

A photograph of a young man in the foreground, looking upwards and smiling. He is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved shirt with horizontal stripes. His arms are crossed. In the background, a group of people, including children and adults, are standing under a large, thatched roof structure, possibly a market or a community gathering. The scene is outdoors, with trees and foliage visible. The lighting is natural, suggesting daytime.

Young in the City

Case developed by Dorthe Skovgaard Mortensen and
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Young, hopeful and extremely marginalized

The world is home to the largest generation of young people ever!

In Sierra Leone, as in most other developing countries, young people's situation is vastly different from previous generations. Sky-high unemployment rates, rapid urbanisation, migration, insecure urban environments, social media revealing global inequalities, and an alarming lack of recognition and inclusion, complicate young people's transition to productive and healthy adults.

As a consequence of a steady growing population and irreversible urbanisation, many young Sierra Leoneans end up living their lives in urban slums and informal settlements (see slum definition). To take a closer look at how these young people live, we'll take you to one of the slums in Freetown.

Bonga Town in the western part of Freetown is a small, densely populated settlement of approximately 10,000 people sandwiched between the rich part of the city and the wetlands. There is only limited vacant land in Bonga Town. Most houses are small and tightly packed shanties built on a wooden foundation with walls and roofs of tin sheets. The shanties are separated only by narrow mud paths, and like other slums, the area is characterised by very limited vegetation and a uniform red-dish-brown colour.

Bonga Town is a patchwork of different people. Some are native residents of Freetown, others have found their way as internally displaced people during the Civil War, and still others - especially young people - have moved from rural areas in hopes of creating a better life in the city. The slum is home to various ethnic groups and people of different faiths but is widely known for its low level of conflict, religious tolerance, and peaceful coexistence.



Bonga Town

Photo: Simon Sticker

Sierra Leone

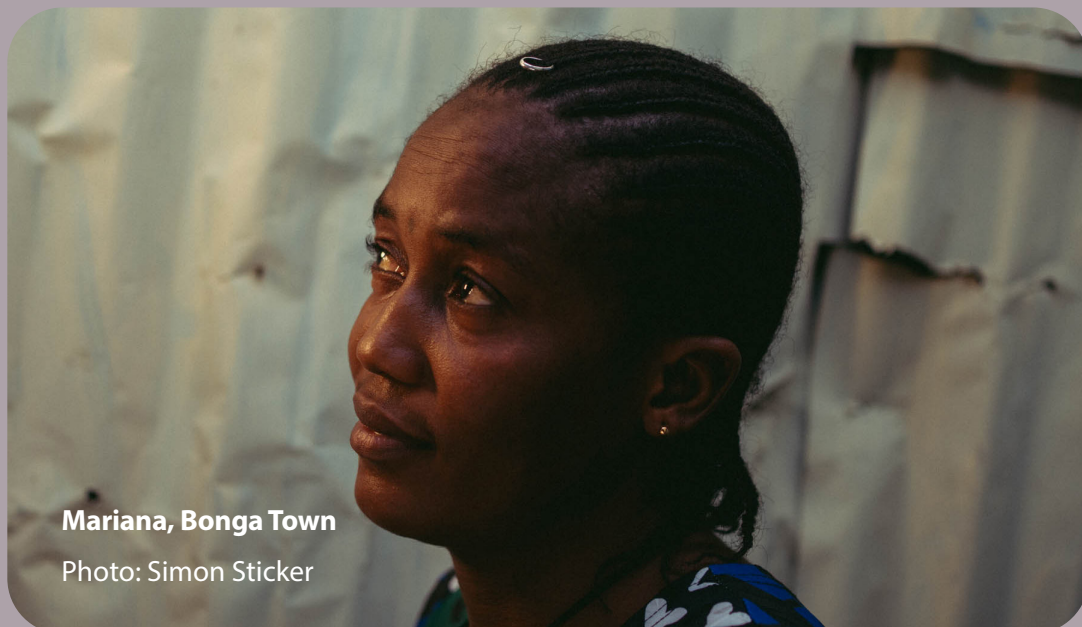
A small, poor, previously war-torn West African country rich on natural resources.

Despite a rich supply of natural resources including diamonds, iron, gold and bauxite, Sierra Leone has for decades been one of the most impoverished and least developed countries in the world with more than half of its 7.6 mil. inhabitants living below the international poverty line of 1.90 US Dollars a day (UN 2019).

Economy remains challenged by pervasive corruption and undeveloped human capital. The country has experienced its share of hardships over the past 30 years including a devastating civil war from 1991-2002, recurrent flooding,

the outbreak of the Ebola virus in 2014, the 2017 mudslides in Free-town and as of 2020 COVID-19. Democracy is slowly being re-established after the civil war that re-sulted in tens of thousands of deaths and the displacement of more than 2 million people.

Sierra Leone's youthful population is fuelled by a total fertility rate of almost 5 children per woman, sustained by a continued desire for large families, low level of contraceptive use, and an early start of childbearing (CIA 2020). An estimated 60 % of the population are below the age of 25, and the age group 15-35 makes up almost 40 % of the total population (UNDP 2018). Most of the population are Muslims, approximately one in five are Christians, and a small share belongs to other religions. Religion has never been a driv-



Mariana, Bonga Town

Photo: Simon Sticker

What is a slum?

According to UN's slum definition, a slum household is a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area who lack one or more of the following:

1. **Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions.**
2. **Sufficient living space which means not more than three people sharing the same room.**
3. **Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price.**
4. **Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable number of people.**
5. **Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions.**

Globally, more than 1 billion people live in slum like conditions.

Source: The urban SDG monitoring series, Issue 1, February 2019.

Space for active citizenship

Bonga Town excels in no way in leisure facilities and youth venues. There are only very few informal places where young people can meet to do sports, discuss, and exercise active citizenship. Men – young and old, rich and poor – meet in the Ataya Base, which are vibrant makeshift tee houses, to discuss politics, their favourite football club, daily life, and experiences of poverty and discrimination. In Sierra Leone, there is usually no risk associated with talking and engaging in politics, only during election campaigns where young men are mobilised (and sometimes paid with drugs and money) to meddle in political rallies.



"I love to advocate for my fellow youth and help them understand that we can push the community forward. My own dreams for the fu-ture is to finish school, live a better life and have a good job"

In general, there are fewer places where young women can meet to talk about current issues, but the small beauty salons, local hairdressers, and cookeries often serve as a discussion club for women.

The young men and women of Bonga Town are eager to organise themselves into youth groups, to be heard and contribute their input to the development of the area and the community. However, they feel under-represented and excluded from the formal decision-making process led by government authorities and local traditional and religious leaders, including, chiefs, chairmen/-ladies, women- and youth leaders, and local councillors – each of whom has great decision-making power but limited will to initiate change.

Because of their “in-between” life situation - between childhood and adulthood, school, and job – and because of young people’s historic role as violent rebels during the Civil War – the youth in Bonga Town tend to carry a stigma associated with recklessness, irresponsibility, idleness, and violence. They constantly experience the mistrust of adults and are not recognised when they participate, express their opinions, and offer their contributions.

What does it mean to be young?

The official age span for youth in Sierra Leone is 15–35, but youthhood is not something static. It is positioned in a social context of not being employed, married, or settled in any other way.

This in-between state often lasts long due to the high unemployment rate and young people’s financial in-ability to enter into marriage or establish themselves independently from their families. Contrary to a Western view of youth, where young people are seen as future leaders and cherished for their entrepreneurial, energetic, and innovative approach to life, young people in Sierra Leone often find themselves in a category of extreme marginalisation.

Basic infrastructure and public space

Bonga Town is generally speaking unconnected to basic public infrastructure. There is no access to clean water and the accumulated piles of household waste testify that there is no effective waste management system. Only few houses are connected to the official power grid and in the absence of street lighting, the area becomes dangerous when darkness falls - especially for young women.

Public toilets and sanitation facilities are extremely limited, and the open sewers that run like smelly streams pose a major health risk, especially when heavy rainfall - exacerbated by climate change - causes the wetland water levels to rise with the result of flooding and recurrent cholera outbreaks. In addition, young people in Bonga Town lack access to youth friendly public spaces, such as sport facilities and green recreational areas where they can engage in leisure activities with their peers.

Key numbers and conditions in Bonga Town

In a baseline survey conducted by Dreamtown, Canberra University and the University of Makeni (2020), 52% of youth living in Bonga Town report that their home did not stay dry in the rainy season. Only 38% have safe access to toilet facilities, but 81% live in homes that are connected to the electricity grid, in some case legally but in many cases illegally. Moreover, 47% of the youth report that they do not have pleasant places outside their home where they can go to spend time and relax. 68% do not have places where they can be creative, and only 19% report having access to nature or "green" spaces where they feel safe to spend time.

Health and safety

Poverty, unhealthy environments with poor sanitation and limited access to health services pose a serious and general health threat to the residents of Bonga Town who are at high risk of contracting diseases. Diseases that, due to population density, are allowed to spread rapidly, creating a genuine risk of epidemics.

The youth in the area must not only deal with the risk of diseases and epidemics. They are at an age where they initiate sexual activity and engage in identity-seeking and risk-taking behaviour. This all too often leads to early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases as their knowledge of reproduction and sexual reproductive health is extremely limited. And while young women in particular face a high risk of sexual and gender-based violence, abuse, and harassment in their homes and not least in public spaces, young men have an increased risk of physical violence, substance abuse and ending up in criminal activity.

In addition to the risk of violence, abuse and harassment, the taboo, shame, and stigma associated with being a victim of violence, prevents young women - but also young men – from reporting cases of violence, including gender-based violence. The seriousness of the situation was publicly acknowledged when the president declared a state of emergency in relation to sexual violence. This was followed by a national campaign “Hands off our Girls”, led by the First Lady, and promises of free medical care. A promise that was later withdrawn.

Violence and safety in Bonga Town

68% of the youth in Bonga Town feel that violence (people hurting each other) is a big problem; 78% feel that men attacking women is a moderate or big problem; and 76% find that being unable to walk safely alone is a moderate or big problem.

Cf. baseline by Dreamtown, Canberra University and the University of Makeni (2020)

Education

In Sierra Leone, primary education is officially free, but in practice, students have to pay for uniforms, books, school supply, tutoring, and exams. Less than 45% of the population are literate. Education is a means of creating a future for oneself and many young people move to the cities in search of an education. However, access to schools in areas such as Bonga Town is limited, and the quality of education is poor and does not provide stu-

dents with the necessary skills to thrive and find a way out of poverty.

So, when you meet a young person in the Ataya Base or beauty salon, he or she is likely to have dropped out of school early or having close friends who have done so. Most drop out due to lack of funds to pay for education, but for an excessively high number of young girls the reason is school-related sexual abuse and pregnancy.

Although a new law allows pregnant girls in public schools, parents and the public opinion oppose strongly to the idea of pregnant schoolgirls in uniform. Early pregnancy and having a child out of wedlock is perceived as not only shameful but can also be a reason for exclusion from the family and the end of the dream of an education.

Illiteracy and education in Bonga Town

57% of the young men and 33% of the young women aged 15–19 report being able to read well. The figure for young men and women aged 25 to 35 is significantly lower due to the lack of educational opportunities for especially young women and for those who grew up during the Civil War.

Cf. baseline by Dreamtown, Canberra University and the University of Makeni (2020)

The literacy rate among male is 51.6% and for female it is 39.8%. Literacy defined as persons aged 15 and over who can read and write English, Mende, Temne, or Arabic.

Livelihood and employment

Most youths in Bonga Town struggle to make a living. In general, 60% of all young people in Sierra Leone are estimated to be unemployed due to high levels of illiteracy and unskilled labour, and a lack of public and private sector jobs. You will therefore find many young people fending for a living in the informal sector, for example by selling cell phone top up, bread and biscuits in the streets, and young men riding Okadas (motorcycle taxis) or offering themselves as day labourers.



These youth are - in the positive sense of the word - hustling their way through life, constantly having their feelers out for new livelihood opportunities and are therefore easy to engage in activities such as community cleanings where they can earn a little pocket money.

Jobs are associated with identity, a position in society and the ability to support a family. In the absence of livelihood opportunities, young people, especially young men, struggle with a feeling of inadequacy, which in some cases leads to mental problems for which some find refuge in alcohol and drugs. Another negative consequence of the lack of income opportunities is that young women may feel compelled to engage in commercial sex work.

The government's stated priorities include free primary and secondary education, economic growth, accountable governance, health, and infrastructure, but so far, the impact of the policies is not felt by the residents in Bonga Town.

Life in Bonga Town is - as you have witnessed - marked by a wide range of challenges, obstacles and shortcomings, but young people are still driven by hopes and dreams of a better future and are resilient to many of the challenges that they face.

The partners

The Danish NGO Dreamtown works in slum communities across Sierra Leone in a consortium with three partners: the old and reputable national NGO, YMCA Sierra Leone, the young and vibrant community-based organisation Youth Dream Centre Sierra Leone (YDC-SL), and the creative media organisation Freetown Media Centre (FMC). Each are contributing with different competencies and together, they want to advance the well-being of young people in the area by improving their safety and increasing access to creative and protected public spaces where they can thrive and exercise active citizenship.

Dreamtown was established in 2017 and works for the wellbeing of young people in cities by creating safe, green, and creative public spaces in informal settlements, thereby contributing specifically to SDG 11.7 – to provide universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible, green, and public spaces, particularly for women and children, older persons, and persons with disabilities. Dreamtown seeks to promote equal access to the cities' many opportunities and making cities a place where young people's dreams come alive. It does so by developing youth-led and public urban spaces in partnership with local organisations and youth activists for the purpose of creating platforms where young people can meet, interact, and learn, as well as express themselves, participate in decision making, and take active part in shaping their local communities. Together with partners, Dreamtown works to improve collaboration with urban stakeholders in support of young people's development priorities and activism in slums. Dreamtown has worked in Bonga Town since 2018.



YMCA Sierra Leone has a strong presence in the local communities, with its more than 100-year history in Sierra Leone. YMCA aims to empower young people and make them productive citizens. It focuses on the needs of the most vulnerable young men and women living in difficult circumstances by offering activities on governance and peace building, health, active citizenship, slum upgrading, and urban development. Essential to YMCA's youth empowerment work is to provide young people the opportunity to develop leadership skills and participate in decision-making processes on issues that affect themselves and their communities. Youth governance and participation is part of the organisation's strongholds. YMCA has a good working rela-

tionship with government stakeholders and engage in policy development processes on youth-relevant issues. Its strategic approach includes life skills training; delivering WASH facilities; mapping communities to establish relevant data for informed engagements; establishing and supporting community-based disaster management committees; and establishing recreational community centres.



YOUTH DREAM CENTRE SIERRA LEONE (YDC-SL) has existed since 2007. It works to promote skills and education amongst disadvantaged youth, women, and children by conducting free non-formal education programmes in safe places where students can learn and study effectively. Its strategic approach includes providing Non-Formal Education, Technical Vocational Skills Training, and Information Communication Technology (ICT) and Media Training. The organisation also works in close collaboration with smaller community-based organisations (CBOs) and local youth groups, providing capacity building support to help these grow into stronger civil society actors and engage in community development. In partnership with Dreamtown and local CBOs, YDC-SL has supported the development of eight public community centres for youth across three cities in Sierra Leone. One centre is located in Bonga Town.



FREETOWN MEDIA CENTRE (FMC) started in 2009 and works with creative arts and digital media in Sierra Leone. Its mission is to promote freedom of expression through digital media and cinema for development, based on community engagement, education, and capacity building programmes. Freetown Media Centre conducts filmmaking workshops and trains human rights campaigners on the use of video and radio in campaigns. They also organize open-air film screenings and have solid experience with facilitating participatory video processes, where vulnerable young women and men use film as a tool to create awareness and dialogue around sensitive issues. The collaboration with Dreamtown includes production of the different types of participatory videos that are integrated into capacity building and advocacy activities.





"All is not lost. Let's come on board and see what we can do, instead of just sitting down. In the end, you are going to be the leader that will steer the activities of the community. I hope to see a better Bonga Town. We are working on it"

James, Bonga Town

Photo: Simon Sticker