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# Jumpstarting Post-War Rural Economies: A Case Study in Sierra Leone

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# Jumpstarting Post-War Rural Economies: A Case Study in Sierra Leone

## **Abstract**

Historically, Sierra Leone has experienced major social, political, and economic disruptions that have heightened poverty levels and the lack of proper living conditions in the nation. The most severe of these disruptions was the 1991-2002 civil conflict that devastated the country and left thousands of victims behind. This case study, based on direct observation, first-hand accounts, and interviews with locals from the village of Kalangba, highlights some of the major challenges that the village faced under the rebel regime, while pointing out the infrastructural, agricultural, and economic legacies that prevailed during the reconstruction period. Additionally, the research suggests that the conflict was a major driver towards the current oversaturation of NGO's in the country. The alarming conditions of Sierra Leone further suggest that the development models adopted by NGO's after the civil war have proven unsuccessful, underscoring the importance of modifying the current development models in place.

## **Keywords**

development, civil war, war legacy, NGO, development models

## **Disciplines**

Business | Growth and Development

**JUMPSTARTING POST-WAR RURAL ECONOMIES: A CASE STUDY IN SIERRA  
LEONE**

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**Economics, International Development**

***Abstract***

Historically, Sierra Leone has experienced major social, political, and economic disruptions that have heightened poverty levels and the lack of proper living conditions in the nation. The most severe of these disruptions was the 1991-2002 civil conflict that devastated the country and left thousands of victims behind. This case study, based on direct observation, first-hand accounts, and interviews with locals from the village of Kalangba, highlights some of the major challenges that the village faced under the rebel regime, while pointing out the infrastructural, agricultural, and economic legacies that prevailed during the reconstruction period. Additionally, the research suggests that the conflict was a major driver towards the current oversaturation of NGO's in the country. The alarming conditions of Sierra Leone further suggest that the development models adopted by NGO's after the civil war have proven unsuccessful, underscoring the importance of modifying the current development models in place.

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## ***Introduction***

Sub-Saharan Africa is widely categorized as the region with the highest poverty indexes and worst living conditions in the world. However, some regions of the African continent are faring better than others. Over the past couple of decades, the countries of Western Africa have been subject to civil conflicts, food shortages, and devastating epidemics that have prevented most of the countries in the region to economically stabilize and provide better living standards for its inhabitants. This research focuses on the nation of Sierra Leone which in 2002 came out of a destructive civil war to be hit once again by the 2014 Ebola outbreak. Currently, Sierra Leone ranks 179 out of 188 countries in the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI), with more than 70% of its population living under poverty.

More specifically, this research focuses on the rural village of Kalangba, a village that served as a major rebel outpost during the civil strife and whose inhabitants were directly impacted by the oppression and destruction that accompanies this type of conflict. Although a considerable part of the data extracted for this research comes from online data bases and journal articles, most of the research relies on a series of conversations, interviews, and direct observation conducted in Freetown, Kalangba, and surrounding villages in central Sierra Leone. The paper draws information specific to Kalangba with the intension of producing results that can be generalizable for numerous other small countryside settlements in West Africa that frequently suffer from abrupt economic disruptions. Analyzing the reconstruction process led in Kalangba provides further insight into the type of challenges that people in disaster-prone areas are vulnerable to which in this case turned out to be the economic and political aspects of the village. Furthermore, the research takes a step into analyzing the current oversaturation of NGO's in Sierra Leone and the economic downturns that come along with this aspect shared by

many countries in the region. Finally, the paper proposes a series of developmental factors that could further contribute to the advancement of the country while assisting with the improvement of the development models that are currently in place.

### ***Sierra Leone Civil War (1991-2002)***

Scholars studying international development describe the escalating social unrest and the unravelling of the Sierra Leone Civil War in 1991 as a consequence of the growing political instability and the decline of economic performance that the country experienced at the time. The decentralization of power after the country's independence from Britain led to the formation of a minority political elite that favored its own localities in the distribution of resources and aid (Allen 1968). This political agenda, driven by self-interest and greed, further contributed to the rising levels of social inequality that would spur conflict almost a decade after independence. Even though rising mineral prices increased government revenue significantly, heavy tax burdens and the prevalence of corruption kept social unrest levels on the rise (Deaton 1999). With growing political and social instability accompanied by increasingly strong rebel forces, the stage was set for conflict. In early 1991, a group of armed rebels—self-proclaimed as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF)—supported by Liberian militant forces took up arms in an attempt to overthrow President Joseph Momoh's regime. Although both the government and the rebels had planned for the conflict to be resolved in a matter of months, the changing control of resources between parties did not tilt the balance in anyone's favor, prolonging the civil strife. According to Hazen (2013), an estimated fifty thousand people were killed during the war, with thousands of civilians tortured or had limbs amputated, or both, more than two hundred thousand displaced locally and almost half-million people forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries.

### ***Economic Disruption of Kalangba During the Civil War***

The RUF raided Sierra Leone from the South through Liberia, making their path northwards to the countryside and finally Freetown. The southern and central region of Sierra Leone were the most severely affected during the conflict as both parties engaged in constant guerrilla-type warfare (Akinrinade 2001). Towards the latter half of the civil conflict, the rebels made their way to the village of Kalangba where they looted the establishment and burnt most of it down. Kalangba, now a small village in central Sierra Leone of approximately 3,000 inhabitants, serves as a clear representation of the hardships and challenges that hundreds of villages in the region had to overcome during the civil war.

Life in Kalangba became severely disrupted by the RUF's occupation, and with rebel forces controlling the area, civilian-led economic activity basically came to a halt. Some of the village's inhabitants were able to flee on time to become refugees in neighboring countries and other villages, while others were brutally murdered or forced to join the rebel forces. It was more common, however, for RUF fighters to take prisoners and amputate individuals' limbs to impair their physical ability and promote the rebels' political influence over the region. It was through torture and physical oppression that the RUF, seeking to establish a new state, sought political legitimacy in parts of the country that were not as diamond rich as the south. One local from Kalangba, Vandy Koroma, recalls how the rebels would frequently torture him, striking him when he refused to work and forcing him to lie on his back while they rode a motorcycle over him several times. This brutal torture resulted in a fractured back, the pains of which he must endure even to this day. More than a decade after the war, thousands of Sierra Leoneans, including Vandy Koroma, still suffer from physical impediments that ultimately hinder their ability to improve their livelihood.

The economic environment of Kalangba during the time of war was further encumbered by the mass enslavement of civilians. According to the accounts of local inhabitants, most of the people in the village fled to the bushes surrounding Kalangba where they spent days on end waiting for nightfall so they could go back to their homes without the rebels spotting them. It was not uncommon for villagers in the area to be forced to work at the fields or carry supplies all day as they were subject to constant death threats and physical harassment.

Furthermore, rebels would seize agricultural production and destroy farm machinery, undermining the area's food supply, driving down economic output and ultimately fostering the development of black markets. Based on the World Bank's data, the food production of the country decreased by 12% throughout the 1990's, highlighting the scarcity of resources that the country experienced at the time. This scarcity, accompanied by a weak, martial state promoted the development of black markets that would provide a means of survival and livelihood for the masses. Not surprisingly, during the civil conflict, the growth of the informal economy outpaced that of the formal economy in terms of agriculture—the major component of the country's GDP—thus accelerating the proportion of the population that participated in this informal economy, especially in places in the countryside such as Kalangba (Sexsmith 2009). The informal economy has remained substantial to this day. Currently, the relative size of the Sierra Leonean informal economy is one of the major causes for the high levels of underemployment—over 60%—which, according to UNDP is one of the main sources of economic vulnerability for people living under levels of poverty and extreme poverty.

The RUF's reliance on forced labor, agricultural production, and mineral extraction had ultimately turned its capital and resources into a war-financing machine that ran at the expense of the livelihood of Sierra Leoneans. By the end of the war in 2002, existing education and health



services were ravaged and access to food, clean water, and housing had become extremely limited (Haze 2013). In the case of Kalangba, the prospects for growth and development in the immediate aftermath from the war looked grim. The village lied in ruins, hope was lost for the legitimacy of the government, and an arduous recovery effort was yet to begin.

### ***Legacy of Civil War in Kalangba***

Kalangba was almost completely decimated in the 1990's, but once the conflict was over, the village inhabitants returned and led a local reconstruction that, although demonstrating progress since the conclusion of the war, still suffers from the social, economic, and physical impediments tied to the conflict's legacy. The first and most apparent legacy of the war is the lack of proper infrastructure in the region surrounding Kalangba. Currently, the village does not possess a proper sewage system, inhabitants rely on underground water wells for water supply, and there is no electrical grid. Additionally, the remnants of burnt-down concrete buildings remain along the village's only road; yet, the owners of these "houses" lack the financial capacity to rebuild their destroyed homes and have had to settle for lower-quality living conditions. Such was the case with John Njala, a Kalangba farmer whose house was burnt down. Having a bare minimum of his possessions after the war, he and his family had no other choice but to live in a rugged clay home.

Once the conflict was over, farmers found themselves with an extremely low seed supply which forced small farmers like John Njala to borrow seeds from bigger producers and incur debts, preventing them from increasing their financial flexibility. Of the six farmers interviewed in the village, only one of them had savings at home—none of them had bank accounts. Therefore, these farmers have to produce enough to subsist at a daily basis and, obliged to repay their debts at the end of the harvest season, do not know with certainty if they will have enough

seeds for the next planting season. Farmers from different regions in the countryside face the same rudimentary subsistence experience of Kalangba farmers. As was the case during the time of war, Sierra Leone possess a heavily agricultural-based economy—agriculture accounts for about 61% of GDP (World Bank). This figure hints at the size of the population which still relies on farming for a living. The volume of small, subsistence farmers in the country and the financial vulnerability that they face are clear contributors to the heightened levels of poverty that currently inflict Sierra Leone.

Another war legacy that still weighs heavily on the quality of life that workers in the village carry on today is related to the forced labor conditions that villagers had to experience under the oppression of rebel forces. Having witnessed war time slavery, workers and employers from the village have adopted what could be identified as a conformist view of labor standards. Today, workers are willing to work manually for approximately 10 hours a day for a daily wage of 10,000 Leones—equivalent to \$1.32—as long as the employer provides the appropriate tools for the job and provides lunch for the workers. Employers lack seeds to feed the workers and money to buy appropriate tools, thus preventing them from sustainably complying with minimum worker expectations. Labor opportunities in the village prove to be extremely scarce outside of agriculture, and with the village's average individual living under extreme poverty, working age people often have no choice but to go unemployed and rely on a single relative for sustenance. For this reason, it is not uncommon for unemployed individuals to seek job opportunities in surrounding villages or bigger cities where employment opportunities are higher but manual labor conditions are just as poor.

More difficult to perceive, however, is the political mentality that the villagers adopted as a product of the war experience. To gauge the degree of political instability that most Sierra

Leoneans have witnessed it is necessary to focus on the inhabitants of villages such as Kalangba. People in this village have lived under both the government and rebel rule. The complete political collapse that the government of the chiefdom experienced in Kalangba undermined to some extent the legitimacy of its roots. In other words, there was no such thing as an acting government in this region of Sierra Leone during and in the aftermath of the war. With corruption still widespread—as of 2016, Transparency International ranked Sierra Leone as one of the most corrupt countries in Africa— and the village of Kalangba trying to overcome the economic burden that remains since the outset of war, there is an overall discontent and even negligence brought about by lost hopes in the present government. For instance, politicians still favor their own localities at the time of distributing resources—a new university was recently inaugurated in the current President Koroma’s village—and in 2016 the President went as far as proposing a change in the constitution for him to stay longer in office. Nonetheless, when asked about the possibility of another civil war, villagers still expressed fear towards such a conflict ever taking place again but hope that a new generation of leaders might bring Sierra Leone’s cycle of corruption and economic instability to an end.

### ***Oversaturation of NGO’s***

The attitude of camaraderie and altruism that arose from the international community and its intention to relieve Sierra Leonean suffering after the civil war resulted in the dumping of free goods and the development of countless NGO’s that aimed to improve the country’s situation. The upward trend in the volume of donations and NGO’s was further magnified by the series of catastrophic events that have occurred in the country after the war—droughts, the Ebola outbreak, and more recently a series of landslides that killed over 1,000 individuals—but these

donations were a major factor contributing to the economic stagnation the country suffers from (Kanyako 2016).

Furthermore, the relationship between the government and the NGO complex of the country has profound consequences for its inhabitants. There are thousands of domestic, international, registered, unregistered, active, and dormant organizations with no system in place to keep track of all of them. Even worse, the NGO's system seems to be a hole into which millions of dollars and thousands of qualified personnel are poured in, with only a few beneficial results for Sierra Leone coming out. In several circumstances, as with the case of Kalangba, NGO's working in an area tend to exclude local inhabitants and chiefs from development projects, failing to exploit the knowledge and ease with which a person from the vicinity can navigate the sociopolitical environment of the village and causing tension between organizations and local governments (Conteh 2014).

For the most part, NGO's have adopted a philanthropic model based on freely giving away goods and benefits; this merely serves to increase the financial vulnerability and dependency of the population. Nonetheless, there is some progress starting to be made as some aid organizations move towards a more market oriented vision focused on job creation and sustainable business projects. Kalangba-based Sierra Leone Children's Fund (SLCF), works in the sustainable development of a community-based farm that not only provides jobs for villagers but also seeks to increase the food supply to the point of promoting trading in the area. Alhaji Saccoh, SLCF founder, shares the vision of his organization claiming, "We need to stop giving people free stuff and get them to work, get them to cultivate all of their farmland to start new businesses." This way, SLCF seeks to promote market-oriented development projects that minimize some of the detrimental impacts that the war legacy has had upon the village. The frail

economic state that Sierra Leone inherited from the war which has been further aggravated by the overwhelming presence of NGO's in the country will not be resolved through philanthropic means but through the inclusiveness of individuals into the economic and financial realms of a stable society.

### ***Conclusion***

When analyzing the path of Sierra Leone from a historical perspective, there is a clear link between current economic underdevelopment and this region's colonial ties. However, attributing the country's ails to its colonial legacy has proved quite unsuccessful in dealing with the issues that Sierra Leone still suffers from today. For this reason, this research paper focuses on the analysis of other major factors driving economic underperformance and undermining the quality of life for millions of Sierra Leoneans. The destructiveness of the civil war and the unstable reconstruction process have brought about a set of sociopolitical conditions that, although hard to find in places outside of Western Africa, have posed a series of developmental challenges that continue to hinder the potential for prosperity in the region. This in turn has led both Sierra Leoneans and the international community to start looking at the issue under a different lens which might prove to be more successful than past efforts.

The case of Kalangba offers a series of social, political, and economic insights that are not only generalizable to the millions of people inhabiting rural areas in the region, but offer new alternatives to development in places suffering from similar conditions. After enduring a series of social and natural catastrophes, the village proved to be resilient in some aspects, but remains quite vulnerable in others. For instance, although the village has been able to return to pre-war food production levels, farmers still rely on borrowing seeds to subsist and agriculture remains as the main employment opportunity in the area. Furthermore, the significant reliance in agriculture

contributes to the large presence of an informal sector that thwarts the improvement of labor conditions thus contributing to the economic vulnerability of the population.

Moreover, the rebel occupation during the war and the inefficiency of the government to assist with the reconstruction process contributes to the political conformism that has come to prevail in Kalangba. A substantial portion of the village's population has lived without the presence of a formal governmental body in the area, and the prevalence of corruption and political inefficacy has crippled the villagers' hopes that the state will do anything to improve their poor living conditions. Nonetheless, this lack of dependence on the government has led villagers to take matters into their own hands and lead a slow yet progressive reconstruction process after crises have stricken.

Finally, the country's propensity to fall prey to major economic disturbances brought about by both natural and sociopolitical phenomena has led to the oversaturation of NGO's. These organizations have attempted to lead larger-scale reconstruction projects that, adopting philanthropic development models, often exclude Sierra Leoneans from actively participating in the reconstruction process. Nonetheless, as with the case of SLCF, smaller scale, locally-led organizations have sprouted and attempt to lead more inclusive and market oriented developmental efforts. This type of development projects leaves behind the giving away of free goods and services while adopting more sustainable practices that benefit the population in the long-term and improves the economic resilience of the area at the time of crises. For Sierra Leone to achieve its highest developmental potential, change must come from within not outside. The only possibility for Sierra Leoneans to improve their livelihood is to guide an inclusive and sustainable economic system that will not crash when unexpected crises afflict the country.

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