

SIERRA LEONE'S MID-TERM CENSUS: THE CREDIBILITY ISSUES AND THE WAY FORWARD.

Policy brief – 011/June 2022



Institute for Governance Reform (IGR)

31a Wilkinson Rd, Freetown | info@igrsl.org



I. Background

Over the last seven years, Sierra Leone spent a little over \$20m on two population censuses under two administrations — one conducted in December 2015 under the APC administration (now the opposition party) and a mid-term census, whose preliminary results were released in early June 2022 under the SLPP-led government. Results of both censuses were rejected by opposition groups referring to them as inaccurate. These controversies left the public — who generally side with one of the two dominant political parties — confused as to who is right or wrong. What is more confusing is the absence of a clear and objective criteria upon which people can declare a census accurate or fraudulent. With the growing political polarization in the country, many people now only entertain views that justify and reinforce their beliefs and biases. Accusations of partisan manipulation of census results are more frequently spread than expert opinions on national statistics, portending a tense political landscape as the country prepares for general elections in 2023.

IGR bases its analysis and policy recommendations largely on official data and statistical evidence. We've have acted as keen observers of multiple census efforts in Sierra Leone – and the broader collection and application of statistics – for the past eight years. It is in this context that we offer this response to the preliminary results of the 2021 Mid-Term Census with three questions in mind: A) How trustworthy are the provisional figures in the midterm census and how might perceived political motives impact trust in them? B) Are perceptions of inaccuracy rooted in objective criteria for assessing a census or are they driven by the historic lack of trust in the institution managing the census? C) Or, worse still, how might self-serving political machinations that prioritize political expediency over accuracy be the basis for justification by some actors?

Ideally, a proper audit of the mid-term census results should be done after the release of complete figures for sub-entities (including chiefdoms, wards and, if possible, enumeration areas). This would provide a deeper and wider breath of statistical accuracy of results that will help citizens understand how the district figures were derived in the first place. However, considering the interest the preliminary figures have already generated and given the decision by NEC to use the data for planning the next election, it is useful to provide our interpretation of the results as well as share some useful tips on how citizens and interest groups can assess the correctness or inaccuracy of a census result.

2. Putting the Mid-Term Census in Context

Sierra Leone conducted its second post-war census in 2015, that established the country's population at 7.09 million. There were sweeping structural changes in the then governing party's-controlled areas following the release of results. Parliamentary constituency boundaries were redrawn, and two new districts were created in the North. What use to be the Northern province was split into two regions (North and Northwest regions), and 40 new chiefdoms were created with regent chiefs installed.

The 2015 census was conducted amidst controversy. IGR and other CSOs monitoring the process raised questions regarding the accuracy of the cartographic mapping process, the enumeration coverage and lack of inclusivity in the process. These claims were confirmed by Stats SL in 2020 after the change of the administration that conducted the census. According

to the Statistician General, his office could not account for 59% of the total enumeration areas covered in 2015 and most completed hard copies of the questionnaires are no longer in the archives. The implication of this is that 59% of the 2015 census can neither be audited nor used to compare figures of localities (towns and villages) with previous or future censuses. In light of these challenges, Stats SL reported that they had advised the Bio administration to conduct a mid-term census. The mid-term census project was initially jointly funded by the World Bank and GoSL, and it was designed to be the first to rely on electronic data capture to digitize the country's population and capture geo-codes of all localities.

Since the announcement of the mid-term census, the main opposition party that conducted the previous census and other groups outrightly condemned the initiative, calling it a ploy by the government to gerrymander constituencies and create new districts in its Southern and Eastern regions. Laying of the mid-term bill for approval by parliament resulted in a fight between MPs across the aisle. The opposition staged a boycott when the final enumeration date was announced, and some of its leaders vowed to attack census staff if they dared come to their communities. There were arrests of some opposition leaders in Freetown, including a vocal woman leader of one of the smaller parties. This move was preceded by a fallout between Stats SL and its main financier, the World Bank, with the latter stating its displeasure with the recruitment and training of enumerators. All other technical requirements of the census had been met by Stats SL.

With this mounting tension, many census enumerators especially in opposition stronghold districts in the North, Northwest, and Western regions conducted their work in fear, while counting proceeded smoothly in the ruling-party-controlled Southern and Eastern regions. There were reports of enumerators that made off with hundreds of tablets, which led to considerably slowing down the house count in Freetown. The Sierra Leone Police arrested a few perpetrators and detained some of the accused individuals.

Given the scale of resources already invested in the census, IGR supported the National Council for Civic Education to facilitate a meeting between civil society, religious leaders, traditional leaders, and Stats SL to discuss ways of overcoming the challenges facing the process, including pacifying belligerent communities to allow census staff to do their job. Calm returned to many communities after their engagement with civil society, religious leaders, chiefs and Stats SL staff. This helped census staff gain access to areas to perform their work.

In addition to the boycott, there were also technical difficulties with the process. Some households, especially in Freetown, complained that they were not visited. Stats SL extended the enumeration period by two weeks, established a toll-free line for the public to call and be counted, and re-assigned some trained enumerators who had completed their work in districts in the South and East to support household counts in Freetown. Notwithstanding the steps taken, the census still ended with some households complaining that they were not visited, and sections of the public are unclear on how households that are not covered were accounted for in the provisional results. It is still unclear what was the effect of the opposition boycott on coverage.

3. Analysis of the Mid-Term Census Results

We employed two approaches to analyse the 2021 mid-term census results. First, we compared 2021 results with the 2015 census results for each district to understand the variance between the districts head-to-head. Table 1 below shows six out of the 16 districts that have the same share of the national population in both censuses. As such, there should be less contention on districts such as Kailahun (7%), Karene (4%), Kambia (5%), Koinadugu (3%), Port Loko (7%), and Tonkolili (7%). Freetown lost almost half of its population, while Western Rural saw the most significant increase, followed by Bo district.

Table 1: Comparison of the Provisional Results of 2021 Mid-Term Census and 2015 Census

Districts	Population (2015 Census)	District % Share of pop. In 2015	Population (2021 Census)	District % Share of pop. in 2021
Bo	575,478	8%	756,975	10%
Bombali	422,960	6%	387,236	5%
Bonthe	200,781	3%	297,561	4%
Falaba	205,353	3%	166,205	2%
Kailahun	526,379	7%	545,947	7%
Kambia	345,474	5%	367,699	5%
Karene	285,546	4%	290,313	4%
Kenema	609,891	9%	772,472	10%
Koinadugu	204,019	3%	206,133	3%
Kono	506,100	7%	620,703	8%
Moyamba	318,588	4%	346,771	5%
Port Loko	530,865	7%	528,038	7%
Pujehun	346,461	5%	429,574	6%
Tonkolili	513,984	7%	557,257	7%
Western Rural	444,270	6%	662,056	9%
Western Urban	1,055,964	15%	606,701	8%
NATIONAL	7,092,113	100%	7,541,641	100%

Now, let us return to the 10 districts where we saw variation in the two censuses. Here we apply a gold-standard measure of evaluating the accuracy of a population census. One of the most important measures of census accuracy is called “coverage.” It indicates how close the census came to enumerating all persons living in Sierra Leone. In every census, some people are missed (referred to as “omissions”), and some are counted more than once or included in the census when they shouldn’t be (called “erroneous enumerations”), such as transiting passengers. The UN Population Handbook provides two primary tools to measure census accuracy: Demographic Analysis and the Post-Enumeration Survey (PES). Each of these tools provide an independent estimate of the size and characteristics of the country’s population that can be compared to the census results. Given that we are analysing the district-level provisional results, we can only apply a demographic analysis at this stage.

Demographic Analysis is a method used to estimate population size and selected characteristics based on historical population data, birth and death records, health services enrolment, and school enrolment, etc. These national estimates of the population are produced independently of the census conducted, and the differences between these two sets of data are used to estimate net undercounts or overcounts of the population.

Table 2: Comparison of the Provision Results of 2021 Mid-Term Census with NPSE and Using Vaccination Data

Districts	No. of NPSE Candidates 2020	% Share of NPSE	No of 2020 BCG Vaccine	No. of 2021 BCG Vaccine	BCG Vaccine average	% Share of BCG vaccine by district	General average (Vaccination & NPSE)	District % Share of pop in 2021
Bo	14,403	9.9%	22,468	22,456	22,462	9.5%	9.7%	10%
Bombali	8,883	6.1%	12,423	13,168	12,796	5.4%	5.7%	5%
Bonthe	3,156	2.2%	6,563	7,605	7,084	3.0%	2.6%	4%
Falaba	1,023	0.7%	5,003	4,517	4,760	2.0%	1.4%	2%
Kailahun	6,882	4.7%	16,595	19,672	18,134	7.7%	6.2%	7%
Kambia	6,715	4.6%	11,047	11,440	11,244	4.8%	4.7%	5%
Karene	6,130	4.2%	7,850	8,287	8,069	3.4%	3.8%	4%
Kenema	13,067	8.9%	21,271	23,537	22,404	9.4%	9.1%	10%
Koinadugu	4,192	2.9%	6,880	7,336	7,108	3.0%	2.9%	3%
Kono	9,510	6.5%	14,293	14,514	14,404	6.1%	6.3%	8%
Moyamba	4,719	3.2%	14,071	14,421	14,246	6.0%	4.6%	5%
Port Loko	10,773	7.4%	19,924	21,838	20,881	8.8%	8.1%	7%
Pujehun	3,531	2.4%	14,748	16,538	15,643	6.6%	4.5%	6%
Tonkolili	10,735	7.3%	13,012	14,817	13,915	5.9%	6.6%	7%
W/Rural	14,707	10.1%	17,192	18,262	17,727	7.5%	8.8%	9%
W/Urban	27,781	19.0%	24,714	29,575	27,145	11.5%	15.3%	8%
NATIONAL	146,207	100.0%	228,054	247,983	238,019	100.0%	100.0%	100%

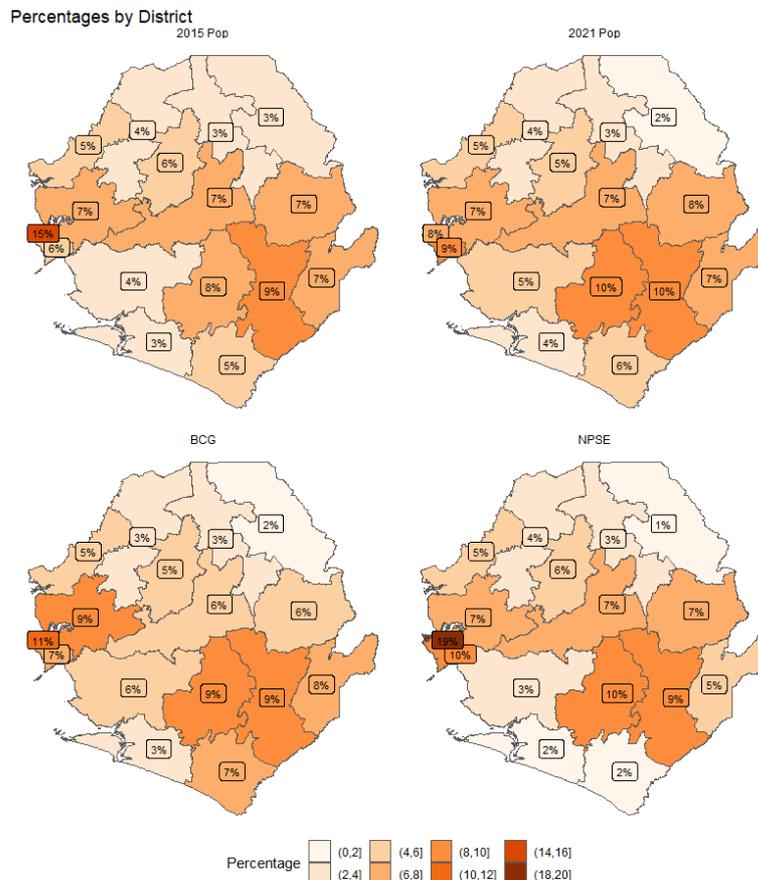
Sources: Min of Basic & Sr. Sec Edu for NPSE and Min of Health for BCG data

Table 2 above uses two demographic estimates: 1) The total record of children (between the ages of 10-12 years old) who took National Primary School Exams (NPSE) in all districts in 2020, and 2) Children under five that received BCG vaccines (for tuberculosis prevention) in 2020 and 2021. The district-level proportions of children who took NPSE exams and vaccinations are compared to those of the 2021 Mid-Term Census.

Although primary school children and infants represent only a share of the population from a specific age range, they are still generally reliable measures. There is relatively consistent, high participation in both across the population. For example, it is believed the BCG vaccination rate is 96 percent. In addition, youth represent a large proportion of the population: 40 percent, according to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). BCG vaccination and NPSE data are also less susceptible to political or gender biases than other potential proxy measures of population proportions, such as voter registrations. For instance, government or opposition activities cannot add or reduce the number of children applying for NPSE exams.

Figure 1 on the following page contains maps that compare the district-level proportions of the population from the 2015 Census, the 2021 Mid-Term Census, BCG vaccines administered, and NPSE candidates.

Figure 1: District-Level Comparison of Census Results with Data from NPSE and BCG Vaccinations



Our focus of analysis in this section is on the remaining 10 districts that did not align with the figures in the 2015 census. The population share of three of the districts: Bonthe (4%), Kono (8%) and Pujehun (6%) in the mid-term census provisional results is lower than the share of children that took the BCG vaccine and the NPSE candidates. It will be helpful for Stats SL to provide micro data on these districts to understand the actual school enrolment rate and better understand this variance. Already Bonthe is the only district that reported more women than men in this provisional results. Which means there could be more in the details. The results of districts such as Bombali (5%), Bo (10%), Kenema (10%) and Falaba (2%) are all within the margin of error of the demographic estimates of children vaccinated and NPSE candidates.

The population results for Freetown (8%) surprised many commentators (See [Yusuf Bangura's commentary](#) as an example and the press release by National Elections Watch (NEW)). Our analysis also shows a sizeable variance between the city's 8% share of the population compared to the average 15.3% share of NPSE candidates and vaccine results combined. In preparing this brief we saw no available record that could help citizens to understand the demographic changes happening in Freetown. We can only give anecdotal explanation for this variance. Freetown has a higher concentration of quality schools, and parents from outside, known as Greater Freetown (the environs of the city) send their children to these schools. In other words, a significant share of the school children taking NPSE and people seeking medical treatment travel from the Western Rural communities to access these services. It is the case that a good share of Freetown's large population seen during the day are not necessarily

Freetonians at night. The city remains the centre of commerce and employment, and so many people who work and trade in Freetown commute to the city and reside in Western Rural communities, such as Imatt, Goderich, Regent, Fourah Bay College, Allen Town, Waterloo, etc. It is interesting to note that in the lead up to the 2018 elections, aspirants of both APC (Mayor Aki-Sawyerr) and SLPP (Raymond De Souza George) were petitioned by other internal party candidates to be disqualified for not being ordinarily residents in Freetown... but living in the Western Rural district. In the absence of an independent research evidence on the population dynamics and demographic changes in Freetown it will be hard to validate the census results. However, one thing is clear, there are many homes reporting on social media that they were not covered.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

It is disappointing that a country with such an acute shortage of reliable statistics can spend over \$20m on two censuses within seven years only to end up in boycotts and controversies over results, and sadly, with no one to be held accountable. Since 2015 political actors have failed to see the importance of a census beyond the allocation of constituencies and amassing votes at the expense of laying a solid basis for planning. There are clear roles for Stats SL, Political parties, CSOs and development partners in helping to depoliticise the census and promoting a more constructive conversations on the way forward.

Stats SL needs to take urgent steps to regain citizens confidence in the census results. One action we recommend is to provide an estimate of the effect of the opposition boycott on the census coverage and explain how it was corrected, if at all, in the provisional results. Similar feedback should be provided to allay the fears of citizens who say their homes were not visited. Stats SL should also take steps to ensure that the post enumeration survey is inclusive and key opposition actors are adequately informed and involved in the process.

If it turns out that portions of the country were undercounted due to noncooperation stemming from party leaders' rhetoric – this could mark a dangerous cycle where even participating in the census is seen as a political act with consequences that include fewer public services and less political representation. This, in turn, could foment public discontent, regional strife, and instability. Partisan actions that undermine the census — either through manipulating results while in power or non-cooperation when in opposition — are driven by unchecked private incentives. The challenge for Sierra Leonean citizens and civil society is to demand greater accountability and performance from our own leaders. Then the equilibrium will shift away from seeking private gain and toward the public good.

Linked to the points above, in difficult moments such as the current situation, Sierra Leone had always counted on the support of its international partners. International missions in 2000s had played a vital role as a neutral convenor and were successful in creating common ground solutions that fostered the consensus that created peace and stability for Sierra Leone. International partners continue to be very well respected by all sides of the political divide. That clout and authority will be most useful if members of the international community work with both sides to have a genuine conversation on integrity of democratic institutions including the responsible role of opposition actors in maintaining peace and stability.

Finally, giving the controversies around Freetown figures, a detailed study is recommended to understand the changes in population dynamics in the capital.