

DPU MSc ESD/SLURC Learning Alliance  
**Co-Learning for Action to  
Transform Freetown**

**Leh wi learn for wok  
togeda for a betteh fritong**



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Photo Credit: Rita Lambert

## Key points

- The majority of the urban poor in Freetown live in risk-prone areas and are systematically exposed to a wide range of preventable health hazards and periodic small-scale disasters.
- However, relocation is not the answer, as this disrupts the lives and livelihoods of poor women and men, girls and boys and perpetuates their exclusion from being part of and playing an active role in the development of Freetown.
- Instead, in-situ rehabilitation is possible and this requires building upon the enormous capacity and resources mobilized by local communities to make their settlements safe and to live a dignified life.
- *Transform Freetown* offers a unique opportunity to tackle risk accumulation through concerted efforts to support community-led resilience at city-wide scale and to articulate social, economic and environmental gains for a better Freetown for all.

## Introduction

During the last three decades, urban development in Freetown has been characterised by spontaneous growth, social and spatial inequality and dramatic changes to the urban fabric, often exacerbated by climate change. Like in many other African cities, this has led to the accumulation of preventable risks which remain largely unattended, while accounting for a high proportion of all disaster-related injuries, impoverishment and damage or destruction of housing and social and physical infrastructure in the city. Risk accumulation or 'risk traps' impose severe impacts on the everyday life, livelihoods and assets of the urban poor as well as the environmental and socioeconomic future of the city.

However, risk path-dependency does not need to be path-determinacy. Championed by the Mayor's *Transform Freetown* initiative, and internationally endorsed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UN-Habitat Urban Agenda, a growing call for 'inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' cities is galvanising in Freetown and across many African countries. This offers a great opportunity for reframing risk management and climate adaptation as part of forward-looking urban development planning.

Working with local communities across several informal settlements in Freetown, our co-learning alliance seeks to generate actionable knowledge and evaluate ongoing actions and investments deployed to mitigate risk in order to produce robust evidence to support strategic actions towards transformative change in Freetown.

## Action learning partners

Since 2017, the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) at Njala University and the practice-based module of the MSc in Environment and Sustainable Development (ESD MSc) at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU) / University College London (UCL) have formed a learning alliance that aims to co-produce actionable knowledge to support transformative actions towards a socially and environmentally just Freetown.

On the ground, our learning alliance works in collaboration with local collectives of the urban poor across the city, the Federation of the Urban and Rural Poor (FEDURP) and partnering organisations working under the "Pull Slum Pan Pipul" (PSPP) programme, which include Restless Development, Youth Development Movement (YDM), BRAC Sierra Leone, CODOHSAPA, and Young Men Christian Association (YMCA).

Every year, we are joined by a group of local interns and community facilitators whose capacity and knowledge strengthens the work of the alliance. In 2018/19, the learning alliance brought together 105 people from 35 countries, including staff from SLURC and DPU, ESD MSc students, local interns and community facilitators. The work of the alliance builds upon numerous action-research projects jointly undertaken by SLURC and DPU, among them Urban Africa Risk Knowledge (Urban ARK – <https://www.urbanark.org/>) and Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW - <https://www.urban-know.com/>).

## Forging co-produced strategies

While there is a wide range of actions and investments devoted to risk mitigation, their impact is often hampered by the lack of synergy between the efforts undertaken by governmental and external support agencies and those deployed by people at risk. Below are the pillars identified through the work of the co-learning alliance, where valuable precedents exist and further action is required to strengthen in-situ resilience and to build a better Freetown for all.

### Cooperative disaster risk reduction (DRR)

Cooperative DRR involves strengthening the capacity of informal settlements' residents to deal with risk by building up collective solutions that address the roots of risk and are responsive to heterogeneous realities and experiences in the ground, such as gender, tenure security and location within each settlement. Our work revealed the existence of various ongoing practices upon which cooperative DRR can be built upon. The examples below shed light on existing practices of solidarity within the settlements, as well as efforts to articulate action with governmental bodies.



Photo Credit: Donald Brown

Crab, Koleh Town and Grey Bush (CKG) is an informal settlement exposed to an array of environmental risks, many of which affect people on an everyday and seasonal basis. During the rainy season, people who live in dense compound housing locations are frequently displaced by flood events within and outside the settlement. We found that the ability of people to cope, and beyond that to act, depends in large part on social networks, including family members and friends, community-based organisations (CBOs) and savings groups. Strengthening these networks can help to prepare, prevent and recover from flood events, providing an alternative to relocation, which disrupts and in many cases destroys social networks.



Photo Credit: Kate Goh

In the peri-urban hill settlement of Moyiba, the Sierra Leone Government's Office of National Security (ONS) – responsible for the overall coordination of the country's disaster risk management – has been conducting training of key representatives from various CBOs. These training programmes focus on sensitisation to the risks from various activities and their contribution to disasters (e.g. flooding, rockfall). We found that the ONS-trained individuals were aware of the contribution of poor solid waste management to the incidence of flooding. Nevertheless, the settlement lacks waste management options, which leads to waste disposal into drains and waterways. This in turn clogs these channels and exacerbates flooding incidents both within the settlement and at the coast downstream. By increasing cooperative efforts between Moyiba's various CBOs, community volunteers and authoritative figures, the settlement could enhance its community waste management system, for example, by implementing regular cleaning days of communal areas or a community-led waste collection initiative targeting areas of Moyiba that are underserved by existing initiatives.



Photo Credit: DPU ESD MSc Dwarzack group 2018/19

In the settlement of Dwazarck, several collective efforts focus on the construction of mitigation infrastructure and are coordinated by the Community Disaster Management Committee (CDMC), which is represented across all twelve clusters of this large and hilly settlement. Inhabitants contribute skills, labour, tools, as well as money to support the construction of bridges, roads and drainage canals. Aligning local collective efforts with the work of NGOs like Catholic Relief Services (CRS), as well as strategic coordination with the Transform Freetown Framework and Community Action Area Plans (CAAPs) provide leverage for up-scaling the scope of these structural mitigation works. However, inhabitants are also acutely aware that the continued functionality of this infrastructure demands high levels of maintenance - particularly addressing issues of waste dumping and burning - which in turn requires further collective action and care-taking.



Photo Credit: Rita Lambert

### Environmental rehabilitation

Environmental and socio-economic objectives can be simultaneously achieved. Communities settled in fragile and risk-prone areas can play an active role in safeguarding vital ecosystems that support the life and economy of Freetown now and into the future. Over the last year, progress has been made in some coastal communities towards zero banking to ensure that expansion over flood-prone areas is limited and that mangroves and creeks are preserved. These efforts require active alliances between local community organisations and municipal and national authorities.



Photo Credit: Adriana Allen

Over the years, community leaders in the coastal settlement of Cockle Bay attempted to limit further land banking over the shore to avoid confrontation with the National Protected Area Authority (NPAA), whose responsibility is to promote conservation and management of coastal mangroves and creeks. However, this practice proved to be conflictive and difficult to enforce by community leaders alone. Recently, the Cockle Bay community developed an innovative mechanism to enforce zero banking and reduce the risk of flooding and eviction threat. A co-management committee has been established with representatives from the community, FEDURP and NPAA and tasked with the responsibility of enforcing community by-laws for the protection/wise use of the mangrove ecosystem. To support the enforcement of the zero banking pact, the MSc ESD students helped enumerating all households settled along the coast. The enumeration revealed a high level of awareness about the benefits of zero banking and environmental rehabilitation, yet the pact requires equal support and recognition of tenants and landlords to participate in this unprecedented initiative, which in turn is setting a valuable precedent for all settlements along the coast.

### Tenure security

A sizeable portion of Freetown's population live in informal settlements and under highly uncertain tenure conditions. For them, settling in marginal lands and living at risk is not a choice but the only option to live in the city. Insecure tenure erodes the capacity of the urban poor to improve the settlements where they live and to sustain their livelihoods. Tenure security can be enhanced by protecting their right to land and housing through collective usufruct entitlements.



Photo Credit: Donald Brown

Tenure insecurity can be especially precarious in dense compound housing locations, where large numbers of people live on land that is often reclaimed from the sea or dump sites. In CKG, large numbers of people live in housing compounds with collective tenure arrangements that allow people to cohabitate in densely populated areas. Many of these people have been threatened with eviction because of their risk-prone housing locations and high densities, which have been unfairly blamed for recurrent flooding and the spread of disease outbreaks, such as cholera and Ebola.



Photo Credit: Adriana Allen

Similarly, tenure insecurity is a particular challenge for tenants, who make the majority of residents dwelling in most informal settlements across Freetown. In Cockle Bay, our work on the ground found that tenants are often off the radar of even community-based collectives. While FEDURP is making an explicit effort to incorporate tenants in the federations' rituals of self-enumeration and savings groups, 80 percent of the tenants interviewed are only part of faith collectives. Our findings show contrasting outcomes between those tenants who are on short term contracts and pay their rent on a monthly basis, and those who have longer term agreements. While the former find little incentive to invest time in the collective life of the settlement, those enjoying a higher degree of certainty to stay are more likely to play an active role in collective organization and community-led upgrading efforts.

### Household-based upgrading

Poor women and men devote significant resources over time to upgrade their living conditions in informal settlements. In many settlements, landlord-tenant agreements are in place to recognize individual investments made at the household level through rental deductions. This provides incentives for tenants to undertake improvements in housing and basic services that in turn have a positive impact of the health of children and the elderly and of the community as a whole.

The coastal settlement of Susan's Bay shows instances of close collaboration between landlords and tenants in reconstruction efforts after a fire with mutual benefits. Tenants contribute material and labour to re-secure a place to live and the landlord allows them to live rent free until investments have been compensated. However, landlords that can manage reconstruction without the involvement of tenants tend to do so and this has forced many to relocate or being left homeless, which indicates that reconstruction and upgrading efforts need to become more inclusive and cater for the needs of not only landlords but also tenants. Susan's Bay further provides examples of tenants joining forces to upgrade housing structures and invest in collective toilet facilities to minimize the impacts of flooding and to reduce household expenses.

### Community-led upgrading

In community-led upgrading, local residents take a lead in planning, developing and managing existing and new services, such as toilets, drainage, water points and solid waste collection. Improving inclusivity is essential to help address issues of access, location, affordability and management in the provision of vital services. This requires working together with local authorities and utility providers to ensure more flexible payment options that match the needs of different local residents. Co-managed services also need to develop more transparent and effective mechanisms to redirect collected fees to additional development initiatives where they are most needed.



Photo Credit: Cristian Tolvett

In Portee Rokupa, water and sanitation related health hazards vary greatly between the rainy and dry seasons and have different impacts across the informal and formal parts of the settlement due to the uneven distribution and functionality of collective facilities. Currently a WASH Committee is the sole organization dedicated to facilities maintenance and engagement with the water utility, though a wider range of efforts are devoted locally to cope with poor water and sanitation conditions. Bringing together these efforts under a wider WASH platform could facilitate knowledge sharing, the identification of critical gaps in the location and functionality of existing and new facilities, as well as better inter-communication with external support agencies and utility providers.



CAAPs reports available at [//www.slurc.org/reports.html](http://www.slurc.org/reports.html)

Incremental upgrading changes benefit from wider planning. Community Action Area Plans (CAAPs) have been developed with the support of SLURC and Architects Sans Frontiers (ASF-UK) in Cockle Bay and Dwarzack. CAAPs set an invaluable precedent in showcasing how community-led processes can be positively articulated to city-wide planning initiatives.

### Resource mobilization

Local communities contribute the bulk of the resources deployed to abate risk. This is done through collective organisations such as FEDURP and the Fordibambai Trust Fund. External support is required not just in the form of one-off interventions but rather to leverage efforts and scale-up community-led interventions in a responsive and inclusive manner.

A precedence that shows successful community funding capacity and leveraging of external funds is the case of Colbot, a settlement located to the east of Freetown city centre, stretching from the Granville Brook dumpsite to the coast, along an estuary. Colbot is affected by intense flooding on a yearly basis.

In 2017, after a serious flood that affected 7000 individuals and caused mass displacement, the Clide Town Community Disaster Management Committee (CDMC) was created to strengthen community responses to environmental risk. This CDMC embarked in an ambitious initiative which consisted in hiring an excavator to clear the main drainage channel. This was paid for through household contributions which amounted to 40 million Leones, with an additional 23million Leones leveraged from the Red Cross. The project was unique as it was planned, carried out and largely funded by the community and greatly reduced the impact of flooding in 2018. Despite the success, the exercise must be carried out each year. The experience has demonstrated that communities can successfully mobilize resources but also highlights the need to devise funding and savings mechanisms that pull together community resources as well as external funds in a sustainable manner.



Photo Credit: Rita Lambert

Despite limited governmental and private resources, there is scope for developing resilient financing systems to improve the living conditions in informal settlements across the city. Central to these financing systems is the ability to capture the existing financial, technical and organisational capacities of local dwellers, government institutions and civil society organisations from the local to city-wide scale. A prerequisite for deploying collective co-financing mechanisms are enabling legal and policy conditions.

Schemes such as the Community-Led Infrastructure Finance Facility (CLIFF) have successfully supported slum dwellers in other African cities to find lasting solutions to urban poverty and risk accumulation. CLIFF provides affordable finance to its implementing partners to help achieve improvements at scale through affordable capital loans to local communities that are recycled and redeployed where needs are identified.

## Actionable knowledge is power

Working in close partnership, our learning alliance has produced a significant research effort to understand how urban resilience can be advanced by local communities. In 2017/18 and 2018/19 the work of the alliance focused on the settlements of: Cockle Bay, Crab, Koleh Town and Grey Bush (CKG), Susan's Bay, Dwarzack, Colbot, Moyiba and Portee Rokupa.

The research conducted over the last two years included: (a) the analysis of a vast body of published and grey reports, policy documents, media news and previous research outputs, (b) 30 transect walks mapping physical conditions in each settlement, (c) almost 120 interviews with key stakeholders and local community members, (d) over 500 household surveys, (e) 40 focus group discussions (FGDs) and (f) 15 action-planning workshops in which the team and local communities co-design specific strategies to disrupt risk traps across the focus settlements and the city as a whole.



Photo Credit: Portee Rokupa Group, DPU ESD MSc 2018/19

## Learning & outputs

With the support of KNOW, we are tracing the learning trajectories of members of the alliance to understand what type of learning fosters transformative capacities to promote urban equality.

In addition to the learning gained by all participants, the alliance has produced a large number of accessible outputs led by the students at the DPU ESD MSc.



Photo Credit: Adriana Allen

**Policy Briefs Series:**

**City-wide perspectives on risk accumulation**

Provide a city-wide understanding of Freetown development and of the causes and consequences of risk accumulation from the perspective of specific hazards.

**Video Series:**

**Co-produced knowledge to disrupt risk traps in Freetown**

The videos produced by the co-learning alliance help to understand how risk accumulation works in specific settlements, as well as the ongoing efforts and possible strategies to build resilience at scale.

To access the videos and policy briefs produced so far under our co-learning alliance, please visit:  
**SLURC website:** <https://www.slurc.org/publications.html>  
**DPU ESD MSc website:** <http://bit.ly/2ReIE41>

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