

After the Guns Fell Silent: The Double-Edged Role of Aid in Sierra Leone's Recovery

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"I remember giving my statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," recalls 45-year old Aminata Conteh, a war widow and resident of Wellington in the east-end of Freetown. "They told us that justice would come, that the international community was helping us. But I'm still waiting for the help they promised."

Like many Sierra Leoneans who survived the country's decade-long civil war, Aminata placed her hopes in the transitional justice process that followed the conflict. At the heart of this process were mechanisms like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), both of which were made possible largely through international aid.

Since the war officially ended in 2002, Sierra Leone has worked to heal the wounds of its past. Central to this effort has been support from international donors, including the United Nations, the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and various international NGOs. These actors contributed funding, technical expertise, and logistical support to transitional justice initiatives. Their backing enabled the establishment of the TRC to gather testimonies and foster national healing, and the Special Court to prosecute those deemed most responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Ibrahim Bangura, a lecturer in peace and conflict studies at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, emphasizes the significance of these interventions. "The Special Court was not just about prosecution. It sent a message that impunity would no longer be tolerated. And without the financial and legal assistance from international donors, we could never have achieved that." Indeed, the Special Court, which operated with a hybrid of international and Sierra Leonean personnel, broke new ground by trying high-level suspects within the country where the atrocities occurred, a first in international criminal justice.

Yet, alongside the achievements, there were notable shortcomings. Mary-Magdalene Kaifala, an advocacy officer with the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law (CARL), based in the city center, argues that while donor support was vital, the long-term impact of that aid remains uncertain. "A lot of money came into the country for justice programs. But many of those efforts faded once the donors pulled out. There was not enough focus on building the systems that could continue after the international presence was gone."

This concern is echoed by staff at the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL) headquartered in Freetown. According to the Chairperson, Madam Patricia Narsu Ndanema, several community outreach and reparations programs launched during the TRC era have since struggled to stay afloat. "Funding dried up. Trained staff left. Community healing programs became fragmented. The expectations of victims were never fully met," she said. The reparations recommended by the TRC, which included psychosocial support, education for war-affected children, and financial assistance to amputees and sexual violence survivors, were only partially implemented.

Some critics, including local governance experts like Sahr Kendema of the Campaign for Good Governance, argue that the influx of aid inadvertently created a top-down justice system, disconnected from the lived realities of ordinary Sierra Leoneans. “Most of the transitional justice frameworks were imported,” he explains. “They were designed with donor timelines and Western legal systems in mind. But in our communities, justice also means restoring relationships, resolving land disputes, and remembering the dead in culturally appropriate ways.”

Moreover, donor coordination posed a significant challenge. Competing interests and overlapping mandates often meant that initiatives lacked cohesion. For example, while some international partners prioritized legal prosecution and documentation, others focused on short-term humanitarian assistance or symbolic reparations.

Despite these challenges, many stakeholders recognize the crucial role international aid played in establishing a foundation for peace and rule of law in Sierra Leone. The transitional justice process, though flawed, helped to prevent a return to violence and introduced vital conversations about accountability.

“There’s still work to be done,” says Kendema, noting: “The conversation now should be about how we integrate justice into our national development strategy. That means supporting the judiciary, strengthening civic education, and funding community-level reconciliation initiatives. We don’t need another round of externally-driven processes. We need to take ownership.”

The experience of Sierra Leone’s post-war transition offers lessons for other nations emerging from conflict. It underscores the importance of balancing international support with local agency. As survivors like Aminata in Wellington continue to hope for reparations and recognition, the challenge for the international community is to ensure that aid becomes a bridge to sustainable justice not a substitute for national responsibility.

In the words of Lecturer Bangura, “International aid should be an enabler, not a crutch. If we want transitional justice to truly succeed, it must be rooted in the voices, cultures, and capacities of the people it seeks to serve.”

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