

REVIEW ARTICLE



The EU in Governance and Economic Development in Sierra Leone

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Received: January 01, 2026
Accepted: February 20, 2026
Published: March 15, 2026

Abstract: This study examines the European Union's (EU) intervention in governance and economic development in Sierra Leone, with particular attention to its contributions to peacebuilding, institutional reform, socio-economic development, and structural transformation. Drawing on qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources, including policy documents, institutional reports, and relevant academic literature, the study situates EU engagement within broader theoretical perspectives on governance and economic development. The findings indicate that EU support has played a significant role in post-conflict stabilization through disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes, transitional justice mechanisms, and electoral assistance. In the sphere of governance and institutional reform, EU interventions have contributed to strengthening public financial management, decentralization, and institutional accountability. Sectoral support in education, health, and agriculture has enhanced service delivery and capacity building, while infrastructure, trade, and sustainability initiatives have supported economic recovery and regional integration. However, structural constraints — including bureaucratic inefficiency, limited local capacity, political instability, and donor dependency — continue to affect the long-term sustainability of these interventions. The study concludes that although EU engagement has positively influenced governance structures and development processes in Sierra Leone, sustained institutional strengthening, local ownership, and accountability mechanisms remain essential to ensuring inclusive and durable development outcomes.

Keywords: EU, Intervention, Governance, Economic development, Sierra Leone.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the European Union (EU)'s intervention in governance and economic development in Sierra Leone, using specific indicators such as peacebuilding, democracy, the rule of law, education, health, agriculture, infrastructure, trade, monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability to assess the impact of such intervention.

The EU is a political and economic union of 27 European countries established to promote regional integration, economic cooperation, political stability, and peace. It was created through a series of treaties, most notably the Treaty on European Union (European Union, 1992) and later strengthened by the Treaty of Lisbon (European Union, 2007). The EU operates through a system of supranational institutions and intergovernmental decision-making, enabling member states to collaborate on a wide range of issues, including trade, agriculture, environment, justice, and foreign policy (Craig & De Búrca, 2021; Chalmers et al., 2019; Barnard, 2022).

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As a political and economic union, the EU is one of the most influential actors in global governance, diplomacy, international cooperation, and economic development. Its external actions are guided by values such as democracy, good governance, human rights, the rule of law, and sustainable socio-economic development (European Commission, 2023; Weatherill, 2020).

In West Africa, the EU has played, and continues to play, a prominent role through development aid, trade partnerships, peacebuilding, and governance reforms (European Commission, 2016; European Union External Action Service, 2020). In Sierra Leone, the EU's intervention in governance and economic development has been significant in shaping the country's development trajectory. The EU's engagement has been particularly visible in the aftermath of the civil war, during the recovery phases and the democratization process (International Crisis Group, 2004; European Parliament, 2015). However, the full extent of the EU's contributions in Sierra Leone is not always widely recognized at the national, regional, or global levels. This paper therefore examines the extent to which these interventions have contributed to strengthening governance structures and promoting sustainable economic development in Sierra Leone.

2. METHODOLOGY

To examine the extent to which EU interventions have influenced governance and economic development in Sierra Leone, this study focuses on identifying key areas of engagement and assessing their implications. The objective is to provide a structured analysis of the EU's contribution to governance and sustainable economic development in Sierra Leone and, more broadly, within the African context.

Data for the study were drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consisted mainly of observations and personal interviews. Secondary materials included Acts of Parliament, textbooks, journal articles, reports, and official policy documents accessed online and through relevant ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), as well as other institutions associated with the EU's intervention in governance and economic development in Sierra Leone.

Given that a substantial portion of the data was derived from documentary sources, the study adopts a predominantly qualitative approach to analyze the nature and impact of EU intervention. The analysis is situated within the broader EU policy framework toward Africa, with particular reference to initiatives in peacebuilding, development cooperation, good governance, democracy, the rule of law, post-conflict reconstruction, institutional capacity building, education, health, and agriculture (European Commission, 2016; European Union External Action Service, 2020; UNECA, 2020).

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: GOVERNANCE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

To undertake a critical analysis of the EU's intervention in governance and institutional reforms and their implications for good governance and sustainable economic development in Sierra Leone, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of governance and economic development.

There is no universally accepted definition of governance in political literature. The philosophical roots of the concept can be traced to Plato, who in *The Republic* used the Greek term *kubernao*, meaning "to steer," as a metaphor for guiding or directing society (Plato, 380 BCE/2007). Over time, the concept evolved to describe relationships among stakeholders across different institutional and societal contexts (Hyden et al., 2004; Mkandawire, 2007). In contemporary political and development discourse, governance assumes multiple meanings depending on context and is frequently qualified by adjectives such as "good," "democratic," or "economic" governance (Fukuyama, 2013).

In policy discourse, international institutions provide more operational definitions. The World Bank describes governance as encompassing the processes and structures through which decisions are made and enforced within an organization or society, involving the interaction of laws, social norms, power relations, and communication in shaping social order (World Bank, n.d.). Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme defines governance as the exercise of political, economic, and administrative authority in managing a country's affairs at all levels (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1997). This includes the mechanisms through which citizens and groups articulate interests, mediate dif-

ferences, and exercise legal rights and obligations (UNDP, 1997). In this sense, governance refers to the system of values, policies, and institutions through which a society manages its economic, political, and social affairs through interaction among the state, civil society, and the private sector (UNDP, 1997).

Johnson (1997) further emphasizes that governance fundamentally concerns processes, rules, and organizational structures. It may be examined not only in broad categories such as political, economic, corporate, and socio-economic governance, but also across substantive sectors including education, health, infrastructure, water, natural resources, and constitutional development.

Economic development, in turn, refers to the process of improving the economic well-being and quality of life of a community, region, or nation. It generally involves promoting sustainable growth, fostering innovation, generating employment, and enhancing living conditions. Beyond income expansion, development also encompasses advances in science, technology, and institutional capacity that contribute to broader social and political progress.

Seidman (2005), in *Economic Development Finance*, defines economic development as the utilization of physical, human, financial, and social assets to generate broadly shared well-being and improved quality of life. It is therefore understood not merely as income growth, but as a policy-oriented process aimed at improving social and environmental conditions while expanding opportunities (Seidman, 2005). Economic development thus extends beyond simple growth. Gillis et al. (1992) distinguish economic growth — an increase in national or per capita income and output — from economic development, which involves structural transformation of the economy. Among the most significant structural changes are the increasing share of industry relative to agriculture in national output and the growing proportion of the population residing in urban areas (Gillis et al., 1992).

Countries undergoing economic development often experience demographic transitions, shifting age structures, and evolving consumption patterns. As incomes rise, spending gradually moves beyond basic necessities toward durable goods and services. Crucially, development requires broad participation in both the process and the benefits of economic transformation. Where growth benefits only a narrow segment of society, it cannot be regarded as genuine development (Gillis et al., 1992).

4. EU–SIERRA LEONE RELATIONS: HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

EU–Sierra Leone relations constitute a long-standing partnership spanning more than four decades, guided by the ACP–EU Conventions and subsequent partnership agreements (European Commission, 2016; European Union External Action Service, 2020). This framework has shaped EU engagement across multiple sectors, contributing to governance reforms and economic development initiatives in the country.

Building on the conceptual clarification of governance and economic development, it is now appropriate to situate EU intervention within the Sierra Leonean context and examine its institutional and developmental implications.

Sierra Leone is a small West African country rich in mineral resources, with an estimated population of approximately nine million as of 2026 (World Bank, n.d.). It borders Guinea and Liberia, and Freetown serves as its capital city. The country is ethnically diverse, with the Krio, Mende, Temne, and Limba among its principal groups. English is the official language, while Krio remains widely spoken. Since independence — and particularly following the end of the eleven-year civil war (1991–2002) — Sierra Leone has concentrated on rebuilding its economy and strengthening state institutions, supported by both domestic and international development partners (International Crisis Group, 2004; Government of Sierra Leone, 2019).

5. EU INTERVENTIONS IN SIERRA LEONE

EU intervention refers to the support extended to partner countries within the framework of established cooperation agreements. As in many other African states, the EU has intervened — and continues to intervene — in Sierra Leone across several key sectors. These include peacebuilding, particularly post-war re-

covery, disarmament, transitional justice, and democratization (International Crisis Group, 2004; European Parliament, 2015); governance and institutional reform, including support for the rule of law (UNDP, 1997; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008); education and capacity building (UNICEF Sierra Leone, 2021); health and crisis response; agriculture and food security; infrastructure and rural development; trade and economic development (European Commission, 2021; Gathii, 2011); as well as monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability mechanisms.

At both central and local government levels, EU engagement has promoted decentralization and strengthened local governance through financial and technical assistance to local councils aimed at improving service delivery and citizen participation (European Commission, 2016; UNDP, 1997). As part of this effort, the EU launched a €3.5 million programme to reinforce local governance structures and support civil society organizations.

The EU's Nature Nourishes Programme further illustrates this engagement, providing approximately €65 million in budget support over four years to advance environmental protection, education, and sustainable agriculture (European Union External Action Service, 2020; UNECA, 2020).

5.1. Peacebuilding and Post-conflict Reconstruction

Following the official end of the civil war in 2002, Sierra Leone required substantial international assistance to stabilize the country and rebuild state institutions. The EU contributed to disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes in collaboration with the United Nations and other development partners (International Crisis Group, 2004; European Parliament, 2015). These initiatives facilitated the disarmament and demobilisation of former combatants while supporting their reintegration into society through vocational training and psychosocial assistance.

Transitional justice constituted another key dimension of peacebuilding. In this context, the EU supported the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), both established to address war crimes and promote national reconciliation. Through financial and diplomatic backing, the EU contributed to strengthening accountability and post-conflict justice mechanisms (International Crisis Group, 2004).

Sustained engagement in democratization and electoral processes further reinforced post-conflict recovery. EU assistance included financial and technical support to the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the deployment of Election Observation Missions (EOMs), civic education initiatives, and measures aimed at enhancing civil society participation. These interventions sought to reinforce adherence to rule-of-law principles such as legality, non-discrimination, separation of powers, judicial independence, transparency, and accountability (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008; UNDP, 1997). EU Election Observation Missions were deployed during several electoral cycles (2002, 2007, 2012, and 2018), offering recommendations to improve transparency and credibility in the electoral process (European Union External Action Service, 2020).

5.2. Governance and Institutional Reform

EU intervention in governance and institutional reform in Sierra Leone has been substantial. In this area, support has focused on strengthening democratic institutions, including the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone, and enhancing public financial management systems (Brinkerhoff, 2000). These efforts have involved measures to improve fiscal discipline, revenue mobilization, and budget oversight, alongside the provision of technical assistance and budget support aligned with national development priorities, including the Medium-Term National Development Plan (Government of Sierra Leone, 2020; European Commission, 2020).

5.3. Socio-economic Development Interventions

In the area of education and capacity building, the EU provided technical and financial assistance to strengthen the capacity of Parliament and the Audit Service. Support also extended to basic and secondary

education through funding for teacher training, school infrastructure, learning materials, and gender inclusion initiatives (European Commission, 2016; UNICEF Sierra Leone, 2021).

The health sector represents another significant area of engagement. Assistance to the Ministry of Health (MOH) included support for the construction and rehabilitation of health facilities, as well as the training of health personnel. During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU provided emergency assistance to reinforce the national health response in Sierra Leone (Kandeh, 2008; European Parliament, 2015; European Union External Action Service, 2020).

Agriculture and food security have consistently remained national priorities in Sierra Leone. EU interventions aligned with these priorities through programmes such as Boosting Agriculture and Food Security (BAFS), which promoted agricultural value chains — including rice, cocoa, and palm oil — while strengthening the capacity of farmers and cooperatives (European Commission, 2021; Government of Sierra Leone, 2019).

5.3. Economic Development and Structural Support

In the area of infrastructure and rural development, the EU funded road rehabilitation projects, renewable energy initiatives, and rural electrification programmes designed to improve connectivity and access to basic services (European Commission, 2016; UNECA, 2020).

Trade and economic development constituted another important dimension of intervention. Support included diplomatic engagement and development-oriented trade policies, as well as regional integration initiatives aimed at expanding market access and strengthening economic cooperation (European Commission, 2021; Gathii, 2011; Asante, 1997; Balassa, 2013).

Monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability have also formed part of EU engagement. The EU has maintained structured oversight mechanisms for funded projects and programmes, including technical assistance and performance assessments intended to enhance accountability and long-term sustainability (European Commission, 2023; World Bank, n.d.).

6. IMPACT ANALYSIS

EU intervention in governance and economic development in Sierra Leone has had measurable implications for political stabilization, institutional reform, and socio-economic transformation. An assessment of this impact must be situated within the conceptual understanding of governance as institutional effectiveness, accountability, and participation (UNDP, 1997; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008), and of economic development as structural transformation and broadly shared well-being (Gillis et al., 1992; Seidman, 2005).

6.1. Impact on Peacebuilding and Democratic Consolidation

In the immediate post-conflict period, EU support for disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR), as well as transitional justice mechanisms such as the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, contributed to political stabilization and institutional rebuilding (International Crisis Group, 2004). These interventions helped reduce the risk of renewed conflict and strengthened accountability mechanisms in the post-war environment.

Support for electoral processes, including financial assistance to the National Electoral Commission and the deployment of EU Election Observation Missions, contributed to improving transparency and procedural credibility in successive elections (European Union External Action Service, 2020). While challenges remain, these measures reinforced rule-of-law principles and democratic governance standards consistent with international norms (UNDP, 1997).

6.2. Impact on Governance and Institutional Reform

EU assistance in public financial management, decentralization, and institutional strengthening has contributed to improving fiscal oversight, budget discipline, and administrative capacity. Support for local

councils and civil society organizations enhanced participatory governance and citizen engagement at subnational levels (European Commission, 2016).

From a governance perspective, such reforms align with the understanding of good governance as institutional accountability, transparency, and effectiveness (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008; World Bank, n.d.). Although structural inefficiencies persist, EU-supported reforms have strengthened formal institutional frameworks and oversight mechanisms.

6.3. Impact on Social and Human Development

In the education and health sectors, EU interventions supported infrastructure development, capacity building, and service delivery improvements. Investments in teacher training, school infrastructure, and gender inclusion contributed to expanding educational access (UNICEF Sierra Leone, 2021). In the health sector, assistance for facility rehabilitation and emergency pandemic response strengthened institutional resilience during periods of crisis (European Union External Action Service, 2020).

Agricultural programmes aimed at enhancing food security and strengthening value chains supported rural livelihoods and productive capacity (European Commission, 2021). These interventions reflect an asset-based approach to development consistent with Seidman's (2005) understanding of economic development as the enhancement of human and institutional capacity.

6.4. Impact on Economic Development and Structural Transformation

EU-supported infrastructure projects, renewable energy initiatives, and trade cooperation contributed to improving connectivity, market access, and regional integration (Gathii, 2011; UNECA, 2020). From a structural perspective, such interventions support the conditions necessary for economic transformation as described by Gillis et al. (1992), particularly through facilitating industrial growth and urban integration.

Moreover, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms embedded within EU-funded programmes strengthened accountability and sustainability frameworks (European Commission, 2023). While long-term structural transformation remains ongoing, these measures have contributed to creating an enabling environment for inclusive growth.

7. CHALLENGES AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Despite the significant contributions of the EU to governance and economic development in Sierra Leone, several challenges have constrained the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of these interventions. These constraints stem largely from institutional and structural limitations within the domestic governance framework.

Bureaucratic inefficiency represents one such challenge. Delays and reduced effectiveness in government operations often arise from complex administrative procedures, excessive regulation, weak coordination, and limited accountability mechanisms. Such conditions may result in resource wastage and diminished public trust in institutions (Mkandawire, 2007; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). Contributing factors include unnecessary procedural steps, unclear lines of responsibility, weak interdepartmental communication, and regulatory burdens that slow policy implementation.

Limited local capacity constitutes another structural constraint. This involves gaps in skills, institutional resources, and technical expertise within local bodies responsible for implementing development programmes. Manifestations include insufficient trained personnel, inadequate financial and technological resources, and weak institutional systems (Hyden et al., 2004; UNDP, 1997). In response, EU-supported initiatives have frequently incorporated capacity-building measures to strengthen institutional performance and improve service delivery (European Commission, 2016).

Political instability also poses a continuing challenge. Situations in which governance systems are uncertain or unstable may generate unrest, protests, or security concerns, thereby discouraging investment and development. Indicators may include leadership instability, civil unrest, policy unpredictability, and

broader security risks (Fukuyama, 2013; World Bank, n.d.). EU engagement has therefore emphasized the strengthening of democratic institutions and the promotion of peace, good governance, and adherence to the rule of law (European Union External Action Service, 2020; UNDP, 1997).

Donor dependency remains an additional concern. Heavy reliance on foreign aid to finance national budgets and development programmes can create vulnerabilities, including unpredictability of aid flows, limited domestic ownership of development strategies, and potential external influence over policy priorities (Mkandawire, 2007; Hyden et al., 2004). In Sierra Leone, EU support has been substantial, particularly in the post-conflict period following the end of the civil war in 2002 (European Commission, 2016; International Crisis Group, 2004).

CONCLUSION

In light of the challenges identified above, several measures warrant consideration to strengthen governance and economic development in Sierra Leone. The Government of Sierra Leone, in collaboration with development partners, should prioritize reinforcing institutional frameworks, promoting greater local ownership of development initiatives, enhancing monitoring and evaluation systems, and deepening cooperation between the EU and civil society organizations (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019; European Commission, 2023). Sustained attention to accountability and institutional effectiveness remains central to preserving and extending development gains (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

The EU continues to represent a strategic development partner for Sierra Leone, given its broad sectoral contributions to peacebuilding, democratic consolidation, governance reform, and economic development (European Union External Action Service, 2020; European Commission, 2016). Continued EU–Sierra Leone cooperation will remain important for advancing institutional stability, inclusive growth, and long-term sustainable development outcomes.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Not applicable.

FUNDING

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author confirms that this article's content has no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication was produced within the framework of the European Interdisciplinary Studies in Sierra Leone (EU4SL) project, funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Actions (Project Reference Number: 101176668).

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