

Cost-effective front-line justice services in Sierra Leone: a case study in frugal innovation and domestic resourcing

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Financing scaled-up investments in people-centred justice

Key messages

Sierra Leone is a rare example of a low-income country where the government funds scaled-up nationwide front-line legal advice, assistance and representation for civil and criminal matters. Launched in 2015, the Legal Aid Board (LAB) has offices across the country. It assisted 160,000 people in 2023, two-thirds of them women and girls. The LAB is also by far the most popular justice institution in the country.

Large-scale, consistent, core government funding has enabled the LAB to provide this scaled-up nationwide service. The Government of Sierra Leone provided 78% of the LAB's \$1.1 million a year income in 2021–23.

The scale of the LAB's operations has driven down its unit costs, creating a virtuous circle with lowering unit costs enabling further scale-up. Unit costs fell by a factor of three between 2018 and 2023. In 2023, each case where the LAB provided legal advice, assistance or representation, cost an average of \$11. This is well below ODI's benchmark of \$20 per case for low-income countries. LAB's low unit cost is particularly remarkable as a quarter of its costs are attributable to providing legal representation for criminal cases.

The platform for this success story is Sierra Leone's innovative 2012 Legal Aid Act, which recognised paralegals as part of the justice system and adopted a mixed model of criminal and civil legal aid, embracing the role of both lawyers and paralegals. This de-regulated model allowed the LAB to operate cost effectively, deploying its staff efficiently. This, together with its frugal, innovative approach (including its pioneering approach to child maintenance payments) has enabled the LAB to take its operations to scale.

Despite LAB's expansion, it has less than half the number of paralegals it requires, limiting its ability to reach Sierra Leone's most marginalised and vulnerable communities. The scope for increased government funding is limited: the Government of Sierra Leone spends more on justice as it does on health, spending proportionately double the funding on both justice and legal aid that donor countries spend in their countries. Bilateral donors previously provided significant funding to the justice sector, but withdrew when the LAB was launched.

There has been no independent in-depth evaluation of the LAB's performance. This is because Sierra Leone does not have a justice sector research budget, and there is limited donor engagement. There is a strong case for rigorous research to investigate the impact of the LAB's scaled-up model of front-line justice service delivery in a low-income country. ODI's initial conservative estimate is that the benefit - cost ratio of child maintenance cases is 50:1 (comparable to estimated global rates of return for some of the most cost-effective interventions in the health sector). This deserves further analysis, as well as the broader impact of the LAB's front-line justice services - as an enabler for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



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About this publication

This country study is part of a series of papers on ‘Financing scaled-up investments in people-centred justice’ following on from ODI’s work on ‘Taking people-centred justice to scale: investing in what works to deliver SDG 16.3 in lower-income countries’ (<https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/taking-people-centred-justice-to-scale-investing-in-what-works-to-deliver-sdg-163-in-lower-income-countries/>). Both research projects focus on practical, cost-effective and realistic ways to deliver sustainable justice services at scale. The project runs until September 2025.

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Acronyms

ADR	alternative dispute resolution
CAB	Community Advisory Bureau
CSO	civil society organisation
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
LAB	Legal Aid Board
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSIWA	Open Society Initiative in West Africa
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Sierra Leone's 20-year journey towards a national legal aid system

Sierra Leone emerged from civil war in 2002 with a previously failing justice system in ruins. Supported by donors (largely the UK), Sierra Leone began to re-build its justice system, with the post-war Truth and Reconciliation Commission identifying lack of justice as one of the causes of the conflict (Sierra Leone TRC, 2004).

Government and donors largely focused on the formal justice system, but from 2003 innovative civil society organisations (CSOs) began to pioneer paralegal models to assist with disputes, conflicts and grievances through more informal mechanisms. The most ambitious was a new local CSO, Timap for Justice, with the ambition to provide a national paralegal service. In 2009, Open Society Initiative in West Africa (OSIWA), with UK support, coordinated a consortium of CSOs, including Timap, to scale up their paralegal services. Following a pilot national legal aid scheme funded by the UK, Sierra Leone's innovative Legal Aid Act became law in 2012. This groundbreaking law recognised paralegals as part of the justice system for the provision of community-based justice services and set up a new independent statutory body with responsibility for legal aid and for developing a national paralegal network. The Legal Aid Board (LAB) began operations in 2015, and in 2016, catalysed by intensive lobbying, the government provided the LAB with its operating budget.

The 2012 Act covers legal aid for civil and criminal matters. It recognises that, with fewer than 200 lawyers in the country, mostly in the capital Freetown, and with limited resources, a mixed system is required, with legal aid provided not only by lawyers but also by a nationwide network of paralegals. The LAB is given responsibility for regulating paralegals, as well as being a legal aid service provider itself.

This journey and the factors leading to the creation and operationalisation of the LAB are discussed in more detail in Manuel et al. (2021) and Hiil (2022). Key factors include primarily: the persistence and skill of a group of committed Sierra Leoneans in civil society and government; inspiration from other countries (including Malawi (Manuel et al., 2023b) and South Africa); and consistent and substantial donor support for the paralegal movement in Sierra Leone, and to justice reform more generally, over the 15 years prior to the LAB's operationalisation. Large-scale and consistent government funding has been vital to the LAB's operations. Government has provided three-quarters of LAB's funding over the last six years. Strong and strategic LAB leadership adopted smart, frugal and innovative models and strategies, enabling its services to expand and operate at scale.

The LAB quickly scaled its operations and now has a nationwide presence, including in remote communities with limited access to the

formal justice system. It is a core justice sector organisation in Sierra Leone, highly visible and active through its nationwide network of offices and advice bureaus. It is also regarded by the public as by far the best performing legal organisation in Sierra Leone: 47% rate it as excellent, with the next best organisation only scoring 10% (Institute for Government Reform, 2019: 15–16).

The Legal Aid Board is now providing a scaled-up nationwide service

The LAB provides front-line justice services operating from 29 regional offices in all Sierra Leone's 16 districts and in 13 chiefdom headquarter towns, as well as from 63 community advisory bureaus. These offices and bureaus provide a range of services: legal advice, legal representation, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) / mediation and legal education, while also monitoring the justice system, especially local and informal courts, police stations, and prisons.

The LAB's advice, assistance and ADR services cover civil issues, the most prevalent of which are: child maintenance payments from absent fathers (26% of beneficiaries); land and property disputes (35%); and family and marital disputes (39%).¹ Each LAB case can involve multiple beneficiaries; for example, where the LAB supports mothers to claim child maintenance from absent fathers for multiple children, or supports the widows of polygamous marriages to re-claim their family home from their husbands' male relatives.

On the criminal side, LAB lawyers represent almost all impoverished accused persons in criminal cases, ranging from the most serious to petty offences.

The growth in the LAB's operations is shown in Figure 1. In 2023, it provided legal advice, assistance or representation to 161,613 beneficiaries.²

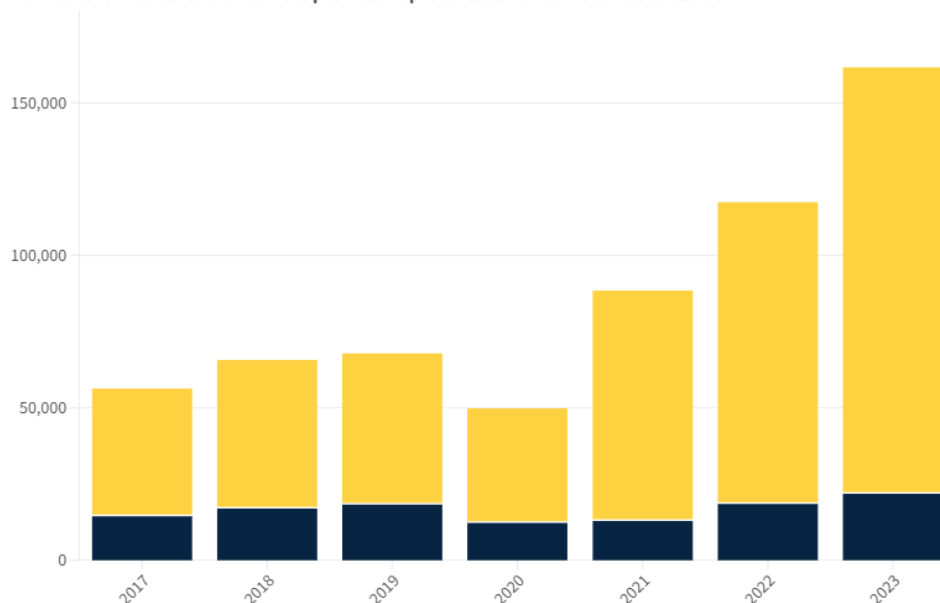
¹ Data supplied by the LAB for 2023. In addition, labour disputes comprise 1% of the total.

² Throughout this report, ODI analysis of LAB cases, beneficiaries, staffing and costs is based on data supplied by the LAB. The LAB records both the number of beneficiaries receiving support and the number of times each beneficiary receives support. While most child maintenance cases involve just one child, some can benefit four children – so four beneficiaries would be recorded. Similarly, marital cases may involve two or more wives. Gathering data on the basis of beneficiaries enables LAB to capture its full impact. However, to ensure comparability across organisations on unit costs per case, ODI and LAB have estimated the number of individual cases LAB dealt with in 2023 at 87,603 cases. This compares to the 161,613 beneficiaries who received support.

Figure 1 Growth in the LAB's services 2017–23

■ Legal representation ■ Legal advice and assistance

Number of times beneficiaries were provided representation or advice and assistance



Source: LAB data

Despite this impressive performance, there is scope for further scaling up, in terms of both unmet need and geographical reach. The LAB currently has 71 paralegals, fewer than half the number required to meet the Legal Aid Act's mandate of one paralegal in each of the country's 190 chiefdoms.

Scaled-up operations and an efficient staffing model have driven down unit costs

The scale of the LAB's operations, together with its efficient staffing model, has driven down its unit costs. Each case where the LAB provides legal advice, assistance or representation, costs an average of \$11 in 2023. This is well below ODI's benchmark of \$20 per case for low-income countries (Manuel and Manuel, 2023: Section 2.2). This low cost is particularly remarkable as it includes the relatively high cost of legal representation in criminal cases, which accounts for a quarter of the LAB's costs but only 14% of its beneficiaries.

The LAB's unit cost per beneficiary fell by a factor of three between 2018 and 2023.³ The LAB has thus achieved a virtuous circle of declining unit costs, enabling further scale-up, which in turn drives unit costs down further.

The LAB's efficient use of its staff – lawyers, programme staff, ADR officers, outreach staff, paralegals and volunteers – is key to its scalable model. The organisation's 24 fully qualified lawyers exercise

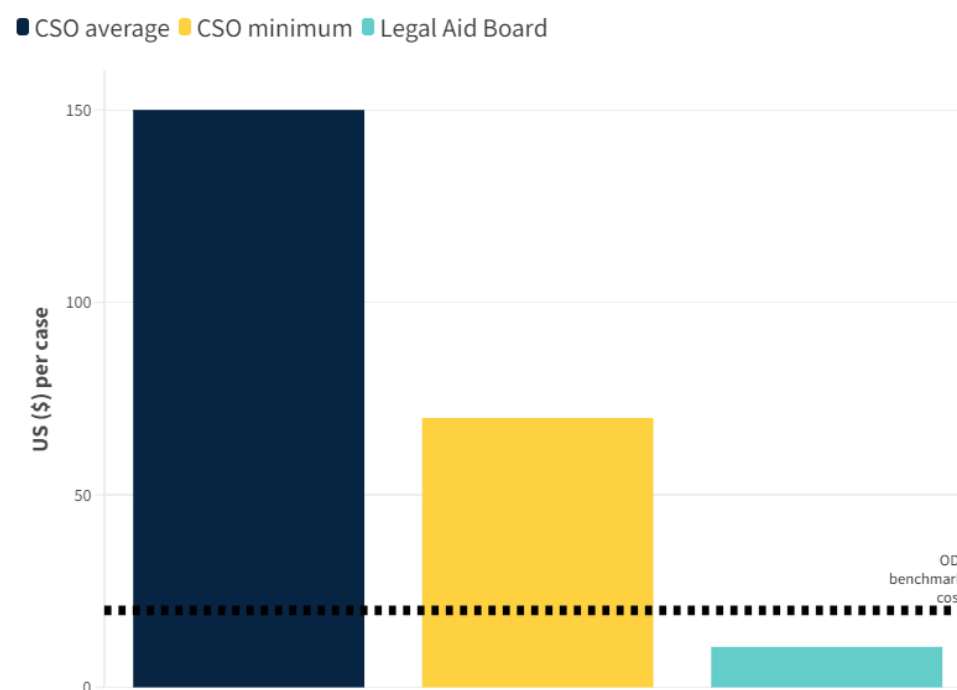
³ Cost per beneficiary (as opposed to per case) was \$5.7 in 2023 compared to \$20 in both 2018 and 2019.

their right of audience to represent impoverished clients in court. They also, along with regional programme managers (who are not lawyers), supervise the LAB's 71 paralegals. Only 10 regional offices have resident lawyers, so supervision is often remote, through use of technology – WhatsApp. The paralegals in turn supervise the LAB's community volunteers operating out of community advisory bureaus.

Community advisory bureaus (CABs) are a LAB innovation that began in 2017. This is an extremely low-cost model to address minor community-level conflicts, disputes and grievances. There are now 63 CABs, mainly in the capital Freetown, staffed by volunteers with relevant experience – such as religious leaders, civil society or human rights activists, and retired police officers. CABs are overseen by paralegals and are provided with support, such as stationery where possible. The aim is to expand CABs to all 446 wards in the country.

The low unit costs achieved by the LAB contrast with the unit costs previously achieved by civil society organisations providing paralegal services (see Figure 2). The graph shows the unit costs achieved by the UK-funded consortium of five civil society organisations (including Timap) coordinated by OSIWA. This deployed 70 paralegals across much of the country, with a presence in two-thirds of all districts, between 2009 and 2013, prior to the LAB starting operations. The consortium's average unit costs of \$150 per case were seven times ODI's scalable unit cost benchmark of \$20 per case. The consortium's high unit cost precluded national scale-up. The high unit cost was due to the operating model adopted: the CSO consortium's 70 paralegals dealt with 4,700 cases a year (Maru et al., 2018) in contrast with the LAB's more than 87,603 cases a year (in 2023) handled by the same number of paralegals. This represents a 18-fold increase in support.

Figure 2 Comparison of unit costs achieved by civil society consortium (2009–13) and the LAB (2023)



Source: FCDO (2018); LAB data

The LAB represents the most vulnerable, including through strategic litigation

The majority of the LAB's beneficiaries are women and children (70% of beneficiaries in 2021–23). Most clients engage with paralegals (25% of whom are female). The LAB's lawyers also provide representation in court where necessary. Most court work is for criminal cases, representing mainly male defendants.

LAB lawyers have taken some high-profile cases to court, securing important victories on the rights of women on divorce/separation – including to the family home and other property. In addition, the LAB successfully mediated with the government for the payment of rehabilitation grants to 80,000 war widows in 2018.⁴ The LAB is the only legal organisation in Sierra Leone with a full-time specialist juvenile lawyer.

The LAB has developed home-grown frugal innovative mechanisms to enhance its impact

Just over a quarter of the LAB's beneficiaries of legal advice and assistance relate to child maintenance from absent fathers. Nearly 35,700 children were beneficiaries of the LAB's child maintenance

⁴ The LAB has not included these beneficiaries in its 2018 data, on the basis that its role did not involve a dispute with the National Commission for Social Action and War Widows, but rather putting pressure on the Commission and the Ministry of Finance to make payment.

work in 2023. The LAB has developed an innovative end-to-end approach to these cases to ensure effective enforcement. Child maintenance disputes are handled by paralegals in the first instance, who mediate an agreement to pay. Fathers agree to pay a minimum of 250 New Sierra Leones (\$12)⁵ per month for basic upkeep of each child plus to pay separately for education and healthcare. Monthly payments are collected by the LAB's offices, so that payments can be monitored. In Freetown, payments are made into child maintenance accounts at Rokel Commercial Bank.

If a father defaults on maintenance payments, the LAB's lawyers apply to court to convert the mediated agreement into an enforceable court order, with the sanction for non-payment being imprisonment for contempt of court. The LAB has secured the agreement of the Magistrates' Courts in Freetown to assign all such cases to one court to be heard together, enabling efficient deployment of LAB lawyers.

Child maintenance is a highly cost-effective intervention. A one-off cost of \$11⁶ secures a monthly payment of \$12 until the child reaches 18. The initial benefit-cost ratio of these cases is conservatively estimated to be of the order of 50:1.^{7 8} This merits more detailed research: it is a higher ratio than any other justice example that ODI is aware of.⁹ It is also comparable to estimated global rates of return for some of the most cost-effective interventions in the health sector (e.g. immunisation and reducing child malnutrition).¹⁰ The intervention is also pro-poor and pro-women and

⁵ At 2023 average exchange rate of 21.4 NSL/USD

⁶ Average cost per case for all LAB cases

⁷ The level of the minimum monthly child maintenance payment has not been revised since its introduction in 2020. This estimate assumes that that monthly payments continue not to be adjusted for inflation. As the domestic bond market is still developing, the discount rate is assumed to be the average of the consumer price inflation rate for the last five years (22%) plus 5%.

⁸ This is a conservative estimate as (a) the benefits are likely to be higher, and (b) the costs lower. As to (a): the estimated benefit assumes all children just receive the minimum amount of \$12 from an estimated average age of 7 until they are 18. However, most children receive more than this. First, as well as the basic monthly payment, child maintenance agreements / orders also provide for fathers to contribute to the costs of education and healthcare. Second, child maintenance payments are linked to the father's income, and so are often more than the minimum. Third, maintenance payments can continue after the child is 18 if they continue in education. As to (b): the estimated costs for securing child maintenance are assumed to be the same as the average for all LAB interventions. However child maintenance payments are mostly secured through mediation, which is a much cheaper process than the criminal case work also undertaken by the LAB.

⁹ See <https://odi.org/en/publications/people-centred-justice-for-all/> page 21 for ODI 2021 review which included a 2020 literature review for the Justice Taskforce (maximum of 10:1) and OECD 2020 White paper Building a business case (maximum of 33:1).

¹⁰ Immunisation ratio is 60:1; child malnutrition 45:1 and malaria 36:1. https://copenhagenconsensus.com/sites/default/files/documents/post2015brochure_m.pdf.

girls: child maintenance payments to female-headed households and girls account for 72% of the beneficiaries.

The LAB monitors and engages with formal and informal justice systems

The LAB is embedded as a key player in front-line justice in Sierra Leone, ‘oiling the wheels’ of the system.¹¹ Its paralegals are present in primary justice institutions daily, including in local and informal courts; police posts and stations; prisons; and juvenile detention services. Paralegals provide legal advice and assistance to people detained or in contact with these organisations, as well as monitoring the organisations’ performance and providing staff training. Issues addressed include police abuse, illegal detention, and local and informal courts exceeding their jurisdiction and imposing unlawful fines.

Local and informal courts are governed by customary law and practice, handling issues such as customary marriage, land and community disputes, and debts. The LAB’s operations have resulted in some tensions, with paralegals seen by local authorities as a threat to their power and sources of income. This is mitigated by the recruitment of paralegals from local communities, who are more accepted by local authorities and have knowledge of local laws and customs. There is now evidence that paralegals tend to be seen as complementing traditional systems (Conteh et al., 2022), although the LAB reports that challenges remain regarding the handling of sexual offences and domestic violence.

The LAB also represents the interests of users of the justice system at the policy and planning levels through Sierra Leone’s justice sector coordination mechanisms, including regular meetings with the judiciary to engage on operational challenges – such as the deployment of judges to districts without judicial presence.

While most of its work is on cases, the LAB also undertakes outreach and legal education

Over 90% of the LAB’s spending is on legal advice, assistance and representation. In addition, the LAB extends its reach by high-profile legal education through community and school outreach, reaching 121,187 people in 2023. It makes extensive use of TV, including documentaries and popular ‘*Wan-Pot*’ comedies, radio phone ins and social media. It engages with topical matters, such as its anti-election violence campaign in the run up to the 2023 election, providing legal education on electoral laws and conflict prevention. The LAB has also developed more than 300 partnerships, including with the main labour unions, motor drivers’ associations, taxi drivers’ union, civil

¹¹ Sierra Leone faces significant challenges in its justice system, ranking 110 out of 142 in the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index. See: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>

society and community-based organisations, as well as across government.

The LAB operates as a regulator, as well as service provider

A wide range of CSOs provide paralegal services in Sierra Leone in addition to the LAB, including Timap for Justice, Namati, the Access to Justice Law Centre, Defence for Children International Sierra Leone, AdvocAid and Legal Access through Women Yearning to Equality Rights and Social justice (L.A.W.Y.E.R.S.).

The LAB regulates legal aid providers and the paralegal profession. It has accredited over 60 legal aid organisations and, with support from the UN Development Programme (UNDP), has mapped another 600 legal aid providers in the country. The operationalisation of the regulatory regime for paralegals is work in progress. Accredited paralegal training is not yet available. However, the LAB has developed a curriculum for paralegal studies.

The role of the LAB as service provider, alongside its regulatory function, has not been without controversy. It has been seen by some as crowding out the civil society organisations that demonstrated the paralegal model, both because it competed successfully against them for donor funding and because it took the LAB some years to develop an accreditation system for other legal aid providers.

The government has consistently provided most of the LAB's funding

The Government of Sierra Leone has consistently been a strong supporter of the LAB, providing three-quarters of the funding in the last six years, and averaging 78% in the last three years, the equivalent of \$0.90 million¹² a year, divided equally between the LAB's wage and non-wage costs. European countries allocate on average 1% of their justice budgets to legal aid (CEPEJ, 2022), while Sierra Leone is allocating twice this – 2%.¹³

The LAB's 71 paralegals are key to its operating model. The government funds 65% of them, with 19 on the government payroll and 27 funded from government non-payroll costs. The remaining 25 are dependent on donor funding through a succession of short-term grants (currently from UNDP and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation).

¹² When the LAB was first established in 2015, the Government of Sierra Leone committed to provide in local currency the equivalent of \$1 million a year. The government maintained this level of funding until 2021. However, while the Government increased its local currency funding between 2021-2023 this was not sufficient to offset in full the depreciation of the local currency against the US dollar.

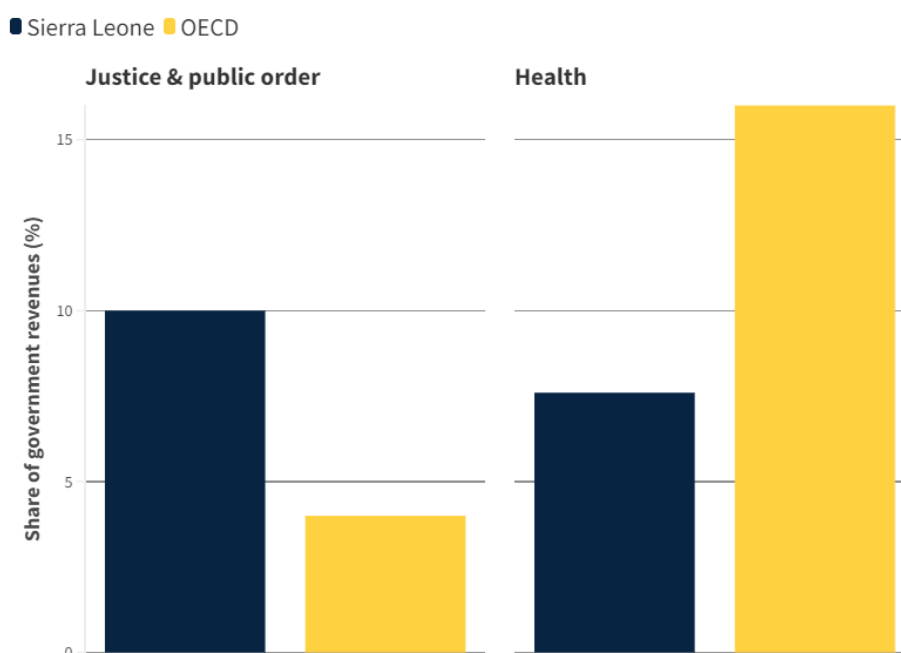
¹³ See: <https://mof.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/FY2022-Summary-Budget-Estimates-Report.pdf>

The LAB's operations are at times challenged by delays in funding releases. In 2023, the LAB received its full budget allocation, although in previous years this has not always been the case.¹⁴

Sierra Leone invests heavily in its justice sector overall

Sierra Leone invests heavily in justice. More than 9% of Sierra Leone's budget was spent on the justice sector in 2022¹⁵. This is 25% more than was spent on health¹⁶. Sierra Leone's justice budget share is also more than the average of 7% for all low-income countries and more than double the percentage that Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries spend on justice in their countries (Manuel et al., 2023a). The political economy of Sierra Leone's domestic resourcing of the LAB is discussed in Manuel et al. (2021).

Figure 3 Spending on justice as a percentage of government revenues compared to health and OECD countries



Source: ODI calculations using Government of Sierra Leone and IMF data and Manuel et al (2023a)

¹⁴ Unless otherwise stated, all spending figures in this report refer to actual spending (which can be significantly lower or higher than the originally budgeted spend) and exclude spending funded by external partners.

¹⁵ 9.5% of revenues. This is an ODI calculation based on spending data from <https://www.audit-service.gov.sl/annual-reports/> and revenue data from IMF World Economic Outlook <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEQ/weo-database/2024/April/weo-report>. The 2022 share is slightly higher than 8.5% average in 2018-2020 (Manuel et al., 2023a) but still below the peak of 12.3% in 2015 (FCDO, 2018).

¹⁶ 7.6% of revenues. This is an ODI calculation based on spending data from <https://www.audit-service.gov.sl/annual-reports/> and revenue data from IMF World Economic Outlook <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEQ/weo-database/2024/April/weo-report>

Government support is linked to the key role of the LAB in the justice system and its contribution to achieving SDG 16

Sierra Leone sees the LAB as one of its leading agencies in the implementation of SDG 16¹⁷ (Sierra Leone Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, 2021). It is embedded as a core member of Sierra Leone's justice sector planning and implementation mechanisms. Sierra Leone's justice sector has adopted a co-ordinated approach to sector investment and reform. The current (fifth) Justice Sector Reform Strategy and Investment Plan (2024–2028) is aligned with national development strategies and has as its first strategic objective: *increased equal access to justice for all with expansion of legal aid* seen as core to achieving this: *'Considering the need for legal aid and government's commitment to ensuring its provision, it is imperative to build capacity of community justice service providers, expand access to particularly women and other vulnerable groups and promote the professionalization of the paralegal system across the county'* (Government of Sierra Leone, 2023).

Prospects for increased government funding for the LAB look remote, while bilateral and multilateral donors provide minimal support

Despite cross-party support, and sustained funding across a change of government, it seems unlikely that the LAB's share of government resources will increase. The justice sector already receives an above average share of resources, and the LAB receives a high share of the sector's funds. An even higher share seems unlikely in view of competing demands on Sierra Leone's budget, including to improve its health services. At the same time, there is a clear case for LAB to expand its operations, not least to ensure it reaches all chiefdoms and the most marginalised and vulnerable communities. While there may be some scope for further scale-up, possibly through increased use of volunteers, funding is clearly a constraint.

This is an example of the justice funding gap in lower-income countries. ODI has shown that even if low-income countries (such as Sierra Leone) maximised their tax take, they could only afford to fund less than half the costs of a basic justice system. ODI has called on the international community to re-prioritise justice aid to address this gap (Manuel et al., 2019; Manuel et al., 2023a).

In recent years, official aid¹⁸ to legal and judicial development in Sierra Leone has been very limited. This is consistent with the

¹⁷ Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

¹⁸ That is, that reported to OECD/Development Assistance Committee (DAC) – provided by both bilateral and multilateral donors. See: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1#>

ongoing overall fall in aid to legal and judicial development discussed in ODI's justice aid update (Manea et al., 2023). There was very significant initial investment in justice in Sierra Leone following the conflict – peaking at an average of \$15.3 million a year in 2007 – 2009.¹⁹ Subsequently, donor funding has fallen to average of just \$0.8 million a year in 2020–22. This almost complete withdrawal of support is partly the result of a reduction in the share of total aid to Sierra Leone going to all justice purposes (that is, to legal and judicial development, human rights, and violence against women and girls) – from a peak of 4.3%²⁰ in 2007–09 to 1.3% in 2020–22. But at the same time, donors have switched their support from national-scale government programmes working across the whole justice sector to focus mainly on CSOs working to reduce violence against women and girls, who received an average of \$3.4 million a year in 2020–22.²¹

Donor (especially UK) support, including seed funding for paralegals and a pilot national legal aid scheme, was highly instrumental in the initial creation of the LAB. However, following the LAB's creation, support was withdrawn. This appears to have been due in part to the UK's disagreement with the LAB's scaled-up service delivery model and preference for legal aid to be provided by CSOs (FCDO, 2018). An initial external funding contribution of \$0.5 million (including from OSIWA and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, but none from bilateral and multilateral donors) catalysed government LAB funding. Other funders have included the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria for some years,²² the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and UNDP.²³ Most external funding has tended to be for specific projects or activities – for example, to fund additional paralegals in rural areas; to support vulnerable groups at high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS; to support juvenile justice; or to provide public education on election law.

Research is needed on the LAB's impact

The LAB is providing increasingly large numbers of vulnerable people across Sierra Leone with legal advice, assistance and representation. However, there is very little independent, robust data on the impact of the LAB's work. The Government of Sierra Leone does not have a justice sector research budget, and limited donor engagement means

¹⁹ All past aid figures are adjusted for inflation (that is, they are expressed in constant prices).

²⁰ This is the same percentage of their budgets that donors spend on justice in their own countries (Manuel et al., 2023a).

²¹ During this period, donors provided consistent funding to human rights, averaging \$3.3 million a year (2006–22).

²² Their funding was critical in early scale-up of paralegals into rural areas, but the programme ceased in 2021.

²³ In 2023, UNDP became the largest external funder (in part due to specific support for election-related work), providing 14% of total funding. UNICEF and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation collectively provided another 17%.

that there are no independent in-depth evaluations of the LAB's performance. Donor reporting tends to be at the output level (for example, the number of beneficiaries). The LAB reports some specific impacts – for example, in its December 2023 report to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation on its work in remote areas of Sierra Leone, the LAB asserted that there had been a steady reduction in illegal fines imposed by local and informal courts.

There is need for deeper understanding of the impact of front-line justice services such as those provided by the LAB, including to make the funding case to the international community. The cost-benefit and impact of the LAB's pioneering work on child maintenance payments in particular on female-headed household poverty levels, on child health outcomes, and on school enrolment rates deserves investigation. The LAB's broader work in Sierra Leone's front-line justice system may have impacts on governance indicators and conflict prevention. Overall, there is a strong case for rigorous research to investigate the impact of the LAB's scaled-up model of front-line justice service delivery in a low-income country.

Lessons and conclusion

The Government of Sierra Leone's innovative, bold and enabling approach to de-regulating justice services has created space for the LAB to take front-line services to scale and provide an affordable nationwide service of legal advice, assistance and representation for civil and criminal matters. This is an extraordinary achievement. This is all the more so, because it has been made possible through consistent government funding, combined with a low unit-cost model and frugal innovations to deliver a scalable system. Civil society also had played a key role in establishing the role of paralegals within Sierra Leone's justice system through innovation and experimentation.

Lessons from this 'home grown' model deserve international attention for their potential wider application, including rigorous independent research on the cost-benefit and impact of this scaled-up front-line justice service as an enabler for the Sustainable Development Goals.

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