

Rural Voices Say TRC's Decentralisation Dream Is Fading

By Alvin Lansana Kargbo

Twenty years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Sierra Leone recommended decentralisation as a key mechanism for peacebuilding and national reconciliation, many rural-based organisations argue that the country is yet to see the full benefits of this reform.

Although local councils were reintroduced in 2004 with the enactment of the Local Government Act, critics say that the devolution of power remains largely cosmetic. Provincial-based civil society organisations report that decision-making and financial control continue to be concentrated in Freetown, undermining efforts to empower communities and promote inclusive governance.

Sahr Kamanda, Programme Coordinator of the Kailahun District Development Network, believes decentralisation has not gone beyond the surface level in eastern Sierra Leone.

“What we have is a structure that looks like decentralisation, but in reality, councils have little to say. They depend on central government transfers, which are often delayed or insufficient. The communities feel neglected when basic services are either stalled or politicized,” he said.

Kamanda noted that ward committees, which are supposed to serve as community-level advisory bodies, remain largely inactive due to lack of resources, unclear mandates, and low public engagement. He stressed that rural communities like Pendembu, Buedu, and Koindu still struggle with access to clean water, poor feeder roads, and weak healthcare systems, issues that decentralised governance was meant to solve.

“We fought for change after the war, and the TRC laid a roadmap. But we are still waiting for that promise to reach the people on the ground.”

In the southern region, Hannah Bendu Kallon, Chairperson of the Bo Civil Society Forum, painted a similar picture.

“We commend the effort to reintroduce local governance, but decentralisation without resources and autonomy is an empty gesture. The local councils can't recruit

the staff they need, can't design local policies effectively, and often have to get clearance from the central government before doing anything significant," she said.

She added that budget transparency at the local level is another issue, with many citizens unaware of how funds are allocated or spent. Public participation in council meetings is low, she said, partly due to lack of information dissemination and partly due to frustration.

"When people feel their voices don't lead to action, they eventually stop engaging. This widens the gap between local authorities and the citizens they are meant to serve."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in the aftermath of the country's brutal civil war (1991–2002), identified poor governance, marginalisation, and lack of political inclusion as major root causes of the conflict. Its final report in 2004 called for the decentralisation of state power to promote citizen participation, equitable development, and national reconciliation.

The TRC warned that unless rural communities were empowered through meaningful governance structures, the conditions that led to the war could resurface in new forms—through corruption, unrest, and youth disenfranchisement.

The Local Government Act of 2004 was therefore a critical response to the TRC's recommendations. It laid the foundation for the establishment of district and city councils across Sierra Leone, granting them responsibilities in areas such as primary education, health services, solid waste management, and local economic development.

However, according to both local observers and civil society groups, the transfer of responsibilities has not been matched by a transfer of authority or adequate financial resources.

In response to the criticisms, a senior official at the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, who requested anonymity, acknowledged the gaps but defended the government's progress.

"We've made major strides in reviving local governance. Councils now exist in every district, and we have devolved key functions like health, education, and agriculture. However, decentralisation is a long-term process. It requires capacity-building, legislative clarity, and sustainable funding," he said.

The official pointed to ongoing reviews of the Local Government Act and national decentralisation policy as evidence of government commitment.

“We are working with partners to streamline the roles of traditional authorities, improve fiscal decentralisation, and ensure that councils are more accountable and responsive to citizens,” he added.

Nonetheless, the official admitted that delays in disbursement of funds from the central government and the politicisation of local councils remain significant barriers.

Independent assessments back the claims of limited decentralization.

A 2023 audit report by the Ministry of Finance showed that only a small fraction—less than 20%—of public expenditure is managed through local councils. Most financial and development decisions still pass through Freetown. Many district councils are unable to collect local taxes efficiently due to weak administrative systems, outdated property valuation mechanisms, and low public trust.

Traditional authorities, including paramount chiefs, often operate parallel to elected councils, causing duplication of roles and confusion over leadership and accountability.

Ward committees—designed to be the link between communities and local councils—are mostly inactive or operate with no budget, training, or regular supervision.

These findings suggest that while decentralisation exists in structure, it lacks depth in practice.

Civil society leaders warn that failure to deliver on decentralisation threatens national cohesion and undermines the very essence of transitional justice.

“You can’t build peace without fairness. And fairness means that a farmer in Kailahun or Bo has the same access to opportunity as someone in Freetown,” said Kallon.

“The longer we delay meaningful decentralisation, the more we weaken the TRC’s vision and the hopes of those who suffered during the war.”

As Sierra Leone continues to push toward inclusive development under its Medium-Term National Development Plan (2019–2023) and Vision 2030 goals, decentralisation must move beyond paperwork and into communities.

For many in the provinces, true justice will only come when the structures of governance genuinely reflect the needs, voices, and dreams of the people they are meant to serve.

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