for many citizens. As stakeholders grapple with the implications of these adjustments, it's essential for policymakers to remain cognizant of the potential socio-economic impacts on ordinary citizens. Striking a balance between revenue generation and alleviating burdens on the populace will be paramount in ensuring equitable progress and sustainable development. As Sierra Leone moves forward, collective efforts to mitigate these hardships and foster inclusive growth will be essential to realizing the Act's vision of economic prosperity for all.



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Sierra Leone's Cybersecurity Evolution and Rokel Commercial Bank's Pioneering Role

In the dynamic landscape of Sierra Leone, the spotlight shines brightly on cybersecurity, an integral facet of the digital age that took centre stage at the recent Rokel Commercial Bank (SL) Ltd Symposium on February 22, 2024, at the FCC building in Freetown. This event illuminated the paramount importance of safeguarding data in an era where personal information is increasingly digitized, presenting both formidable technical challenges and compelling societal imperatives.

Sierra Leone's progress in cybersecurity is commendable, particularly amid the backdrop of digital transformation and the associated trials faced by many developing African nations. Data protection is akin to safeguarding a treasure trove, necessitating stringent measures such as access control, encryption protocols, and robust backup and recovery systems. These approaches resonate with global strategies where data is revered as a precious asset deserving the utmost protection.

The rising awareness among Sierra Leoneans across diverse demographics, from students to seasoned professionals, about the perils lurking in the digital realm is of significant note. This burgeoning consciousness marks a pivotal stride towards fortifying the nation against cyber threats.

Data Protection in the Digital Era: Navigating Regulatory Frameworks and Compliance Challenges

Safeguarding sensitive information in the digital sphere encompasses many strategies, ranging from restricting access to authorized personnel to formulating strategies to mitigate data loss risks. Meanwhile, international regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), Brazil's General Data Protection Law (LGPD), and Canada's Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) set benchmarks for data privacy and security, exerting a profound influence on global

data protection practices.

Multinational organizations grapple with the intricate task of complying with diverse and sometimes conflicting data privacy laws, underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of these regulations and a flexible approach to data management and protection strategies. The trajectory suggests a trend towards stricter data privacy regulations worldwide, signalling a growing consensus on safeguarding personal data in the digital era.

The Imperative of Data Security: Addressing Cybercrime

Alarming statistics underscore the urgency of data security. The financial sector bears the brunt of an average cost of $5.9 million per data breach incident, while the global average data breach cost stands at approximately $4.45 million. An overwhelming 83% of organizations experienced multiple data breaches in 2022.

A robust data security ecosystem encompasses governance frameworks, effective data discovery methods, robust protection strategies, compliance adherence, efficient data retention policies, proactive threat detection mechanisms, and responsive threat management systems.

Cybercrime: A Growing Menace

Cybercrime presents a multifaceted challenge, with cyberattacks increasing in frequency and sophistication, affecting entities of all scales. The financial implications of cybercrime are profound, with global costs projected to soar to $10.5 trillion annually by 2025. Cyber threats manifest in various forms, from identity theft to ransomware attacks, necessitating diverse countermeasures.

Phishing remains one of the most prevalent threats, evolving in sophistication and scope. Phishing campaigns encompass diverse methods, including email, SMS, voice calls, and social media platforms. It can lead to substantial financial losses, data breaches, and identity theft. Combating phishing demands a multifaceted approach, integrating technological solutions, employee training, and public awareness campaigns.

Addressing cybercrime demands a concerted global and local effort involving robust cybersecurity measures and international cooperation. Effective legislation and law enforcement play pivotal roles in deterring cybercriminal activities.

The Role of Cybersecurity in Rokel Commercial Bank's Strategic Priorities

During the symposium, the CEO of Rokel Commercial Bank, Walton Gilpin, delineated five strategic priorities: cashless ecosystem, banking process automation, cybersecurity resilience, digital transformation, and gender parity. Cybersecurity resilience is a central pillar among these priorities, underscoring the bank's commitment to modernization and equality. From fostering a cashless ecosystem to embracing digital transformation, cybersecurity underpins each priority, ensuring the integrity and security of banking operations.

Sierra Leone's journey towards cybersecurity maturity epitomizes a broader global imperative to safeguard data in an increasingly digitized world. The symposium hosted by Rokel Commercial Bank serves as a testament to the critical role of cybersecurity in shaping the nation's digital future, highlighting the interconnected nature of technological advancement and security imperatives. As Sierra Leone navigates its digital trajectory, embracing robust cybersecurity measures will be indispensable for fostering sustainable growth and resilience in the banking sector and beyond.



Aminata Kondeh, Author
President of Sierra Leoneans in Technology (SLinT)



Contrasting Realities: The Clean International Image Versus the Dirty City Dilemma of Freetown's Mayor

Since assuming office in 2018, Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyer of the Freetown City Council (FCC) has implemented numerous initiatives and gained worldwide recognition for her efforts. However, despite her commendable projects and international accolades, Freetown continues to struggle with sanitation issues, painting a stark contrast between the city's global image and its local realities.

Aki-Sawyer's flagship project, the 'Transform Freetown' initiative, aimed to address various urban challenges, including waste management, housing, and environmental degradation. Under this vision, significant efforts were made, such as the commitment to plant one million trees to combat flooding and absorb carbon dioxide. Additionally, plans were laid out to construct 5,000 houses for low-income earners, particularly in densely populated slum areas like Kroo Bay and Susan's Bay.

Several measures were implemented to improve sanitation, including introducing the 'Cleanest Zone Winner' competition and employing sweepers in all 48 wards of the city. The FCC also initiated the installation of street bins along crucial streets, with plans to expand this initiative further. Furthermore, new sanitation by-laws were passed to regulate the sector more effectively.

Despite these efforts, Freetown continues to grapple with sanitation challenges. Littering, poor refuse disposal practices, and the indiscriminate location of dumpsites persist, undermining the city's cleanliness. The mass influx of people to Freetown during the war exacerbated these issues, leading to a decline in sanitation standards.

Efforts to curb littering, such as placing sanitary baskets in various locations, have been insufficient due to their limited number and poor maintenance. Residents often resort to illegal

dumping, especially in hard-to-reach or emerging communities where sanitation services are inadequate.

The location of dumpsites, particularly the largest one in Akram, poses significant health hazards to nearby residents. Despite repeated appeals for relocation, promises remain unfulfilled, exacerbating health issues such as malaria and respiratory problems.

Scavenging in dumpsites further compounds health risks, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive waste management strategies. Relocation plans for affected communities, such as Hastings, have been slow to materialise, eroding public trust in the Mayor's promises.

Several steps can be taken to address these challenges and bridge the gap between international recognition and local sanitation realities. There is an urgent need to increase the coverage of sanitation services, particularly in hard-to-reach communities, to ensure all residents have access to proper waste disposal facilities. Like in the 70s, we must strengthen enforcement of sanitation by-laws to deter littering and illegal dumping, with stricter penalties for offenders.

The Mayor also need to foster community participation in sanitation efforts through education and awareness campaigns, empowering residents to take ownership of their environment. She must collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including government agencies, businesses, and civil society organisations, to implement comprehensive waste management solutions. It goes without saying that more investment in infrastructure for waste management, including establishing modern landfill sites and recycling facilities to reduce the burden on existing dumpsites, is urgently needed.

While Freetown may face significant sanitation challenges, Mayor Aki-Sawyer's commitment to transformative initiatives and global recognition underscores her potential to lead the city towards a brighter future. She can bridge the gap between Freetown's local realities and its global image by prioritising community engagement, investing in infrastructure, and collaborating with stakeholders. With concerted efforts and collective determination, Mayor Aki-Sawyer can realise her vision of a cleaner and healthier Freetown, setting a shining example for cities worldwide.



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Allegations of discrimination against Sierra Leoneans of Lebanese descent under New Leadership at the Immigration Department

Reports of discrimination against Sierra Leoneans of Lebanese descent have surfaced, shedding light on purported difficulties faced by this community in obtaining essential travel documents from the Immigration Department. The situation has raised concerns about potential violations of constitutional and international human rights standards.

Sierra Leone is home to a significant Lebanese population, with roots dating back to the 1893. However, recent allegations suggest that Sierra Leoneans of Lebanese descent are encountering obstacles when seeking passports and other travel papers, effectively treating them as foreigners in their own country.

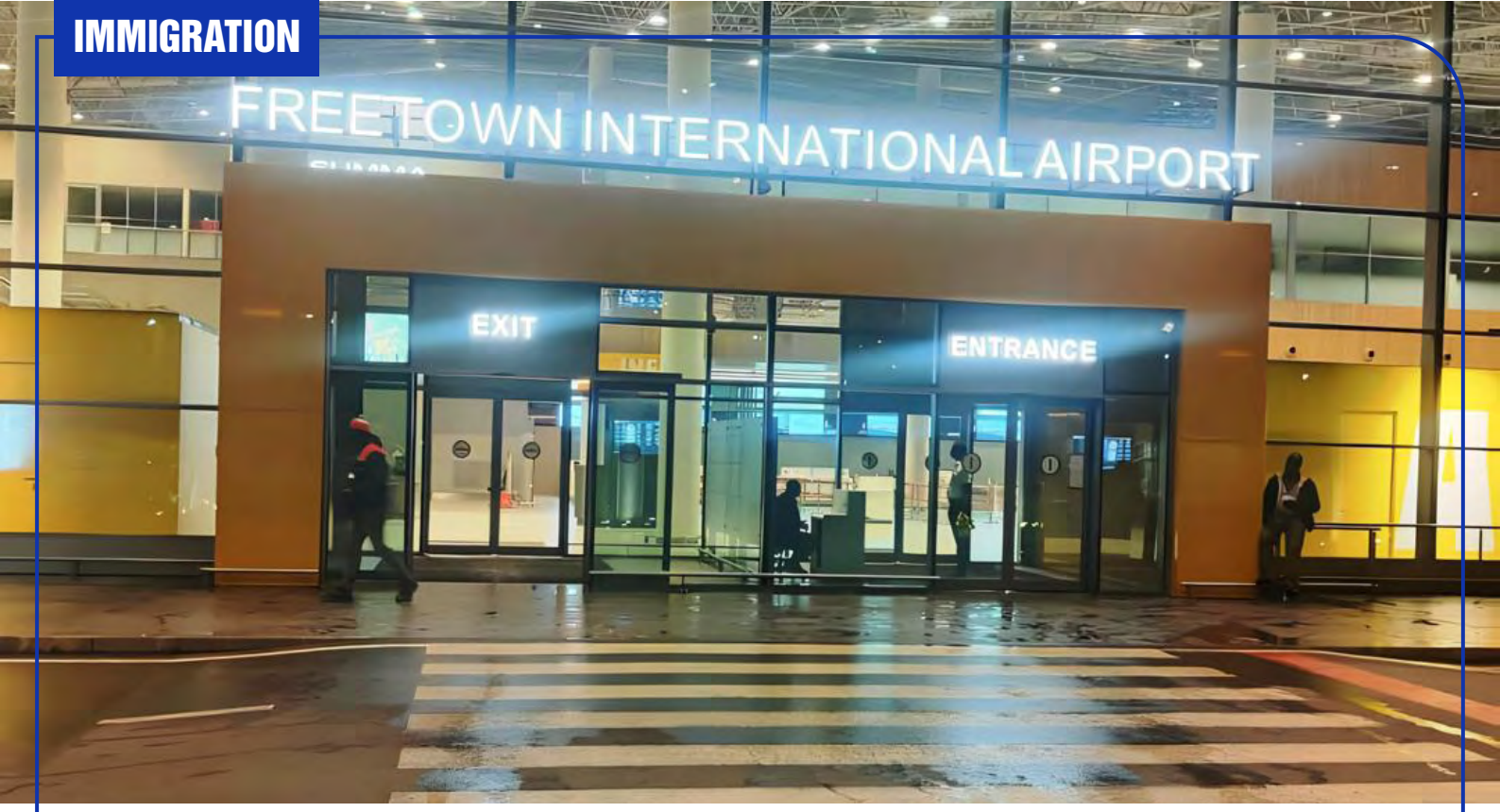
The appointment of Alusine Kanneh as Chief Immigration Officer appears to have marked a shift in the issuance of passports to Sierra Leoneans of Lebanese descent. While these individuals have historically faced challenges in obtaining citizenship documents, the current situation has exacerbated these difficulties.

Speaking anonymously, a Sierra Leonean-Lebanese individual shared his frustration at being denied a passport, citing stringent criteria imposed by the Immigration Department. He highlighted feelings of discrimination, particularly in contrast to the perceived ease with which foreigners from distant lands secure travel documents.

Chief Immigration Officer Alusine Kanneh refutes allegations of discrimination, attributing recent measures to control the issuance of passports to foreigners. According to Kanneh, new regulations stipulate that Lebanese individuals arriving in Sierra Leone for the first time are ineligible for Sierra Leonean passports unless they can provide evidence of birth or naturalization in the country.

Despite assurances from



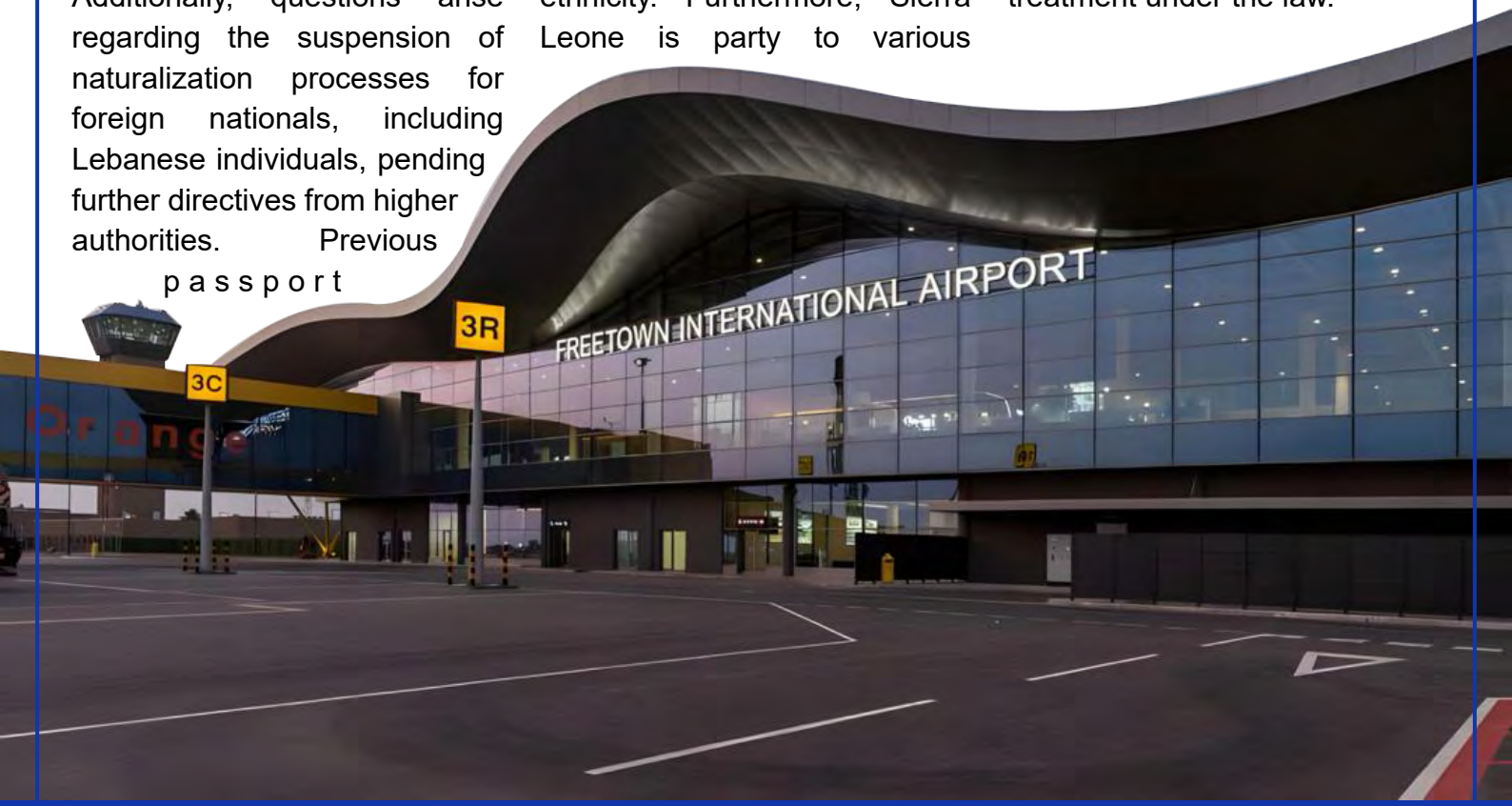


immigration officials, uncertainties linger regarding the future issuance of passports to naturalized Lebanese individuals, as well as the associated fees. Plans for determining passport fees for naturalized Lebanese are underway, with modalities currently under review.

Additionally, questions arise regarding the suspension of naturalization processes for foreign nationals, including Lebanese individuals, pending further directives from higher authorities. Previous passport fees for foreign nationals, including Lebanese citizens, are reported to have been set at $3,000, though a new pricing structure is anticipated.

Critics argue that such discriminatory practices violate Sierra Leone's constitution, which prohibits discrimination based on nationality or ethnicity. Furthermore, Sierra Leone is party to various international human rights treaties that condemn all forms of discrimination.

As allegations of discrimination persist, stakeholders call for transparent and equitable practices within the Immigration Department to ensure that all Sierra Leoneans, regardless of descent, are afforded equal treatment under the law.





The "F" word Déjà vu?

For a good reason, we dislike the term "conflict and fragile affected state." Still, the events surrounding the night and day of 26 November 2023 confirmed that Sierra Leone is fragile. There must be better words, but let's go with fragile for now.

Waking up on the morning of 26 November and trying to make sense of the unfolding drama throughout the day, primarily by WhatsApp, was like watching an old cowboy movie from a seemingly bygone era. Same old themes—like sobels (soldiers by day, rebels by night), characters from various phases of our long war. It was a triggering moment for those who lived through the war in Sierra Leone as well as those who were far away.

A 2022 report on fragility in the Mano River Union carries the stark warning: "Any number of expert analysts reach the conclusion that the contemporary situation increasingly mirrors the situations leading up to the civil wars in the subregion; and that the window may be closing on the opportunity to stop the downward spiral and to build the society that citizens want and deserve."

Indeed, experts talk of a "conflict trap" or a "fragility trap." The causes of civil conflict are complex and multifaceted. Even when war ends, many embers causing the spiral to all-out war may remain dimmed but not completely extinguished. Any number of shocks to the system can reignite old flames.

Such traps aren't inevitable, though. It is up to all of us to take responsibility for ensuring that our history isn't destiny. We've made mistakes in the past, but we're not necessarily doomed to repeat them.

While this feels like a moment of great peril for the nation of Sierra Leone, let us remember our fate lies in our collective hands. We can discipline ourselves to seek reasons to be hopeful and take active steps to bring them to reality. There are several avenues for individual and group action we can embrace.

How have we done with implementing TRC recommendations?

In Sierra Leone's case, we took time and trouble to thoroughly diagnose the underlying causes of our brutal 11-year civil war. Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Report lays out all the issues in considerable detail and depth. A later matrix of the status on the implementation of TRC Report recommendations dates back to 2010, nearly a decade-and-a-half ago.

The constitutional review process has been ongoing but is yet to produce the fundamental shifts in the balance and separation of power that could be fundamental to putting Sierra Leone on a genuinely different footing (not that constitutional changes without a shift in mindsets will help us much.) It is worrying that the documentation of this work was supported by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), a foundation established by the billionaire

George Soros that has recently undergone radical restructuring. How can we continue to support this important work?

An excellent place to get back on track with learning the lessons from the civil war and being able to say with confidence "never again" would be a stocktake of where we are with TRC Report recommendations and an assessment of what our priorities for implementation should be, 20+ years after the war ended.

We now have a Ministry of Information and Civic Education. Imagine instilling visions of a more just, inclusive, equitable, and dynamic Sierra Leone in young Sierra Leoneans who are now navigating the education system. Imagine a genuinely national citizens' movement owning and driving a TRC implementation process and ensuring their government of the day acts in the public interest rather than on a narrow partisan basis.

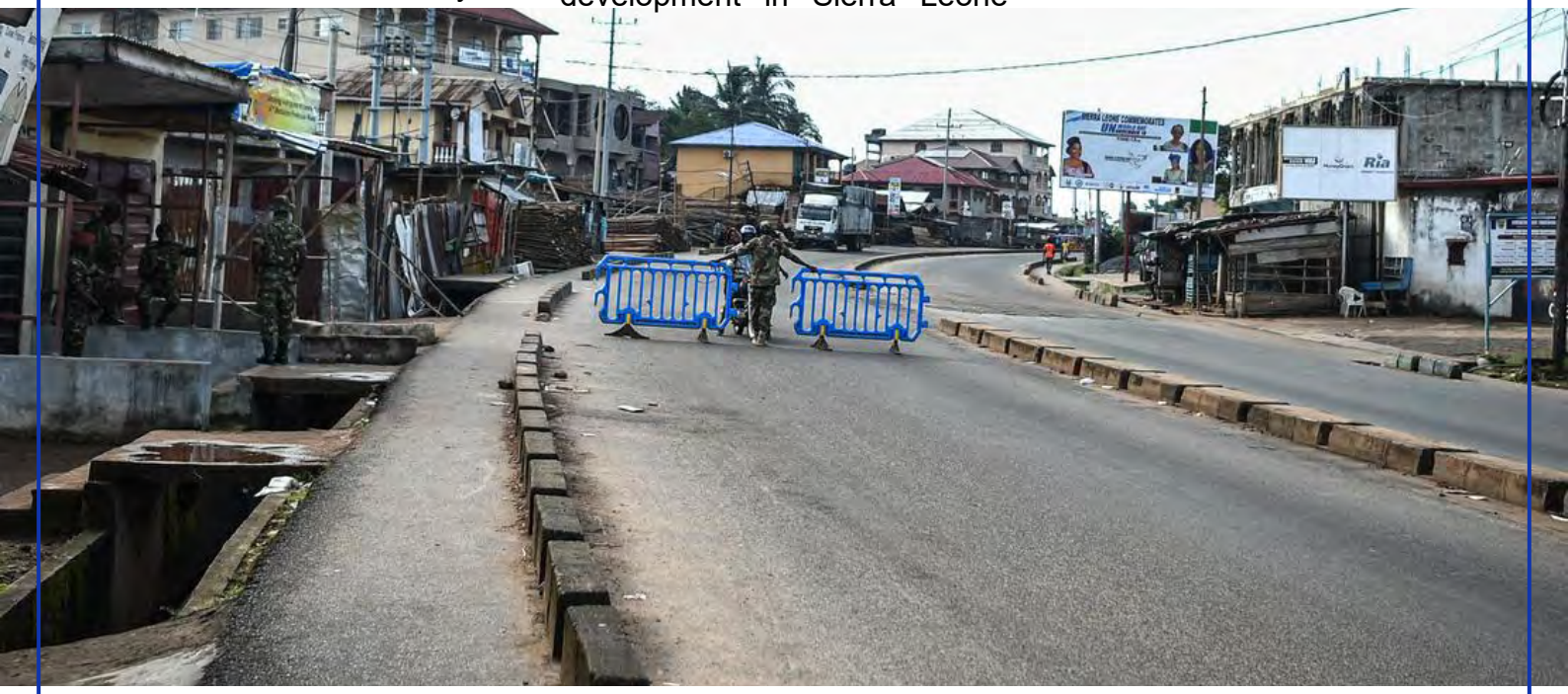
In her article Nine Things Successful People Do Differently, Heidi Grant Halvorson urges us to get specific and know exactly how far we have left to go. Once we've done a stocktake of the TRC recommendations, let's get specific on our implementation priorities. We cannot leave this to a government seated in Freetown. All organs of government, right down to the section level, need to be in on the act. The NGO, Fambul Tok has a People's Planning Process, "an inside-out approach to healing, recovery, and ongoing development in Sierra Leone that puts the people at the center—and the helm."

Each community, section, chiefdom, town, or city center can have its own attention-grabbing poster—in a language and form relevant to the people in that locale—illustrating progress on its priority plans that integrate the reconciliation process and the forward look toward future development. In this way, citizens can hold their elected officials and companies operating in their locale accountable for their contributions to agreed development priorities.

Getting our politics right

Academics are very clear in telling us that Sierra Leone's neopatrimonial system of ethnoregional patronage politics is inimical to development. It promotes corruption, undermines the rule of law, weakens institutions, and leads to misallocation of resources, all of which are detrimental to the country's economic and social progress. When you combine these factors with our winner-takes-all elections and the increasingly high stakes in the contestation for power, it is easy to see why our politics can breed hatred, division, and cycles of violence.

We need to understand that this is a system. In our everyday parlance, we fixate on individuals. True, academics often describe Sierra Leone as having an "imperial presidency," reflecting the amount of power concentrated in the hands of the Executive President. Without checks and balances, there



will be a tendency for more and more power to fall into the president's hands. This has two undesirable consequences. First, the competition to capture the presidency by political actors intensifies. This makes elections costly and contentious. This, in turn, introduces its own imbalances, as we've seen in the run-up to, during, and the aftermath of the 2023 elections. From late 2018, I had begun to dread the 2023 elections. Now, barely six months after those elections, our attention is already fixated on the 2028 elections. Political actors have already begun positioning themselves for this big showdown.

The second unfortunate consequence of an increasingly imperial presidency is that too much pressure rests on the presidency to deliver the development results citizens expect. Yet, governance is increasingly complex and interdependent nationally, regionally, and globally. A highly centralized, command-and-control presidency can't adapt and deliver in complex interdependencies that demand decentralized decision-making close to the theatre of action. Like a precarious house of cards, one flawed move can bring them all crashing down in a flash. This is where consensus-based constitutional review is essential.

A mistake we've made is to reduce these critical questions of how we organize the state to a fight between our two main political parties, the opposition All People's Congress Party (APC) and the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). How we



separate partisan politics from deeper and broader questions of political architecture and design is an urgent and vital question we must address and resolve. One way to start would be to include more citizens' voices in the dialogue process. Under normal circumstances, we would have considered civil society actors legitimate amplifiers of different citizens' interests. Sadly, we now perceive (rightly or wrongly) so many civil society actors and organizations as partisan, and the divisions between some reflect this partisan divide. Finding ways around that problem might entail developing new codes of conduct, searching harder for other credible voices, and encouraging new groups to form.

Of course, partisan politics has its place in our system of democratic contestation. Paradoxically, despite countless coups, imposition of one-party rule, and an 11-year civil war, APC and SLPP remain embedded within society, especially in their respective regional strongholds. Identity and politics are intertwined in Sierra Leone. Suppose Party A members think that Party B members want to eliminate their party. In that case, they will likely equate this as an existential threat to their existence as a group. Such fears can breed distrust and extremist politics and undermine the viability of dialogue, conflict resolution, and peace-building efforts.

In West Africa, we've seen too many coups and attempted coups over the last few years. We need more than ritual condemnations of coups. Let's be as tough on the causes of coups as we are on the coups themselves.



Creating an uneven playing field, moving the goalposts to favour one side over others, and placing unreasonable obstacles on political participation can incentivize some actors to take extreme measures to capture power. How can we reduce the tension, violence, and cost before, during, and after the next election in Sierra Leone? The test will be that every legitimate political actor has an incentive to participate in the democratic process, confident they have a fair chance.

Similarly, incumbents must feel confident they can leave office without fear of unending political persecution at the hands of the new sheriff in power hellbent on manipulating our already weak institutions to exact revenge. The president, vice president, ministers, and heads of parastatals all have to be incentivized to leave office and return to everyday life.

It's the economy, stupid

Politics and economics go hand-in-hand. A poorly performing economy is a political liability even in a benign political environment. Improvement of our macroeconomic stability is a national emergency. In a series of talks he gave in Freetown derived from his best-selling book, Gambling on Development: Why Some Countries Win and Others Lose, the author, Professor Stefan Dercon, explained that macroeconomic stability is the first of three critical ingredients for a country's elites to form a "development bargain" that benefits most citizens. The second is a "self-aware" state that doesn't generate a plan that is a shopping list but is strategically calibrated in line with state capacity and resource availability. In other words, it is a state that cuts its cloth according to size. The third requirement is accountability mechanisms to track progress and make course corrections.

Our moral imagination

Perhaps all this sounds like pie in the sky. Many Sierra Leoneans seem resigned to perpetual mediocrity, crisis, breakdown, and failure. This is where John Paul Lederach's idea of the "moral imagination" comes in. We've come a long way from the darkest days of the war in the 1990s. We can translate our desire not to return there to building on what we have, appreciating our relationships, especially across regional and political dividing lines, recognizing we have a shared fate, for better or worse, and acknowledging that we can create a shared future of peace, prosperity, and purpose. Let's start with the small steps.



Chukwu-Emeka Chikezie
writes in his personal capacity

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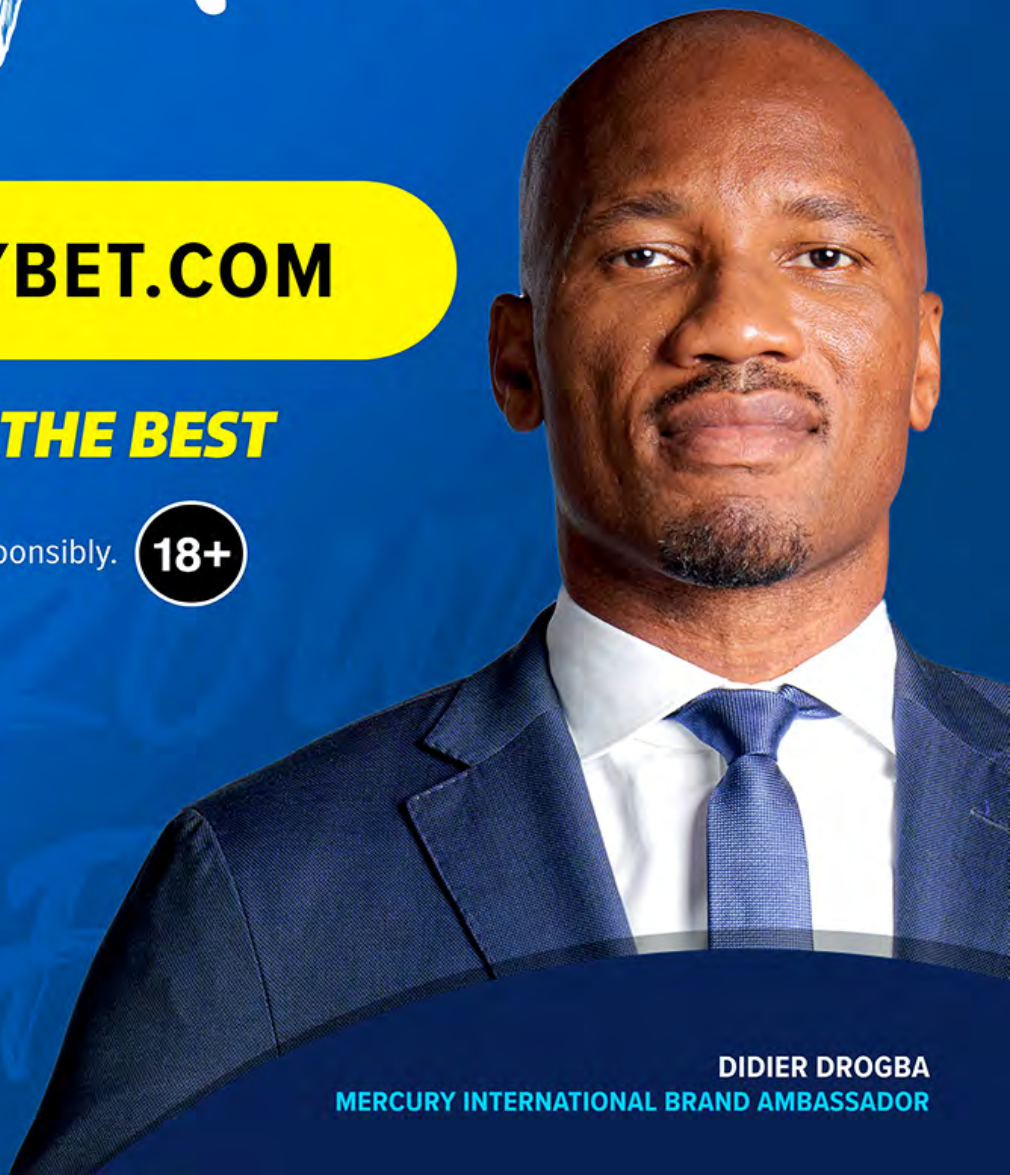
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Demystifying Stigma Related to Hepatitis B and the Urgent Need to Tackle This Silent Epidemic

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver commonly caused by viral infection. There are five main hepatitis viruses, referred to as types A, B, C, D and E. Every 30 seconds, someone dies from a viral hepatitis related illness. The disease can affect anyone, but underserved communities are disproportionately affected. Chronic hepatitis B and chronic hepatitis C are among the life-threatening infectious diseases that cause serious liver damage, cancer, and premature death.



Chronic hepatitis B and chronic hepatitis C are neglected, silent infectious diseases with a burden that has surpassed malaria, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and tuberculosis (TB) in Africa. Globally, 354 million people are living with the hepatitis B or C virus. According to African Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the African region has the highest of hepatitis B, where 82.3 million persons are living with chronic hepatitis B. Two of every three children infected with hepatitis B globally are born in Africa and hepatitis B infection acquired at birth or in early childhood is the most common cause of primary liver cancer in adulthood. In Sierra Leone, according to a recent meta-analysis by Yendewa et al [1], 1 out of every 8 persons is infected with hepatitis B, which means approximately 1 million Sierra Leoneans have chronic hepatitis B infection.

Millions of people living with hepatitis B face an added burden of stigma and discrimination. Stigma is defined as a social process, experienced, or anticipated, and which is characterized by exclusion, rejection, blame, or devaluation resulting from experience, perception, or reasonable anticipation of an adverse social judgement about a person or a group [2]. Studies confirm key underlying reasons for stigma included fear of infection, as well as negative assumptions andstereotyping around the sources of infection, with hepatitis B transmission in adults often being perceived as associated with the use of injectable drugs, sexual promiscuity, or homosexuality.

Stigma resulting from hepatitis B infection has contributed to discrimination, a reduction in quality of life, and difficulty accessing employment, education, and immigration. Studies have been done to confirm the psychological responses to discrimination which include trauma, suicide, mental health challenges, depression, economic instability, and social isolation. People living with hepatitis B go through extreme poverty as they must pay out of pocket to manage their life-long disease. Many young



Sierra Leoneans who have ambitions to travel abroad to study or seek greener pastures have been refused a visa after an unknown positive status was revealed to them. Young aspiring individuals are stripped off great job opportunities in Sierra Leone, because of their hepatitis B positive status.

Lack of knowledge about the mode of transmission results in unnecessary stigma and discrimination. So let us debunk some of the myths and misconceptions surrounding this silent killer virus. Hepatitis B is not transmitted through casual contact, neither through sharing of food nor kitchen utensils. Many reports have shown that even people living with hepatitis B have poor understanding of the mode of transmission of the infection which can result to internalized stigma. It is sad to witness a parent scared or have a sense of guilt to transmit the virus to their children. If we think about it, what can a poor man in a village, or an uneducated person know about the disease if he can't read? Thus, the importance of community outreach programs should never be underestimated. Notwithstanding this, even educated people do not know much about HBV infection and its mode of transmission.

Household transmission of the virus, which is a form of horizontal transmission, can occur through blood-to-blood contact from an open wound of an infected person or through sexual contact. Therefore, it is very important to disinfect surfaces that have been contaminated by blood and to keep wounds covered. Other than that, parents can hug, play, kiss their children and eat together. Notwithstanding that, sharing of toothbrushes, nail clippers and razors can lead to transmission of hepatitis B. It is however crucial for household members to be vaccinated. Children can transmit the virus to each other through wounds or bites but not through tears, sweat or urine. However, if a child has been immunized against the virus, this form of transmission rarely occurs.

In a first published study in Sierra Leone by Ghazzawi et al [3], on assessment of stigmatization attitudes, 43.5% of the participants had concerns with sharing food or utensils with someone with hepatitis B. Similarly, 44.1% stated that they would have concerns with having casual contact or working with a person known to have hepatitis B. Overall, nearly half (49.3%) expressed at least one stigmatizing attitude towards people with hepatitis B.

A big misconception in Sierra Leone about the mode of transmission of hepatitis B is that people believe it is transmitted through sweat, one big myth that needs to be demystified. According to Ghazzawi et al [3], almost 68% of people believed hepatitis B is caused by a curse or evil spirit. This underscores the need for educational interventions at all levels of society to dispel myths and misconceptions by embarking on community awareness raising and sensitization. Community education and mobilization campaigns related to hepatitis B vaccination are critical to preventing CHB infection and reducing stigma and discrimination toward people living with hepatitis B.

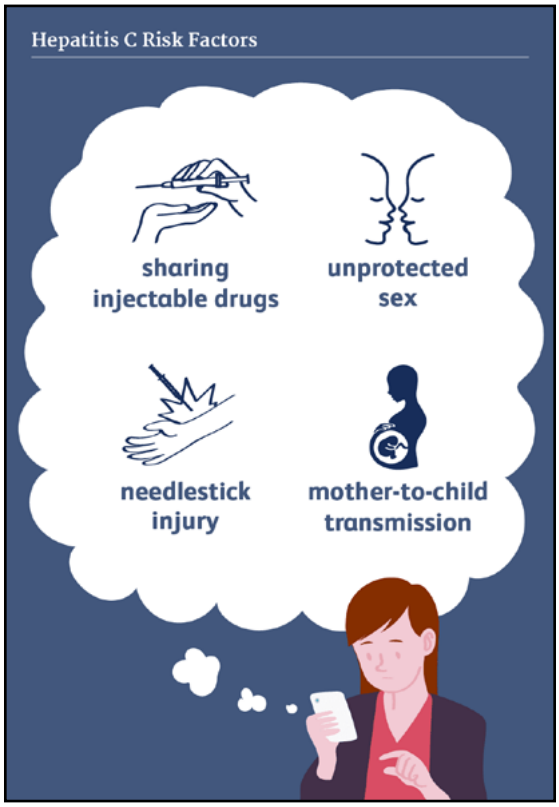
Disclosure of positive hepatitis B status to sexual partners and family members remains a major challenge for people living with hepatitis B. I have come across lived experiences of people living with chronic hepatitis B whose partner and/or family member have abandoned them because of their status. A handful of Sierra Leoneans are very hesitant to disclose their status to their partners, especially when we know practicing a polygamous

relationship is a way of life and a culture in our society, keeping a positive status of the virus a secret and continuation of practicing unprotected sex with partners can results in a chain reaction of transmission of the virus. Remember that symptoms of hepatitis B infection appear after 9-21 weeks of exposure to the virus.

According to Ghazzawi et al., assessment of health-seeking behaviors by the public, yielded overwhelmingly positive results, where 80.4% were willing to take medication for treatment if they tested positive for hepatitis B, while a similar proportion (78.8%) were willing to undergo regular clinic follow up every 3 to 6 months for the management of hepatitis B. This study shows that people are willing to seek healthcare if the environment is conducive to do so and having health care professionals with adequate knowledge to offer the dire need for appropriate healthcare services and psychosocial support. Studies in SL have demonstrated poor knowledge of hepatitis B infection among healthcare professionals.

Although data does not exist in Sierra Leone to elucidate this, there are studies done in other countries which reveal that healthcare professionals themselves contribute to stigma and discrimination among people living with hepatitis B. hepatitis B-related stigma and discrimination result in low uptake of hepatitis B education, screening, immunization, and sound preventive practices among at-risk individuals, underscoring the importance of effective hepatitis B education among healthcare professionals.

Now that a hepatitis policy exists for the first time in Sierra Leone, we are eagerly waiting to see government take swift actions towards providing dignified and equitable services to those living with hepatitis B and to deliver effective prevention strategies and health promotion programs to eliminate the virus by 2030! An ambitious target which all countries with high burden of the disease have set as a target for elimination.



Sadly, there are no anti-discrimination laws and policy in Sierra Leone to protect the rights of Sierra Leoneans affected with hepatitis B. Eliminating the stigma surrounding hepatitis through the introduction of policies and structural changes has been named as a key factor in hepatitis elimination by the World health Organization. Policy makers and decision-makers have an essential role in ensuring that anti-discrimination laws, public health policy, education and health systems work together with civil society and the affected communities to tackle the crisis of stigma and discrimination. To address these challenges, and as KnowHep Foundation is a professional body that advocates for elimination of VH in Sierra Leone, in collaboration with the World Hepatitis Alliance, we urge government to adopt the following policies:

1. Provide accurate and accessible information regarding hepatitis B for those newly diagnosed including transmission, health promotion information, rights and responsibilities, and long-term health plan.
2. Ensure all newly diagnosed individuals are linked to appropriate and supportive healthcare services for ongoing monitoring and management.
3. Ensure equitable and affordable access to prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) programmes for all women.
4. Ensure that mental and emotional support is provided to people diagnosed with hepatitis B and their families.

5. Require that all healthcare professionals receive ongoing hepatitis education and are aware of stigma and how to address it.

6. Ensure testing for hepatitis B is conducted in the context of healthcare services, that the results are confidential, that the testing is of direct benefit to the person being tested and is not required as a condition of employment or education.

7. Anti-discrimination laws and policies must be formulated, and correctly implemented, and adequate recourse is given to enable people experiencing discrimination to pursue justice through the legal system.

8. Ensure there are legal protections in place for people with hepatitis B, including protection from government sanctioned discrimination.

9. Ensure that immigration and visa policies do not limit the freedoms of people living with hepatitis B, because of their diagnosis.

10. People living with hepatitis B should have their voice heard. Sharing lived experiences will reduce stigmatization. People living with hepatitis B must come forward to report any form of discrimination against them and they have the power to drive political will.



Despite the availability of hepatitis B medication and a vaccine, many people living with hepatitis B in Sierra Leone are still unable to access or afford the treatment and preventative measures they need. The poor people are left alone to tackle the epidemic. Policy makers must act now to improve the lives Sierra Leoneans who are currently impacted by hepatitis B. We are NOT WAITING, and we cannot leave people behind. The lives of people living with hepatitis B are impacted by stigma and discrimination every day. Their human rights must be protected. With concerted effort we can end stigma and discrimination and improve the lives of people affected by hepatitis B in Sierra Leone.

Below is a brief list of resources for people living with hepatitis B or individuals living with people living with hepatitis B.

1. Transmission of hepatitis B – how hepatitis B can be transmitted.

2. Online Support Groups

3. Factsheet – When Someone in the Family has Hepatitis B

4. Know Your Rights – for anyone experiencing discrimination because of their hepatitis B status

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From Bars to Beats:

Rapper LAJ's Journey of

Prison, Pardon and Redemption

In a remarkable turn of events, Sierra Leone's renowned hip-hop artist Alhaji Amadu Bah, popularly known as LAJ or Boss LAJ of the Red Flag Movement (RFM), has embarked on a journey from incarceration to ambassadorship, symbolizing a tale of resilience, forgiveness, and hope for the nation.

Just weeks after being granted a presidential pardon by President Julius Maada Bio, LAJ has been appointed as a peace ambassador tasked with promoting reconciliation, unity, and peace domestically and internationally. This appointment is a testament to his commitment to turning his past challenges into opportunities for positive change.



LAJ's path to redemption began when he was released alongside 352 other prisoners under the prerogative of mercy, a constitutional provision allowing the president to grant clemency on occasions such as New Year's Day. Previously serving a nine-year sentence for robbery, LAJ's journey through the correctional system and subsequent release sparked both controversy and acclaim.



His arrest, stemming from a scuffle at a fuel station in Freetown, ignited tensions in the capital, with supporters rallying for his freedom. Amidst allegations of mistreatment and human rights violations during his detention, LAJ's ordeal garnered widespread condemnation both locally and internationally.

Yet, amidst the challenges, LAJ emerged with a message of gratitude and reconciliation. Donning a white T-shirt emblazoned with the words "Thank You," he expressed profound appreciation to President Bio and the First Lady for their compassion and mercy, acknowledging their pivotal role in his newfound freedom.

With a renewed sense of purpose, LAJ has pledged to use his platform to advocate for peace and unity, partnering with fellow hip-hop artist and entertainment ambassador Kao Denero. Their collaborative efforts, including releasing a hit song, "The Peace", exemplify their commitment to fostering national harmony and development while in prison.

The appointment of LAJ as a peace ambassador marks a significant milestone in Sierra Leone's cultural landscape, signalling a shift towards reconciliation and inclusivity. His journey from incarceration to ambassadorship is a testament to the power of forgiveness and second chances, inspiring hope for a brighter future.

As LAJ prepares to launch his latest musical endeavour, titled "THIS GAME WE GO DON AM," he sends a powerful message of resilience and determination. Through his music and advocacy, he aims to transcend socio-political challenges and pave the way for a more peaceful and prosperous Sierra Leone.

In the face of adversity, LAJ's journey reminds us that redemption is possible and that even the darkest moments can lead to newfound light. As he embarks on this new chapter, let us stand together to support his mission to build a more united and harmonious nation. From bars to beats, LAJ's story is one of hope, transformation, and the enduring power of music to inspire change.





Propelling Leone Stars to Footballing Glory

The recent African Cup of Nations (AFCON) has wrapped up. And it's safe to say that the top African footballers who gathered in Ivory Coast did their continent proud. Massive congratulations to the eventual winners... Ivory Coast really showed off their hosting skills and organization, and the standard of refereeing was top-notch. Unlike in other parts of the world, the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system served its purpose well.

The football quality was outstanding, highlighting the incredible talent across the continent. This year's AFCON demonstrated that success in African football is no longer limited to the traditional powerhouses, with smaller nations like Cape Verde, with a population of less than a million, proving their mettle.

This reality leads us to reflect on what it will take for Sierra Leone's Leone Stars to advance in the next AFCON and break the cycle of exiting at the group stages, a challenge we've faced in the past. Despite having some promising talent, our national team seems to be lagging behind, currently ranked 127th in the FIFA rankings, just behind The Gambia, which has a population of less than 3 million.

The big question is: What steps do we need to take to level up? To break this cycle, we need to rethink our team selection process, moving away from favouritism and focusing on current form and potential. While there's been a change in leadership with John Keister's departure, our technical team still seems to lack the fresh ideas and tactical nous needed for success.

Solid leadership and tactical





direction are essential for navigating the complexities of African football. Our management and organization need to evolve, embracing professional standards to drive our team forward. Additionally, our planning needs a serious overhaul. We are very often reactive and late in putting plans in place.

Crucially, we need to foster a strong team ethos – consistency, tactical discipline, and effective teamwork. This means tapping into talent both domestically and internationally. However, the commitment of our home-based players to the demands of full professionalism is lacking. While we're making strides in infrastructure, such as installing artificial turfs across the country, we must realize that building a winning squad requires more than just upgraded facilities.

Financial backing is crucial. While we appreciate efforts to develop infrastructure, we must also provide adequate resources to assemble a competitive squad. Many nations in African football aspire to qualify for AFCON. To turn our aspirations into reality, we must back up our dreams with tangible action. Investing more resources, both financially and in management, will pave the way for a skilled and disciplined squad, rather than just wishful thinking.

Sierra Leone has the potential to shine on the continental stage, but it demands a comprehensive commitment to change, innovation, and investment in our footballing future. Only then can we truly compete, leaving behind the disappointment of group stage exits and forging a new narrative for Leone Stars in African football.



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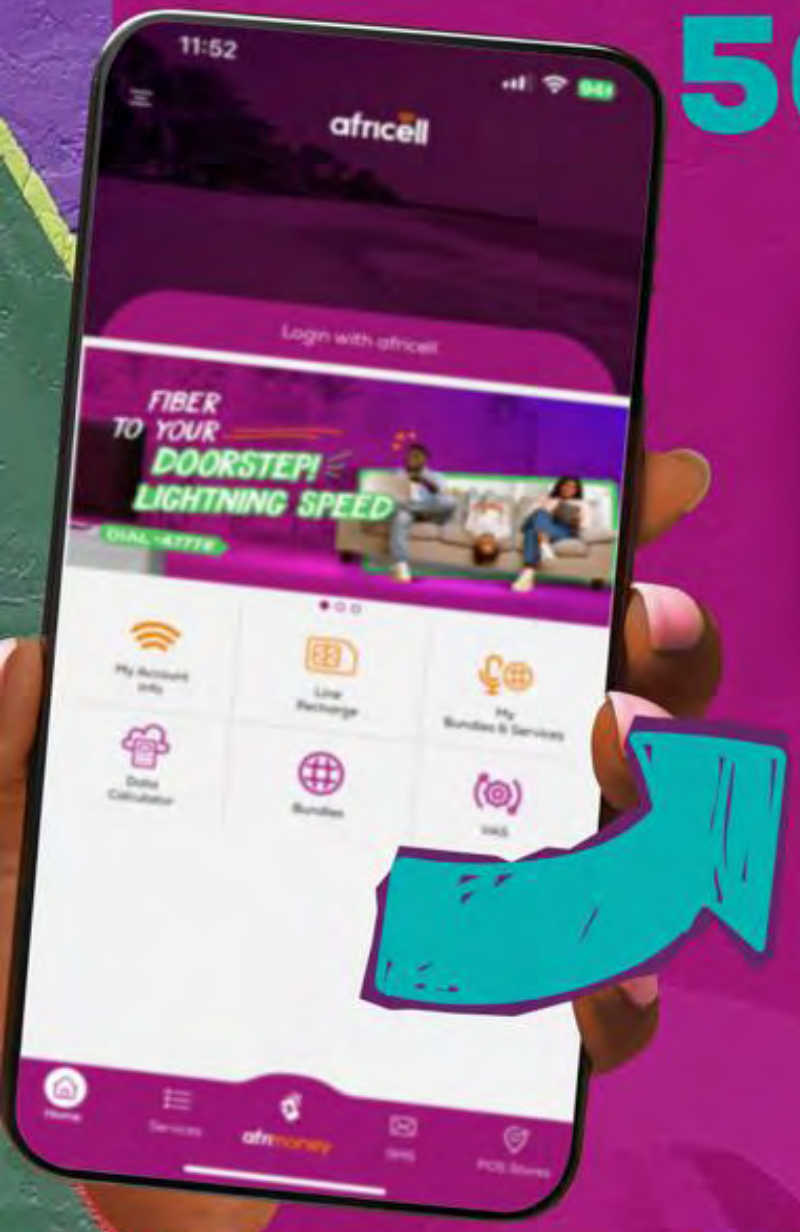


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