

Sierra Leone's Cocktail: Mudslide, Flooding and Disaster Politics

By Bai-Bai Sesay, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Every year the rainy season in Sierra Leone comes with its usual ferocity and destruction of lives and property. And every year, the response from the government and society remains the same.

The causes of Sierra Leone's annual flooding and disasters are multi-dimensional and complex. Sierra Leone has essentially become a massive slum; and to create a viable and sustainable country is the singular most important challenge the nation faces today.

Flooding, especially in Sierra Leone, is not just about the rains, garbage in the streets, poor drainages, hillside constrictions, or poor people squatting in disaster prone areas, or construction of more low cost housing. It is about a myriad of forces: environmental, social, economic, geological, geomorphological, land use planning, engineering, and above all coordinated radical, bold, technically sound and transformational policies.

Since the outbreak of the 2017 mudslide disaster that took the lives of over a thousand people, mostly children and the elderly, the city continues to be pelted by heavy rains. Government ministers from across various ministries including Water Resources, Lands and Country Planning, Environment, Local Government, and Defence, along with other government officials recently conducted an assessment

tour of the Western Area Rural District of Freetown to evaluate the level of encroachment on protected areas, especially critical areas hosting the city's water catchments, and to produce mitigating strategy for those protected areas.

Due to past flooding, disaster and mudslide experiences within the city; the Freetown City Council (FCC) called on residents, especially those who are living in communities prone to flooding, to remain alert as heavy rain is forecasted over the coming days.



Search and rescue team members and soldiers operate near a mudslide site and damaged building near Freetown on August 15, 2017, after landslides struck the capital of the West African state, Sierra Leone [Saidu Bah/AFP]

Residents living in lowlands and flood plains along the coast of Freetown have been advised by the Council to be vigilant, especially at nights, as they have an increased risk of flooding and other environmental disasters.

The authorities at the Freetown City Council (FCC) say that with support from several partners and the central Government they will continue to collaborate with the military to implement the City's 2020 Flood Mitigation programme, as they have done in the last month in fifty-two communities across the capital Freetown.

According to the FCC, their interventions which include clearing of blocked culverts, drainages and silted gutters and waterways, have help reduced incidences of flooding in certain vulnerable communities.

The Council says that the current practice of building along waterways and in flood plains in parts of the city leaves many residents vulnerable, and that its flood mitigation activities cannot effectively address this land use planning challenge.

Lamenting on the looming flooding disaster awaiting several low-lying communities in Freetown this rainy season Dr Sillah Kargbo, former presidential adviser – Water Resources and Water Infrastructure, wrote:

“I don't know what is wrong with our politicians. I wrote a flood management project and while I was at State House, we hired an American Engineering Consulting firm to do the first part of the study. The Government of Sierra Leone still owes that firm \$1,300,000 so that they could complete the design of the drainage system.

“I am made to understand that the current government say it is a past government debt. Now people are suffering from avoidable floods and possibly mudslides. Freetown is the

wettest country capital in the world, with an average of 5000 mm of rainfall per year. Are the authorities going to sit down and see such devastating flooding every rainy season?

“I gave a copy of Freetown Stormwater Management Report to the Mayor and Ministry of Finance and pleaded with them to pay the consultants to complete their work and nothing has been done. Most of the city’s flood waters are coming from the hills that have been deforested for uncontrolled and unplanned housing constructions.

“The proposed flood Management system includes the construction of 29 cascaded ponds to temporarily hold the large volumes of flows coming from the hills and released in a controlled way through specially designed weirs into the also proposed overland drainage network. The proposed Stormwater system also includes a subsurface storm sewer system to prevent the street flooding we are seeing in these videos.

“Government should be continuity. The current government please you cannot ignore projects initiated by the previous government, meant to protect the lives and property of our people; you need to complete this project for God’s sake. People are suffering.



“Your government also has the Rokel River Water Supply project I submitted to the Ministry of Water Resources to address the water supply problem in Freetown. Please be patriotic citizens and implement those two projects for the good of all.”

It is no secret that successive governments have paid lip service to the problems and dangers of deforestation, climate change, and flooding in Freetown, and there is no indication of a concerted action to effect real change anytime soon.

Sierra Leone is listed among countries most prone to experience climate change and natural disasters. Its population of about 7.2 million is greatly at risk and remains vulnerable to major ecological threats of water shortage and food scarcity, according to scientific projections in this year’s Global Peace Index (GPI).

The GPI estimated that hundreds of millions of people worldwide will be hit by water and food insecurity by 2025, and sub-Saharan Africa would be the most affected region.

Studies show that many African countries faced food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic, and Sierra Leone is one among fifteen countries ranked at the bottom of the Global Food Security Index 2019.

The Meteorological Agency's seasonal forecasts last November indicated a rise in heat temperatures to about 35 – 37 degrees Celsius during the dry season, with Freetown and Makeni the hardest hit. Because this prediction in many ways turned out to be true, we now turn back to the Agency to hear its predictions for the rainy season and to know whether they agree or disagree with the GPI projections.

The Agency's Director-General, Ibrahim Sinneh Kamara, said that Sierra Leone would experience low rainfall in the rainy season and this will affect crop production.

“Low rainfall will affect crop production this year and farmers will suffer huge losses if the Ministry of Agriculture does not advise them on the best crops and rice varieties to plant,” he said.

Kamara asked that this information be cascaded to rural communities to help farmers better prepare for the worse. He said the heavy winds and thunderstorms experienced lately were the attendant consequences of low rainfall but more importantly signalled that climate change projections for this region – Gulf of Guinea – are real.

Though the DG did not wholesomely agree with the entirety of the GPI projections, he however affirmed the strong belief that the conclusions contained therein cannot be overstated.

“Those people are experts in the field of Meteorological Science. But I think that we should conduct a national survey to gather more specific data, identify specific threats and come up with more concrete and realistic predictions. This will then inform policy formulation and adaptation and response plan to mitigate the risks and impact of climate change in Sierra Leone,” Sinneh Kamara stated.

Mr Kamara further said that the massive deforestation for the construction of unplanned and uncoordinated settlements along the Freetown Peninsula, could aggravate several risk factors that could trigger a mudslide or landslide to occur in that area. He predicted that such disaster could happen in the future if regulations were not put in place now to control it.

He believed that widespread public education and awareness-raising about climate change and its consequences; strong early warning systems and effective legal frameworks could change the narrative in terms of strengthening Sierra Leone’s adaption and response mechanisms toward climate change.

The Government strategies, objectives and policy actions for disaster prevention and mitigation are clearly articulated in the National Medium-Term Development Plan.

In his government's commitment to protecting the environment, the president of Sierra Leone told the nation in this year's State Opening of Parliament that his government was pursuing policy actions that would bring about a change in environmental governance, forest management and ecosystem conservation.

If this is politics talk to gain popularity to the affected people on the slums areas, nobody knows. But many people are saying that the best way is for the governments to remove all the people from the slums areas to prevent further disaster, mudslide and flooding.

"Let forget the politics of talking. Action is needed to save the lives of people staying in these slums areas", an environmentalist pointed out, advising government to take action now.

Fatmata Bangura, 42, has been living at a slum with her seven children and other family members for several years. She has had several experiences in many disasters, mudslides and disasters in several locals where she has stayed most of

life due to poverty.





Explaining her ordeals, she says that during the raining season, especially August and September, she always have sleepless nights with her entire family due to heavy rains.

“I lost my husband several years ago due to disaster at one of the slums including my younger sister and her husband, now I have to care for their children and mine,” says Fatmata Bangura, who grew up in Freetown.



It could be recalled that in 2017, the mudslide devastated the mountain town of Regent as a result of heavy rainfall, urban sprawl and soil erosion due to deforestation.

“This disaster was 90 percent man-made. There were trees along 80 percent of the river and hardly anybody lived there. Thirty years ago, no one would have been killed,” says Thorsten Kallnischkies, a geologist seconded to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) office in Sierra Leone.

“The only way to avoid this in future is through raising awareness among the communities – how to build and where to build,” he says. “Administration and government must enforce laws to avoid future fatalities.”

Sierra Leone’s Office of National Security (ONS) has been working closely with national and international stakeholders, says John Rogers, ONS director of disaster risk management.

Nonetheless, warns Kallnischkies, unless change takes place at every level, the benefits of development are vulnerable and could be reversed.

“It will happen again, if politicians and administration allow unplanned settlements and deforestation. Victims who had lost their families and houses are already rebuilding their houses – in the same places. It’s like having a picnic on a motorway,” Kallnischkies noted.