

Environmental Planning in Sierra Leone: International Experience Award Trip 2019



Destruction of 2017 landslide on Sugar Mountain, Freetown, Sierra Leone

In April 2019 I travelled to Freetown, Sierra Leone as a recipient of the International Experience Award Funding. The intent of this trip was to conduct a brief research study of how environmental planning works in the Global South, a location that is subject to more severe impacts of climate change. The Global South is subject to greater impacts of climate change including extreme weather events due to their geographic location and socio-economic dynamic. In the case of Sierra Leone, being on the coast and closer to the equator make the country more vulnerable geographically. These regions are also subject to greater risks in terms of capacity to adapt to these extreme weather events, as the colonial history of much of the Global South has resulted in inequality in ability to adapt to climate change (Akpalu et al 2015). In

2017 Freetown experienced a mudslide on Sugar Mountain that destroyed homes and killed over a thousand people. After learning about this particular natural disaster I chose Freetown as a case study to investigate the strengths and weaknesses in environmental planning processes in Freetown. As a student in the Environmental Services stream at SURP, I was interested in researching how rapidly growing cities, subject to more severe climate change impacts are planning for population increases and the evolving demand on essential infrastructure.

Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC)

I spent a full day in the SLURC offices meeting first with Dr. Joseph McCarthy the Executive Director, and Braima Koroma, the Director of Research and Training, along with other staff members, who provided an overview of the type of work SLURC does in Freetown. Their research focus is mainly on urban resilience in the many informal settlements that make up Freetown. From these conversations I learned that the priorities in international non-governmental organizations (NGO) funding is not on climate



Group photo at the SLURC office

change or environmental planning, which makes it challenging for organizations like SLURC and for municipal councils to do anything with little or no funding for it. Their funding is focused on other sustainable development goals outlined by the United Nations (United Nations 2015). This explained why I struggled to find information on Sugar Mountain and the effect the mudslide had on planning; there was very little effect because there was little money to do any environmental resiliency

programs. This disconnect between the current priorities of the Global North, where municipalities and countries are declaring climate emergencies, and the financial priorities of major international actors does not align. This caused me to ask; why are international organizations not focusing their efforts on environmental planning in countries that are most vulnerable to climate change impacts? From the pre-departure research conducted, it was clear that this was where there was a need.

Porté-Ropuka as a Case Study

I was given the opportunity to go into one of the informal settlements with students from the University College of London and participate in their initial site visit to map community assets. As a group, we were guided by a community member through a settlement called Porté-Ropuka. Upon arrival we met the



Water tank provided by UKAid in Porté-Ropuka, Freetown, Sierra Leone

chief to discuss the strengths and weaknesses in his community. He specifically outlined how limited financial resources is the biggest barrier his community faces in terms of their ability to upkeep key infrastructure in Porté-Ropuka such as the pathways, building integrity and reliable water sources.

Our guide told us about the large water tank in the community that gets filled up by UKAid on an irregular basis. It is a temporary measure for emergency relief, but not a sustainable infrastructure solution. There are a few wells in the community. However, the water is not safe for drinking and is therefore mostly used for washing.

When we first arrived in Porté-Ropuka, we came across a group of young teenage boys who were carrying rocks. They stopped to talk to us we learned that they were community volunteers rebuilding homes that were destroyed in a small mudslide last year. They were also building their own retaining wall to reduce the impacts of future landslides. It was clear that community level planning was most effective, as it is done by residents and the chief. Funding comes from international NGOs and is unreliable; focused on what the NGO wants, not always what the community is trying to work towards.

Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary

The Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary, situated on the edge of Freetown, runs similarly to Ontario conservation authorities as they have an area to protect and are consulted for environmental protection advice. Their protection area was historically home to a large chimpanzee population. However, the civil war and poaching have drastically reduced the native population. In their natural environment,



Sign for the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary in Freetown, Sierra Leone

chimpanzees migrate across vast forested areas. Each night chimpanzees build nests in trees to sleep in, which requires them to tear down branches and sometimes entire trees. Each morning they continue to migrate and find a new tree several kilometres away. Because in the wild they migrate, destroying the trees is not damaging to the ecosystem because the habitat has time to recover. However, given the small size of the protected area relative to their natural habitat, the chimpanzees can quickly destroy this protected forest. In order to rehabilitate chimpanzees, while also protecting the forest, the sanctuary staff close off sections of the forested area to allow for regrowth each year. The dedication and innovative methods of the sanctuary staff are a clear strength for

environmental planning in Freetown.

Role of International Actors in Environmental Planning in Freetown

While in Freetown I saw several infrastructure, housing and other planning related initiatives. However, I learned through conversations with locals and with members of the ex-pat community that most of these projects are not locally led by the Mayor or the City Council. There was construction to widen one of the major roads in town that was being funded and constructed by the Chinese government, flood

mitigation measures initiated in an informal settlement by the Catholic Relief Service, and bridges being built by the European Union. Based on my observations, formal infrastructure and environmental planning in Freetown in many cases is done by international actors through projects mandated by NGOs from around the world. While some of these projects are beneficial, NGOs are often unable to implement them in more than one location, or they are unable to continue to monitor their effects over time as funding runs out. This leaves Freetown with scattered planning projects that are not always sustainable. A clear example of this is the water tank in Porté-Ropuka that is not maintained or refilled on a regular basis, leaving the community uncertain about how reliable this water source is.

Conclusion

The strengths I found in approaches to environmental planning in Freetown were the sense of community and responsibility to one's community. Through my site visit I saw how effective planning and infrastructure done at the most local level was in Porté-Ropuka. Local level planning allows for creativity and innovation in communities with minimal resources. This was the clear message that the chief of Porté-Ropuka expressed to our group - he was very proud of how innovative his community is.



The Cotton Tree, an historic landmark in the middle of Freetown, Sierra Leone

The presence of international NGOs falls into both categories as it is a strength and a weakness for environmental planning. It is a strength, as they run useful infrastructure projects with more formality.

However, their presence could also be a negative, as their solutions are often short term or projects are conducted without full consultation of the community. This results in fewer effective projects that could have been better managed by the local community. Other weaknesses included the lack of trust in the government as a result of the recent civil war and the lack of funding for environmental planning or related projects internationally. My findings are not limited to environmental planning, they are important for all types of planning. As a planner in North America, this

experience highlighted the importance of local level planning, community consultation, and innovation, and how important it is that we incorporate these values into planning at home and around the world.

References

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