

STATEMENT BY ABU KARGBO FOR THE UPR Info PRE-SESSION ON SIERRA LEONE

~Slide 1~

This statement is submitted on behalf of the Christian Brothers Development Office (CBDO), a faith-based civil society organization working in Sierra Leone to promote human dignity, social justice, and inclusive development, inspired by the Edmund Rice Charism.

CBDO works with vulnerable and marginalized communities, particularly women, children, and young people, with a strategic focus on Quality Education, Gender Equality, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), Health, and the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living, themes on which we have made recommendations in our joint submission with Edmund Rice International and VIVAT International for the UPR of Sierra Leone.

~ SLIDE 2~

Our first set of recommendations refer to the Right to Quality Education:

Since the last UPR review, Sierra Leone has advanced the right to education through increased investment, the Free Quality School Education Programme and the Radical Inclusion Policy, removing financial barriers for students, expanding enrolment by over 1.3 million learners, and improving access for marginalised groups.

However significant challenges persist: classrooms built for 45 often hold 80+ learners, while only 61% of primary teachers are trained. Over 60% of rural children lack pre-primary education. Outcomes include 57% adult illiteracy, 50% of primary leavers unable to read or write, 22% of children aged 4–17 out of school, and dropout rates reaching 36% at senior secondary level.

~ SLIDE 3~

We urge Member States to recommend that Sierra Leone

- ❖ **Focus investment in education infrastructure and teacher development**, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, ensuring safe and inclusive classrooms, adequate WASH facilities, disability-accessible learning environments, and accelerated recruitment and training of qualified teachers
- ❖ **Enhance education monitoring, accountability** and data-collection systems to track enrolment, retention and learning outcomes effectively, with particular attention to girls, children with disabilities and learners living in poverty, to ensure recent reforms deliver equitable and sustainable results.

~ SLIDE 4~

Gender Equality: While Sierra Leone has implemented gender equality initiatives, like the **Gender Equality Women's Empowerment Act 2022**, expanded women's economic and land rights under **Customary Land Rights Act (2022)**, has enacted Prohibition of Teenage Marriage and Child Protection Laws, significant challenges persist in the effective implementation of these laws as **cultural norms like child marriage and harmful practices like FGM still dominate.**

In 2020, Sierra Leone ranked 155/162 for gender equality with women disproportionately confined to informal work, accounting for 96.6% of female employment. In Parliament, women hold 12.3% of seats. Adolescent motherhood affects 112/1,000 girls with 30% girls marrying before turning 18 and 13% before 15.

~ SLIDE 5~

We urge Member States to recommend that Sierra Leone:

- ❖ **Strengthen and focus on the effective enforcement of laws** prohibiting child marriage and female genital mutilation through targeted monitoring in high-prevalence areas and by engaging traditional and religious leaders
- ❖ **Engage with Traditional leaders** and strengthen implementation of the Customary Land Rights Act (2022) ensuring **equal inheritance rights** for women and daughters especially in rural areas.
- ❖ **Ensure sustained, gender-responsive budgetary allocations and adequate staffing for the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs** to enhance enforcement of gender equality laws, coordination of prevention efforts, and delivery of comprehensive, survivor-centered support services.

~ SLIDE 6~

Sexual and Gender Based Violence: Despite declaring rape, a national emergency in 2019 and expanding prevention efforts through community engagement, male involvement strategies, and the EU–UN Spotlight Initiative, Sierra Leone still struggles with SGBV due to weak law enforcement, entrenched cultural norms, and limited resources.

According to the GB Survivor Incident Report of 2024, of the 2,771 survivors who received support; 94.1% of cases were sexual assault and 5.9% physical assault, affecting ages 2 months–97 years. Women and girls comprised 99% of survivors. Most cases occurred in Freetown (33.2%), Kenema (14.6%), and Bo (14.5%), leading to severe health and psychosocial harm, school dropout, and long-term poverty.

~ SLIDE 7~

We urge Member States to recommend that Sierra Leone:

- ❖ **Strengthen the effective implementation of the Sexual Offences Act** through timely investigation and prosecution of cases, reinforced survivor protection measures and adequate resourcing of law enforcement and justice institutions, in line with international human rights standards.
- ❖ **Increase sustainable financing and trained personnel** for comprehensive, survivor-centered SGBV prevention and response, including equitable access to medical, psychosocial, legal, and shelter services, while intensifying community-based prevention initiatives to address harmful social norms.

~ SLIDE 8~

Right to Health: While we commend the Government of Sierra Leone and its partners for initiatives like the Free Health Care Programme for mothers and children, national responses to HIV and AIDS, TB, malaria, enhanced vaccine coverage and advancing health and well-being under SDG 3, **we draw attention** to the maternal mortality ratio which remains critically high at 354 deaths per 100,000 live births, the critically under-resourced health centers with more than 30% clinics without full-time staff especially in the rural areas.

~ SLIDE 9~

We urge Member States to recommend that Sierra Leone:

- ❖ **Increase sustainable public investment in the health sector**, with particular emphasis on primary health care, maternal and child health services, and the consistent availability of essential medicines, emergency obstetric care, and functional referral and emergency response systems, especially in rural and underserved areas
- ❖ **Strengthen the health system by recruiting, deploying, and retaining qualified health workers** through improved conditions of service and incentives for rural postings, while reinforcing regulation, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms to ensure equitable, accessible, and quality health services for women, children and marginalized populations.

~ SLIDE 10~

Right to Adequate Standard of Living: While Sierra Leone has implemented social protection programs, invested in infrastructure and agricultural development like the ‘Tomabum Rice Projects’, Sierra Leone’s Multidimensional Poverty Index shows two-thirds of the population are poor. Only 28% have electricity access, dropping to 4.9% rurally, causing up to 5% annual GDP losses. Improved water access reaches 12% urban and 9.2% rural populations. Severe food insecurity affects 2.2 million people (28%), with 71% spending over 75% of income on food, heightening vulnerability to price shocks.

~ SLIDE 11~

We urge Member States to recommend that Sierra Leone:

- ❖ **Strengthen and expand social protection systems** to ensure effective, inclusive, and shock-responsive coverage of vulnerable and marginalized groups, including children, women, persons with disabilities, older persons, and rural populations, with a view to reducing poverty and inequalities and ensuring an adequate standard of living.
- ❖ **Accelerate equitable access to basic services and sustainable livelihoods** by improving access to safe water and sanitation, affordable energy, adequate housing, and essential services; increasing targeted support to smallholder farmers through access to credit, markets, and climate-resilient agricultural practices; and investing in rural infrastructure to promote food security, resilience, and poverty reduction.

~ SLIDE 12~

While Sierra Leone has demonstrated political will and legislative progress, urgent and sustained action is required to translate commitments into lived realities especially for women, girls and rural communities.

We call on Member States to make strong, measurable recommendations to support Sierra Leone in fulfilling its human rights obligations.

Thank you for your attention and a special word of gratitude to UPR Info for making it possible for me to present at the Pre-Session in Geneva, thanks to their funding programme.

Concluding Remarks

I would like to use this brief moment to reflect on the lived realities I have witnessed in rural communities where our organization is currently implementing development projects: For example, pregnant women in Mabureh being transported on the backs of motorcycles over extremely poor roads in desperate attempts to reach clinics without adequate medical personnel; girls in Blama deprived of meaningful educational opportunities and facing the intersecting burdens of poverty, early pregnancy, forced marriage and harmful practices such as FGM.

I also wish to highlight the situation of vulnerable women and girls in Bo, a cosmopolitan city with varied social challenges whose agency and dignity we seek to promote through free skills-training programmes accompanied by start-up kits that strengthen their pathways to self-reliance and economic empowerment.

In light of these realities, I respectfully urge that any recommendations aimed at strengthening Sierra Leone's commitment to addressing the challenges discussed today place deliberate focus on those furthest left behind—children, girls, women, and persons with disabilities, particularly in remote and underserved rural communities.

Thank you