
Cuba provides clear example to Sierre Leone on dealing with disasters

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Mudslides in Freetown, Sierra Leone [killed about 1000 people](#) on August 14, mostly inhabitants of the urban slums in the hills above the capital.

Despite its portrayal as a natural disaster caused by days of heavy rain, “the tragedy was entirely man-made”, as writer [Lansana Gberie states bluntly](#). The result of environmental degradation, lack of disaster preparedness and substandard housing for the poor, these deaths could have been avoided.

Much like the [Ebola epidemic](#) that killed [4000](#) Sierra Leoneans in 2014, the deep roots of this disaster are the neocolonial structures and neoliberal policies that govern Sierra Leone. They assure, as African Socialist Movement International Support president Joshua Lew McDermott [wrote in Jacobin](#), that “the levers of the Sierra Leonean state that could have checked the wealth extraction and bolstered domestic industries and social services were done away with in the name of fiscal austerity, debt repayment, and incentivizing foreign investment”.

Poverty constrains the resources available for disaster response, but not all governments in poor countries are equally ineffective. The difference in government response is highlighted every time there is a major hurricane in the

Caribbean, and many more die in Haiti than in Cuba.

For example, in 2007, [Hurricane Matthew](#) killed 546 people in Haiti and only four in Cuba despite being of similar intensity in both locations (it also killed 47 in the US).

The government of Cuba, unlike Haiti's, invests in meteorology, with dozens of weather stations to monitor, predict and track incoming storms. The victims in Sierra Leone sadly had no similar warning system.

In Cuba, there are annual preparations and drills in May at the start of hurricane season. The military and police make plans for evacuations.

In "[areas identified as vulnerable](#)", authorities provide "electrical generators, drinking water and additional medical personnel in advance of the storm's approach, as members of the community are bestowed with the responsibility of providing such essential services".

Furthermore, the Cuban government provides its citizens with health care and education. "[Compared to their Caribbean neighbors](#)," *Ecology and Society* wrote, "Cubans are far better prepared for emergencies. Not only do they benefit from better infrastructure and housing, as well as a highly effective risk communication system, but more importantly, Cuba is populated by the most educated population in the developing world."

A more educated population better understands the risks posed by hurricanes and how to respond to them.

Although many dismiss Cuba's success at minimising the number of deaths due to hurricanes and other natural disasters as possible only in one-party state, "[there's little about its hurricane program that rests on authoritarianism](#)", an August 30 *Jacobin* article noted.

While, "the hurricane response may be directed from the top down... it's carried out by ordinary Cubans in their local communities, building on the regular training they receive". There is no technical reason why Sierra Leone could not follow such a model of "total mobilisation". The problem is political will.

The real impediment is that neocolonialism and neoliberalism deprive the Sierra Leonean government of the fiscal capacity and policy space to solve the problems of substandard housing and lack of disaster preparedness. Many NGOs are doing an admirable job of replying to the crisis, but disaster relief is a core government function. The Sierra Leonean government is simply too small and [disorganised](#) to handle such crises.

One major reason the government is so small is because it [deprives itself of needed tax revenue](#) by offering huge tax exemptions to foreign mining companies such as African Minerals and London Mining and agribusinesses such as Addax BioEnergy. As a result, Sierra Leone's government captures less than 10% of GDP in taxes.

In a 2014 report, [Christian Aid](#) estimated: "[T]he government lost revenues from customs duty and Goods and Services Tax exemptions alone worth Le (Sierra Leonean Leone) 966.6bn (US\$224m) in 2012, amounting to an enormous 8.3 per cent of GDP.

"In 2011, losses were even higher — 13.7% of GDP. The annual average loss over the three years 2010-2012 was Le 840.1bn (US\$199m)."

Even the [International Monetary Fund agrees](#) that Sierra Leone needs to improve tax collection. Yet, the World Bank and IMF insist that Sierra Leone's development depends on attracting more foreign investment, and implementing more austerity — the same policies that led to the current predicament.

Unchecked development in the hills surrounding Freetown has been "[raising fears of landslides and other calamities](#)" for years, *Al Jazeera* noted in 2011. But fiscal austerity means there is little money for building adequate housing and enforcing the housing code so that people do not build in areas vulnerable to flooding.

For 2016-2018 the Sierra Leonean government has only allocated Le 4.386 billion a year (less than US\$600,000 at the current exchange rate) or about [0.4% of its budget to housing](#). This figure excludes salaries of about Le 4 billion for the Ministry of Works, Housing and Infrastructure.

The Sierra Leonean government needs to engage its citizens in regular disaster preparations like those in Cuba. It also needs a national policy for slum upgrading and resettlement.

[The Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre](#) recommends the government support the construction of housing cooperatives like [Our Lady of Charity Housing Cooperative](#) in Uganda as a sustainable, affordable housing solution.

We should support activist groups such as the [African Socialist Movement](#), which work to build a more democratic, egalitarian and accountable Sierra Leone government; one capable of enforcing environmental and housing regulations, building dignified housing and mobilising citizens to prevent the next disaster.
