

SIERRA LEONE

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S I E R R A L E O N E

I. INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone was a British territory until it gained its independence in 1961. This was not only an important political event but also marked a significant change in government policy concerning the collection, compilation and evaluation of demographic data for the country as a whole. An evaluation of the sources of demographic data and their reliability, relating to the population of Sierra Leone must therefore recognise this pre- and post-independence dichotomy.

II. POPULATION ESTIMATES BEFORE INDEPENDENCE

Before 1961, Sierra Leone was divided into two separate administrative areas; the Crown Colony which consisted of the port and its immediate environs, and the Protectorate which made up the rest of the country. The Colony was established in 1808, and the Protectorate in 1896. This nearly ninety-year gap is reflected in the availability of population figures for the two areas, because population counts were limited to the Colony area until the Protectorate was established in 1896.

1) Population counts in the Colony

The first recorded census, by actual enumeration of population, was conducted in 1881. Previous to this, censuses were held in 1861 and 1871. These however were not based on actual enumerations but regarded simply as "estimates of the population obtained by various means" [13, p. 2]. After 1881, regular decennial counts were carried out up to 1931; there was a temporary break in 1941 because of World War II, with a resumption of census-taking in 1948.

2) Population counts in the Protectorate

The Protectorate, on the other hand, does not have such a long tradition of census taking; a proper enumeration of the population was never attempted during the colonial period. Estimates of the population were made by local colonial government officers using a variety of ad hoc methods. The first of these estimates was made in 1901 and thereafter in 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1948.

3) Estimates of the population of Sierra Leone from 1901 to 1948

As a result of these differences in the historical pattern of censuses in the country, estimates of the population of the whole country, that is the Colony and Protectorate combined, are available only as from 1901 (Table 85).

Table 85

SIERRA LEONE - POPULATION TOTALS OF THE COLONY, PROTECTORATE
AND SIERRA LEONE, 1861 TO 1948

YEAR	COLONY	PROTECTORATE	TOTAL
1861	17 918	-	-
1871	37 089	-	-
1881	60 546	-	-
1891	74 835	-	-
1901	74 351	949 927	1 024 278
1911	75 520	1 324 577	1 400 097
1921	85 044	1 455 510	1 540 554
1931	96 422	1 672 058	1 768 480
1948	124 657	1 733 618	1 858 275

Source: [13, p. 21, Table V and p. 82 Table LX]
[14, Table A] for 1948

4) Accuracy and reliability of pre-independence census data

In the Colony area, where censuses were conducted by a de facto enumeration of the population from 1881, the use of unscientific statistical principles and census procedures has rendered the information collected practically unusable for analysing past demographic trends in the country during Colonial times.

The use of the "household method" for enumerating the population, which was largely illiterate, the lack of trained enumerators to check the completed questionnaires, and difficulties encountered with enumerating itinerant populations were some of the factors which introduced many errors of reporting and recording in the data collected by these censuses. Estimates of the population which are based on these censuses therefore can only be regarded as being unreliable.

In the area known as the Protectorate, censuses were generally carried out using two different methods; one for the non-native population and the other for the native population. Figures for the non-native population, normally small in number, which comprised Europeans, Asiatics and West Indians, and other Africans, were obtained by an estimate based partly on enumeration. However, for the bulk of the Protectorate population, made up of 'natives', estimates were obtained by a number of ad hoc methods. Estimates for 1901 were regarded as being of a very rudimentary character, while those for 1911 and 1921 were based on counts carried out in various villages.

For the 1931 and 1948 censuses a more ambitious scheme was adopted. Over a period of time, varying in length from three to six months, District Commissioners or their appointees visited a number of villages, selected principally because of their accessibility, and estimated the population using a number of ratios. First, the number of houses was obtained; then an average occupancy rate was determined by counting the number of persons in a sample of these houses. The information obtained from these villages, regarded as "key villages", was then used to calculate the total population for the Chiefdom using the house tax lists to obtain the total number of houses in each chiefdom.

The inherent biases of the District Commissioner, or his appointee, in his choice of sample villages and houses, and the incomplete and indifferent nature of the income tax lists, cast great doubts on the accuracy and reliability of the estimates of the population obtained.

In addition to these shortcomings, there are other factors which have tended to limit the use of these data for analysing intercensal population growth trends. Firstly, there were frequent intercensal changes in the administrative boundaries of the Colony and Protectorate. As a result, pre-independence census data do not provide a consistent basis for analysing the historical growth of the population of the two administrative divisions, the Colony and the Protectorate.

The consequences of these unscientific statistical and census procedures of the Colonial administrators are reflected in the erratic pattern of intercensal population growth rates between 1861 and 1948 (Table 86).

Although there was considerable movement of traders, civil servants, military personnel and ships crews, mainly between Britain and Sierra Leone, and a large volume of internal migration between the Colony and Protectorate, these movements do not provide adequate explanations for the erratic patterns of population growth between censuses. An overriding consideration must be the indifferent and unscientific methods of enumerating and estimating the population adopted during the colonial period.

Table 86
SIERRA LEONE - AVERAGE ANNUAL RATES OF GROWTH OF THE
POPULATIONS OF THE COLONY, PROTECTORATE AND SIERRA LEONE,
1861 TO 1948

PERIOD	COLONY	PROTECTORATE	SIERRA LEONE
1861-1871	7.5	-	-
1871-1881	5.0	-	-
1881-1891	1.9	-	-
1891-1901	0.2	-	-
1901-1911	0.2	3.4	3.2
1911-1921	1.2	0.9	1.0
1921-1931	1.3	1.4	1.4
1931-1948	1.5	0.2	0.3

There are serious errors also in the recording of estimates; some Census Reports, in a number of cases, provide contradictory estimates of the population for some years. For example, the Colony population of 1891 is reported as being 72 996 in the 1911 and 1921 Census Reports, but 74 835 in the 1931 Census Report. Again the Report of the Census of 1921 reports a total population of 85 163 for the Colony, while the subsequent reports of 1931 and 1948 report a total population of 85 044 (Table 87).

Table 87
SIERRA LEONE - DIFFERENCES IN OFFICIAL REPORTING OF CENSUS
FIGURES FOR THE COLONY, 1911 TO 1948

YEAR FOR WHICH ESTIMATE IS REPORTED	CENSUS REPORTS OF:			
	1911	1921	1931	1948
1881	-	60 546	60 546	-
1891	72 996	72 996	74 835*	-
1901	74 351	74 351	74 351	74 351
1911	75 572	75 572	75 520*	75 572
1921	-	85 163	85 044*	85 044*
1931	-	-	96 422	96 422
1948	-	-	-	124 657

* Reported Totals inconsistent with estimates recorded in actual census reports.

Sources: [11, pp. 4 and 5] [12, pp. 3 and 4] [13, p.2] and [14, p.2]

The contradictions and inconsistencies in the reporting of census totals are even more frequent and serious in the case of the population of the Protectorate (Table 88).

Table 88

SIERRA LEONE - DIFFERENCES IN OFFICIAL REPORTING OF CENSUS
FIGURES FOR THE PROTECTORATE, 1911 TO 1948

YEAR FOR WHICH ESTIMATE IS REPORTED	CENSUS REPORTS OF:			
	1911	1921	1931	1948
1901	949 827*	-	949 877* or 949 927*	949 927*
1911	1 327 560	1 327 560	1 324 577*	1 324 577*
1921	-	1 456 148	1 455 520*	1 455 510*
1931	-	-	1 672 058	1 672 058
1948	-	-	-	1 733 618

* Reported totals inconsistent with estimates recorded in actual census reports.

Sources: [11, p.4] [12, p.3] [13, p.3] and [14, p.2]

This analysis has shown that sources of population data before Independence are rather unreliable to serve as a basis for determining historical changes in the size of the population of Sierra Leone. Population estimates obtained from Colonial Census Reports are useful only for providing broad indications of the relative increases in the size of the population of the two constituent administrative areas of the country, the Colony and the Protectorate.

III. POPULATION ESTIMATES AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Independence in 1961 brought with it a more enlightened approach to population data collection in the country. Since then, two censuses, covering the entire population of the country, have been conducted. A number of national sample surveys investigating the demographic, socio-economic and agricultural characteristics of the population have also been carried out. In addition, other machinery for collecting a variety of data on the population have been established. These will now be analysed to determine their potential usefulness for estimating the size of the population of this country.

1) The 1963 Population Census

In April 1963, the first truly national population census was conducted in Sierra Leone. It was a de facto count of all persons who had spent census night in the country, and was the first time, in the history of census-taking in Sierra Leone, that serious attempts were made to use scientific and objective procedures before, during and after the actual enumeration of the population.

The census showed that the total size of the population of the country was 2 180 355 in 1963. The relative accuracy of this total was established by a post-enumeration survey which revealed an under-count of between 2 percent and 5 percent [7, vol. 1: x-xi]. Assuming an under-count of 5 percent, because of the "tendency toward under-enumeration rather than over-enumeration in an initial census" [2, p. 429], the enumerated total has been adjusted to mid-year 1963 to obtain a final total of 2 297 964 [2].

2) The 1974 Population Census

A second national population census, again involving a de facto enumeration of the population of the entire country was carried out on 8th December 1974. For this census considerable assistance was obtained from the United Nations. Concerted efforts were made to apply the definitions, principles and procedures recommended by that World Body for the conduct of population censuses.

Because of a number of technical difficulties encountered in the processing of the data, only the preliminary results have so far been published. These show that the total size of the population, as enumerated in 1974, was 2 735 159. Taking account of an assumed under-count of 10 percent, the enumerated figure has been adjusted to give a final total of 3 088 675 for 1974 [8].

However, in the absence of a post-enumeration survey, which was never conducted, there are serious doubts about the authenticity of the basis for determining the size of the under-count. In addition, in view of the experiences gained from the 1963 census and the more careful preparations made for the 1974 census, it is perhaps not reasonable to assume a bigger under-count in 1974 than in 1963. The actual enumerated total of 2 735 159, rather than the adjusted figure, is a more reliable reflection of the size of the population of the country in 1974, and should be accepted until the final figures are published.

3) Registration of Births, Deaths and Migration

A possible source of data for estimating the population size of a country between two censuses is the Register of Vital Events. Although Registration of Births and Deaths was established in Sierra Leone as far back as 1801, the system is compulsory only for the Western Area, where less than ten percent of the population live. The system also suffers from widespread under-reporting of both births and

deaths, poorly paid and inadequately trained registrars and many errors in recording the information. Vital Registration data in Sierra Leone therefore do not provide a reliable basis for estimating the size of the population between censuses.

Data on international migration are also quite unreliable. The long and unguarded land boundaries between Sierra Leone and Guinea on the one hand, and Sierra Leone and Liberia on the other, and the fact that these boundaries separate people of the same ethnic group, encourage considerable movement of people between these countries. However, most of this movement is not recorded, while existing records of 'entries' and 'departures' at the airport and sea-port constitute only a small and unrepresentative fraction of migrants across the borders of the country.

These data cannot therefore be used as a basis for estimating population size in Sierra Leone.

4) Demographic Sample Surveys

As a means of meeting the ever increasing needs for more reliable data, not only about the entire population of the country but also of particular groups within it, a number of attempts have been made to carry out demographic sample surveys. The objectives of these studies, the target population, the areas covered and their methods and techniques have been quite diverse.

Only one of these surveys, a UNICEF Country Study of the Needs and Priorities of Children, Youth and Women, conducted in 1973 by Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone was nationwide [6]. While it provided detailed information on a number of demographic, social and economic characteristics of the population, the sampling procedures adopted have made it unwise to use a "raising factor to derive a global result for the country" [6, p.6]. The data obtained from this survey do not provide a basis for estimating the population size of the whole country.

5) Other Sample Surveys

Other sample surveys, not of a purely demographic nature but with considerable population inputs, have been conducted principally by the Government Central Statistics Office. These include:

- a national Household Survey, carried out in selected areas between 1966 and 1969, to collect information on Household Expenditure and Income, Economic Characteristics and Migration;
- the Agricultural Statistical Survey of Sierra Leone of 1970/71, which by its nature, had a limited scope;
- the General Household Survey (First Round) 1976/77;
- the General Household Survey (Second Round) 1977/78.

The Household Surveys provide considerable data for making detailed analysis of the socio-economic characteristics of households and household members. The Agricultural Statistical Survey, on the other hand, concentrates on farm-holders only. The sample surveys therefore do not provide adequate information for evaluating the size of the population of the country.

6) Non-conventional sources of demographic data

In addition to censuses, vital registers and sample surveys, there are a number of other sources, usually termed "non-conventional" which provide data for estimating the population size of a country. These include lists of registered voters, the results of parliamentary elections, the results of national referenda and national population registers. For Sierra Leone, three of these sources are evaluated to determine their reliability for estimating the size of the population of this country.

a) The 1975/76 Electoral Register

In Sierra Leone the list of voters includes all persons aged 21 years and over who are citizens, are not mentally ill and have no criminal record. Hence for any year, the actual population aged 21 years and over should closely be approximated by the number of registered voters, with the population aged 21 years and over being higher than the number of registered voters for any constituency or administrative area.

A comparison of the 1975/76 Electoral Register, which is the most recent compilation of voters in the country, with the projected population aged 21 years and over for 1975 reveals a number of inconsistencies. For each of the Districts, the number of registered voters exceeds the population aged 21 years and over, while for one District, Pujehun District, the number of electors exceeds the total population.

For each of the Districts a further comparison is made between:

- the population aged 21 years and over as a percentage of the total population in 1974; and
- the number of registered voters in 1975/76 as a percentage of the total population projected to 1975.

Where the data from both the Census and Electoral List are accurate these computed percentages should be closely related for each District. For Sierra Leone however, an examination of the figures reveals serious inconsistencies.

While the percentage of the total population aged 21 years and over in 1974 is 44.6 percent for the country, and varies between 40.0 percent and 50.8 percent for the Districts, the number of registered voters in 1975/76 constitutes 80.1 percent of the total projected population of the whole country in 1975, and varies between 60.9 percent and 116.9 percent for the Districts (Table 89).

Table 89

SIERRA LEONE - PERCENTAGE OF: (a) POPULATION AGED 21 YEARS AND OVER IN TOTAL POPULATION IN 1974, AND (b) REGISTERED VOTERS 1975/76 IN TOTAL PROJECTED POPULATION IN 1975 BY DISTRICTS

DISTRICTS	PERCENTAGES	
	Number of Persons aged 21 years and over	Number of registered voters
	(a)	(b)
Bo	50.1	79.0
Bonthe (including Sherbro U.D.)	50.8	74.3
Moyamba	49.4	78.5
Pujehun	49.6	116.9
Kailahun	47.0	88.5
Kenema	48.8	90.8
Kono	43.3	73.9
Bombali	40.2	73.9
Kambia	41.9	85.0
Koinadugu	41.0	75.8
Port Loko	43.1	81.6
Tonkolili	41.4	89.7
Western Area	41.2	60.9
TOTAL	44.6	80.1

These inconsistencies can be due either to errors in the 1974 census data or in the 1975/76 Electoral Register. However, because of the rather lax procedures used for registering voters in the country, there is no doubt that these observed inconsistencies have arisen because of the gross distortion and considerable inflation of the Electoral Register. On the basis of the 1975/76 Electoral List, the population size of the country in 1975 has been estimated at 5 011 220, giving a growth rate of 7.2 percent per annum from 1963. This is quite unacceptable, and confirms the serious inaccuracies of the 1975/76 Electoral List.

b) The National Population Registration

The registration of all citizens and non-citizens, aged 16 years and over, was instituted in Sierra Leone by the National Registration Act of 1974. Although the objectives of the registration are non-demographic, some of the information required can be used for studying a number of characteristics of the population. Information is required, for example, on the age, sex, marital status, occupation and level of education of the applicant. Questions on place of birth can also be used for studying both international and internal migratory patterns.

However, the potential usefulness of the National Population Registration as a basis for estimating the population size of the country is limited by a number of factors. Apart from excluding the population aged under 16 years, which according to the 1974 Population Census make up 43 percent of the population, registration in the different administrative regions is still far from completed. In addition, there are serious doubts about the efficiency of the interviewers who collect and record the information, while the incidences of omission on the one hand and double registration on the other are known to be quite high. The National Population Registration is, as yet, of no practical use for estimating the size of the population of Sierra Leone.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Sierra Leone, unlike many other African countries, has had a long history of census-taking. The two post-independence national population censuses, of 1963 and 1974, provide fairly reliable data on the size of the population of the country, and serve as the basis for making projections of the future size of the population. Because of the absence of reliable data on the population for the whole country from other sources, practically all analysis of its population characteristics including the size, distribution, composition and movement of the population, must be based on data from these two censuses.

A comparison of the enumerated population between 1st April 1963 and 8th December 1974, indicates an annual rate of growth of 2.0 percent. This may seem a low rate of growth especially when compared to other West African countries, but it may in fact reflect the genuine consequences of high rates of mortality, especially of infants and children, which have been observed in the country [4, p.iv], [6 p.46] [16, p.6].

When the detailed results of the 1974 census become available they will provide the basis, in conjunction with other methods of demographic analysis, for estimating current and future population trends and for providing more reliable estimates of the size of the population until the next National Census which becomes due in 1984.

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