

AT2030
Case Study:
Executive Summary

Inclusive Design and Accessibility of the Built Environment in Freetown, Sierra Leone

Prepared by
GDI Hub

**Cluster 4 Capacity
& Participation**
Inclusive Infrastructure

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Summary: Becoming a more inclusive city

An inclusive Freetown is a city that can be experienced by everybody in a fair and equal way. By creating safe and accessible environments for all members of the community, the city can allow everyone to access and participate in the opportunities they would like.

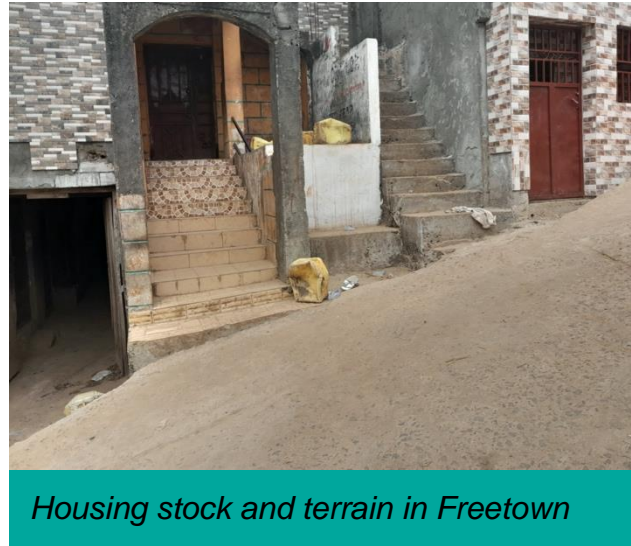
The city of Freetown has a population of 1.06 million people that includes 7,807 persons with disabilities according to the 2015 census. However, literature suggests this is an underestimate as disability prevalence in country is at least 4.3%. More comprehensive data is needed to support holistic action towards disability inclusion in the city. Freetown has numerous urban development challenges including: complex topography and the occupation of disaster-prone land; poor transport and road networks; a lack of water, sanitation and waste management; inadequate housing and other basic necessities. These challenges exacerbate inequality in the city and the need for improvements in infrastructure across all sectors for the benefit of the whole population.



This case study, produced by the Global Disability Innovation Hub (GDI Hub) and Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) sets out the current state of accessibility and inclusion in the built environment in the city of Freetown. Research was conducted between December 2021 and May 2022 with persons with disabilities living in Freetown and key urban stakeholders such as policymakers and built environment professionals. This participatory, inclusive, research combined interviews, participatory activities and workshops to identify priorities and recommendations to 'take action' towards becoming a more inclusive city and build consensus among stakeholders.

“Our physical disability is not our problem, we already accepted it. But the environments and the perception of the people are now our disabilities.”

Living in Freetown for persons with disabilities is not easy. Large parts of the city are inherently inaccessible due to geographic conditions such as the steep terrain and development patterns that have led to many people living in informal settlements on high-risk land. Many people, especially those living in informal settlements, lack access to basic and essential services within their communities where infrastructure is limited and connectivity is poor.



Housing stock and terrain in Freetown

Persons with disabilities cite transport links and road networks; access to healthcare and education; and access to basic necessities like housing, food, water and sanitation as high priorities.

“I would need easy access to safe drinking and an affordable water supply...free or affordable quality medical care, easy access to transportation facilities as well as an improved assistive technology to live an independent life.”

Inclusive policymaking is leading the way. From the stakeholder perspective there is awareness of the urgent need for progress. The city has a strong track record of developing robust policies, including examples of inclusive policymaking processes such as the new AT strategy (Assistive Technology (AT) Policy and Strategic Plan 2021-25). However, implementation of the policies and their relevance to the reality on the ground, especially for those communities living in informal settlements, remain significant challenges.

Stakeholders would benefit from adopting more community-led approaches and learning about grassroots inclusive design. Good examples do exist in the city. For example, where persons with disabilities led the development of an

accessible home that is future-proofed for family members. These examples could be collated to create a suite of case studies that policy makers can use and learn from and that could be scaled up or replicated.

“I want to reiterate it and I want it to come out strongly in this study that it is only with an honest and sincere collaboration among various actors that we can amicably improve the lives of persons with disabilities, otherwise, we are only wasting our time because the resources are not enough and when actors workers are fragmented, we are only doing a duplication of efforts. Therefore, we need that coordination and synergy among us.”

Access to basic services including sanitation and food is a major theme. The way in which water is managed and accessed in the city affects daily life. Many persons with disabilities have no independent access to clean drinking water. They are also often prohibited from leaving their homes or getting around their communities due to open drains and sewers that are not fit-for-purpose. People also regularly experience stigma due to the lack of privacy in public toilet facilities which are not accessible, leading to long-term mental health impacts.

“Having access to an improved toilet facility, a decent, affordable and easily accessible home to sleep in will make life a bit better for me.”

Healthcare and education also urgently need to be more inclusive and will require a systems approach to address infrastructure, products and technology, service design and awareness. The inaccessibility of the physical environment amplifies exclusion and stigma.

Climate plays a major role in the city. Incidences of disasters are likely to increase, so the time is now to ensure disaster and emergency responses are inclusive of persons with disabilities. This should be addressed in city wide strategies that deal with the challenges of climate change and should also be reflected in any disability strategy for the city. An inclusive city vision must be resilient and adaptive, just as a climate resilience strategy must be inclusive.



The lack of any additional physical space to help improve accessibility in the city is also a prominent challenge. Freetown is busy, congested and overcrowded and there is a need to make space that supports persons with disabilities. Doing so will help provide better public spaces for all residents of the city. Key public spaces that are a priority for improvement include improving streets to provide safe pedestrian environments and improving public spaces in communities that connect housing with other areas and facilities. Housing areas are also very congested and typically inaccessible. Identifying areas where appropriate, accessible and affordable housing can be built will be key.

Assistive technology (AT) is widely regarded as a vital enabling tool to support daily life for persons with disabilities. However, accessing AT remains a challenge and the current state of the built environment and infrastructure does not support AT use. There is a need for AT that is locally adapted and sustainable to suit the existing environment.



Example of using assistive technology

Ultimately, **participation of persons with disabilities is key**. ‘Nothing about us without us’ must be at the core of inclusive city planning. Persons with disabilities living in Freetown have the best knowledge of the challenges they face and can be the designers of an inclusive city. City government and built environment professionals must ensure active participation of persons with disabilities in all that they do.

“Whenever the government wants to do any road construction or building construction, the involvement of people with disabilities will be felt, the planning exercise should include people with disabilities. How about this door? How about this step? How about this ramp?”



Key barriers to an inclusive Freetown include:

Physical Barriers:

- Lack of physical space in the city
- The natural topography of the city being steep and hilly
- Poverty and a lack of basic infrastructure
- Poor sanitation and often no access at all
- Congested roads and traffic and no access to public transport
- Poorly built housing
- Vulnerability to climate change and disasters
- Inaccessible healthcare and education

Non-physical Barriers:

- Lack of participation of persons with disabilities
- Policies not reflecting reality on the ground
- A lack of accountability and responsibility for implementation
- Lack of awareness and understanding of the issues and wider impacts
- Poverty cycle being difficult to break
- Limited access to good healthcare and AT

Priority Recommendations:

- Produce an inclusive city strategy, centred on the participation of persons with disabilities, adapted to the local context and local resource-constraints. This should consider informal settlements, essential infrastructure needs and the scarcity of resources. It should also address climate resilience and disaster response as it relates to the city.

- Prioritise action across the key barriers reported including access to transport, housing conditions, access to education and livelihood opportunities, access to sanitation and healthcare.
- Finance an inclusive built environment by allocating funding and resources to support implementation.
- Raise awareness around the co-benefits of inclusive infrastructure, for example, how accessible housing and sanitation supports better health and livelihoods.
- Develop case studies of community-led inclusive design initiatives in the city and informal settlements to be used as good examples that inspire.
- Develop building codes and accessibility standards in a way that ensures an inclusive design approach is implemented and inclusive outcomes delivered relevant to the local context. These should consider the user experience and journeys across the city.
- Contextualise legislation and standards to local development plans through participation of local persons with disabilities.
- Embed inclusive design in the implementation of all essential infrastructure and services. This must include improvements to the informal settlements and lower income areas, which must be viewed as part of the city.
- Provide disability equality and awareness training to service providers and inclusive design training to all key urban stakeholders to help reduce stigma and increase inclusive solutions.
- While essential services are a priority, don't underestimate the importance of access to recreation, sport, culture and public space as this supports positive mental health and wellbeing.
- Develop targeted education and training programmes with persons with disabilities to support education attainment and ensure participants are financially supported as required.
- Support local communities to lead, facilitate and resource development projects in their area.
- Champion what good looks like in the local context by showcasing good examples with a global audience
- Develop a fairer assistive technology distribution system in line with the new strategy on AT that addresses existing barriers.



- Promote use of local materials and resources to ensure sustainability and longevity.

Different stakeholders have different roles to play in shaping an inclusive environment and specific recommendations for **policy, practice and people** are found in the full report.

Creating an enabling environment

Ultimately, an inclusive city is a vital part of an enabling environment where persons with disabilities can thrive. An enabling environment for persons with disabilities should integrate: a supportive legislative environment, an inclusive culture and mindset, participation in planning, design and decision-making, positive cultural change, an accessible and inclusive built environment, access to good quality and affordable assistive technology and inclusive climate resilience. There is good progress across some of these factors in Freetown. However, there is work to do.

So what might an inclusive Freetown look like?

- Inclusive mobility and transport
- Accessible and affordable housing for all
- Inclusive and accessible healthcare and education for all
- Enjoyable urban life: recreation, culture, sport and safe inclusive public spaces
- Inclusive infrastructure, urban planning and services: from water and waste to electricity
- Inclusive climate resilience, adaptation, and disaster preparedness
- Thriving and connected communities
- Access to opportunities and livelihoods

What's next?

This report outlines the key findings from our AT2030 Inclusive Infrastructure case study on the city of Freetown, Sierra Leone. As the fifth of six case studies on inclusive design and the built environment in lower-and-middle-income countries, it will go on to inform our Global Action Report.



The data collection that informed this case study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and we recognise the impact it has had on partners and communities. We hope this research on inclusive environments can support strategies for a more inclusive recovery.

To find out more:

The full case study is available at www.at2030.org/inclusive-infrastructure and you can contact the [Inclusive Design Team](#) at GDI Hub to find out more.

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Global Disability Innovation Hub

www.disabilityinnovation.com

GDI Hub is a research and practice centre driving disability innovation for a fairer world. Our vision is of a world without barriers to participation and equitable opportunity for all. We believe disability innovation is part of a bigger movement for disability inclusion and social justice. GDI Hub works across 5 domains, research, innovation, programmes, teaching, and advocacy. We are solutions-focused experts in; Assistive & Accessible Technology; Inclusive Design; Inclusive Education Technology; Climate & Crisis Resilience and Cultural Participation. Based in East London and a legacy of London 2012 Paralympic Games, we deliver world-class research, ideas and inventions, creating new knowledge, solutions and products, and shaping policy through co-creation, participation and collaboration. An Academic Research Centre (ARC) and a not-for-profit Community Interest Company (CIC) we are operational in 41 countries, with more than 70 partners and have reached 28 million people since launching in 2016.

Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC)

The Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), based in Freetown, is a globally connected research centre created through a partnership between the Bartlett Development Planning Unit (University College London) and the Institute of Geography and Development Studies (Njala University).

The centre aims to generate capacity building as well as research initiatives in cities across Sierra Leone focused on the well-being of residents of informal settlements. This will be achieved by:

- strengthening the research and analysis capacities of urban stakeholders in Sierra Leone
- significantly improving the quality and quantity of available knowledge on the informal settlements in Sierra Leone
- making urban knowledge available and accessible to those who need it, prioritizing residents of informal settlements; and
- delivering world leading research in order to influence urban policy and practice

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