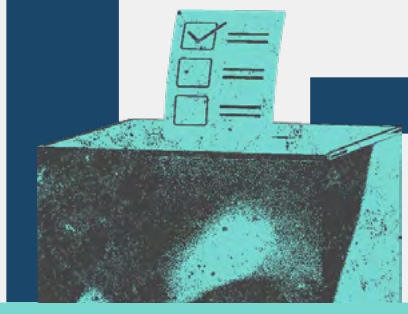


SIERRA LEONE





YOUTH VOTER REGISTRATION COSTS & CHALLENGES SIERRA LEONE

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Civic Engagement

Youth, which in Sierra Leone refers to people in the 15- to 35-year-old age bracket, make up over a third of the total population and constitute the most significant electoral constituency. However, several structural and administrative barriers persist that restrict young people's participation in elections and broader political life.

Many of the problems currently associated with voter registration in Sierra Leone can be ascribed to an incomplete transition from an active model to a voter register extracted from the recently established civil registry system. Sierra Leone has made significant progress towards a more efficient and integrated voter registration system by linking voter registration to the civil register: however, ensuring comprehensive coverage, data accuracy and public confidence in the process remains a work in progress. Strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing public awareness and investing in technology are crucial for improving voter registration and fostering democratic participation. As the current operational procedures do not fully reflect the reality of the new integrated system, the National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) has undertaken extensive consultations which culminated into draft legislation that has been tabled to parliament. The NCRA plans to introduce a national identity card have been actualized. Nevertheless current procedures, and the complex inter-institutional arrangements they are the result of, remain largely unknown to young citizens, may be time-consuming and constitute a disincentive for first-time voters.

The other main obstacle for first-time voters, who, despite the existence of the civil register, are required to register in person upon reaching adulthood, is the difficulty some young people face in obtaining the necessary documentation. The issuance of birth certificates while it can be demanded to obtain civil registration status and consequently access voter registration, still present particular practical challenges.

The other main barriers to youth voter registration are the lack of information resulting from insufficient investment in voter education on the part of the election management body. A common theme in observation reports is that registrants are often unaware of the administrative requirements, particularly when confronted with legal changes or procedural innovations.

It is to be hoped that Sierra Leone completes its transition to a fully civil-register-based system, integrated with the new national identity card, in a manner that will streamline the registration process for all voters.

This paper contextualises the discussion of youth and voter registration in the larger context of the challenges stemming from the 2018 and 2023 electoral cycles, when the biometric civil and voter registration system was introduced. It first outlines the legal and institutional framework governing voter registration, then provides an analysis of the experiences faced by youth during recent voter registration efforts. The concluding section looks into civic and voter education in Sierra Leone and explores its implications for youth voter registration.

Background

The electoral legal framework for voter registration is constituted primarily by the 1991 Constitution, the Public Elections Act of 2012, the Civil Registration Act of 2016, the Public Elections Act of 2022 as amended and the Local Government Act of 2022 as amended.

Since the resumption of multi-party democratic elections in Sierra Leone in 1996, and in accordance with the 1991 Constitution, the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) is responsible for election management and voter registration. Following the adoption of the National Civil Registration Act of 2016 and the NCRA establishment, Sierra Leone now has an integrated system where the civil register forms the basis of the voter register and responsibilities and tasks are shared between the two institutions. The NCRA is responsible for registering births, deaths, adoptions, marriages and divorces, and for maintaining a civil registration database. This database serves as the basis for issuing identity documents and for voter registration.

The civil register contains data on the vital statistics of all citizens and resident foreigners, including biometric information such as fingerprints and photos. For every electoral cycle,, the data of eligible citizens, those aged 18 or over, is extracted from the civil register to form the voter register. The ECLS cross-checks the data to ensure that only eligible voters (citizens over the age of 18 and who are not legally disqualified) are included.

This integrated system requires first-time voters to be included in the civil register during designated registration periods by presenting identification documents. At the same time, their biometric and demographic data are collected and added to the voter register. Their data is transferred to the ECSL for inclusion in the provisional voter register. During the verification period, the provisional voter register is published at registration centres and online, after which voters are encouraged to verify their personal details at the assigned polling centre. Claims or objections can be submitted at the registration centres before the final voter register is published. This results in a three-phase ECSL registration: the field data capture (registration), the publication of the provisional voter register (exhibition) for corrections, objections and inclusions and the inquiry process, where persons whose registration was objected to are given a hearing to determine whether they should be retained in the register or removed. The collection of voter identification cards follows. In the 2023 elections, there were a total of 3,374,258 registered voters on the final voter register.

The current implementation of the system is complicated. While the voter register is derived from the civil register, the ECSL proactively updates it through a voter registration exercise ahead of elections. However, only the NCRA can make changes to personal information, which is a lengthy process for registrants and requires a comprehensive voter information campaign. Those in the Sierra Leonean diaspora or outside the country during the registration window cannot be included in the voter register, making them ineligible to vote. Additionally, there are no provisions for registering prisoners on remand (who are eligible to vote) or individuals with reduced mobility, as the law mandates that registrants must be physically present at the centres. Furthermore, individuals whose information has already been recorded by the NCRA and who were on the voter register for past elections must confirm their entries to be included in the voter lists for each subsequent election to verify specific data subsets, such as their place of residence .

The Carter Centre election observation mission considered "burdensome" the requirement for eligible citizens, whose names already appeared in the civil register, to present themselves in person at indicated locations and dates to confirm their data.[1] It was seen as essentially in conflict with a system which extracts the voter register from the civil register.

Although not a legal requirement for voter identification, voter ID cards are issued by the ECSL for each election. The photographs on the voter ID cards produced for the 2023 election were of poor quality, making verification of the identity of many voters difficult. This issue was compounded by problems with the quality of voter photos on the voter lists in polling stations. An electronic copy of the voter register, including voters' names, photos and polling centres, was provided to political parties a little over a fortnight before the election, but polling-station-level data was not made available.[2]

1 The Carter Center, Final Report General Elections in Sierra Leone June 24, 2023 (Atlanta: The Carter Center, 2023), 30.

2 European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM), Final Report Republic of Sierra Leone General Elections 24 June 2023 (Freetown: EU-EOM Sierra Leone, 2024), 18,

By law, every citizen of Sierra Leone who is at least 18 years old and of sound mind has the right to vote unless serving a prison sentence or convicted of a non-custodial electoral offence.[3] Although the voting population is predominantly young, there are age limits for candidacy: 21 years for members of parliament and local councillors and 45 years for the presidency.

Voter registration in Sierra Leone requires high interistitutional coordination, incorporating features of both active and passive models. The division of responsibilities between the electoral management body (ECSL) and the civil registry (NCRA) remains central to this model., particularly as Sierra Leone moves forward with the issuance of a national ID card.

During the 2018 electoral cycle, the ECLS took the lead in the joint civic and voter registration exercise, utilising the NCRA's facilities and infrastructure to transmit field data to the NCRA server. This data was then sent to the ECSL as the basis for the provisional voter register. Due to the long queues on the final day, the initial 28-day registration schedule was extended by an additional 14 days, increasing the cost of the exercise.

The voter registration exercise for 2023 was conducted jointly by the NCRA and the ECSL under Section 33 of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone and Section 24 of the Public Election Act 2012 and took place from 3 September to 4 October 2022. Given that the law mandates a 15-day period for voter registration, the 2023 exercise was carried out in two phases, with a total of 3,630 registration centres involved. The first phase, encompassing 1,815 centres, occurred from 3 to 17 September 2022, while the second phase was carried out in the remaining 1,815 centres from 20 September to 4 October 2022. Challenges faced during the first phase necessitated a two-day extension of the deadline.

This lack of clear legal delineation of responsibilities is problematic. Section 33 of the 1991 Constitution mandates the ECSL as the authority responsible for voter registration.[4] Whereas the National Civil Registration Act of 2016, section 14 (a) mandates the NCRA as the authority responsible for registrations. The resulting overlap between the two institutions led to unclear messages for voters and necessitated extensions to voter registration timelines.[5] The ECSL and the NCRA signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for both the 2018 and 2023 elections on cooperation to ensure that data extraction from the civil register was compliant with the provisions of the Public Elections Act. During the 2022 registration process, a desk was set up in the registration centre to enable the NCRA to register individuals not already in their database, perform deduplication and then transfer the data to the voter register. There is, therefore, a need to amend the provisions in the 1991 Constitution and the Public Elections Act, particularly parts III and IV, to establish a continuous voter registration process to align it with the current NCRA practice The difficulty associated with the requirement for registrants to confirm their data in person at the registration centre should be alleviated. The process should be simplified to reduce the need for repeat visits to registration centres.

Since the enactment of the 2016 National Civil Registration Act, only citizens registered in the civil register are eligible for inclusion in the voter register. Communication with the public was not effectively coordinated between the two institutions, resulting in unclear explanations regarding voter registration issues that undermined trust in the accuracy and integrity of the voter register.

Furthermore, voters were not allowed to correct errors in the voter register stemming from the civil register, such as misspelt names or incorrect dates of birth. The failure of some voters to rectify these errors with the NCRA adversely affected the accuracy of the voter register. The issues related to blurred or missing photos on the voter cards continued to foster mistrust throughout the 2023 electoral process, despite the ECSL's efforts to tackle the situation (an application for voters to verify their data was developed, certificates were provided to concerned voters and approximately 6,000 photographs were recaptured during voter card distribution).

Despite these setbacks, there is still a consensus that the civil registration system offers the best and most efficient means for compiling the voter register.



3 Constitution of Sierra Leone, Sec 31.

4 The 1991 constitution of Sierra Leone provides in Chapter iv, section 38 (8) that "the registration of voters and the conduct of elections in every constituency shall be subject to the direction and supervision of the Electoral Commission, and it shall cause the register of voters to be revised and reviewed at least once in every three years".

5 In advance of the 2022 voter registration process, the political parties raised objections to the NCRA playing a leading role in voter registration. The Attorney General and Minister of Justice clarified that, since the constitution is silent on the source of data, the NCRA will register all residents in the country and that the ECSL will then extract data from the civil registry as its primary source for the voter register.

Voter Registration Costs

Detailed information on electoral costs is not available[6] and, as the ECSL declined to be interviewed for this research, no data is available on the costs of voter registration as a proportion of total electoral costs. The government of Sierra Leone allocated SLE 349.5 billion to the ECSL for the 2023 elections, but no breakdowns into cost categories were provided. Additionally, ECOWAS provided a grant of USD 500,000 to support the electoral process and other financial support was provided by donors, particularly the basket fund managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Although there are no detailed budget breakdowns in the public domain, the available data suggests that a considerable share of the election budget was dedicated to voter registration, as well as the acquisition of biometric equipment[7] and logistics. For the 2023 elections, contracts totalling approximately USD 10 million were stipulated for supplying biometric voter registration equipment and solar-powered generators.[8]

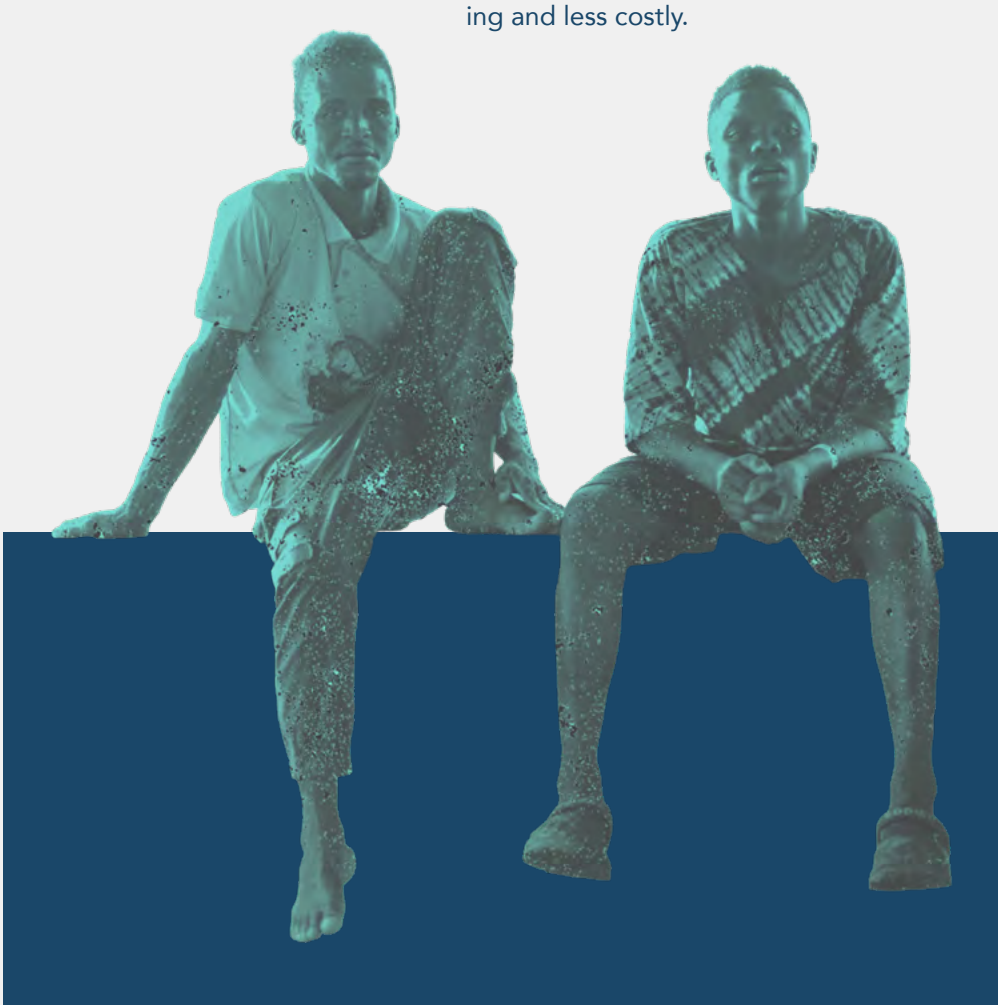
The Ministry of Finance facilitated budgetary allocations through the National Election Sustainability Trust Fund (NEST) account at the Bank of Sierra Leone. Money was deposited in this account to eliminate the disbursement bottlenecks that had hampered the ECSL in past elections.[9] The budget also covered data transfer costs.

The ECSL internal audit, conducted through the Ministry of Finance, verifies voter registration expenditure. Additionally, parliament verifies voter registration budgets, as it is the body ultimately responsible for appropriating funds for government institutions. The Elections Steering Committee indirectly verifies voter registration expenditure by development partners through various funding windows. As is the case with all government agencies, the Ministry of Finance and the Accountant General's Office oversee expenditures.

The supreme audit institution, the Audit Service Sierra Leone, audits the ECSL's processes and accounts. If funds are not adequately accounted for or expenditures lack supporting documents, the Anti-Corruption Commission carries out investigations.

Sierra Leone has significantly increased its investment in electoral processes over the years, demonstrating its commitment to enhancing the credibility and efficiency of elections through the adoption of new technology, including biometrics. The cost of voter registration remains substantial, highlighting the need for strategic planning and procurement to achieve cost-effectiveness.

Despite the setbacks in the voter registration process in 2017 and 2022, there is still a widespread consensus that a fully functioning civil registration system will make the voter registration process more efficient, much less time-consuming and less costly.



6 The link to the financial report on the relevant page of the ECLS website is not operational.

7 Frank Hersey,"Sierra Leone seeks supplier of biometric voter kits and system ahead of 2023 elections," Biometric Update", March 2, 2022, .

8 Chernoh Alpha M. Bah, Matthew Anderson, and Mark Feldman, "Sierra Leone: Equipment and software irregularities affect voter registration despite about US$10 million government procurement expenditures," Africanist Press, September 12, 2022

9 Delays in disbursement of funds impacted the management of voter registration for the 2018 elections, resulting in huge logistical challenges including movement of registration materials and staff and delayed payment to registration and other ad-hoc staff, vendors and contractors and even full-time employees of the ECLS.

Case Study

A voter resident in the capital city, Freetown, goes to his home town in another region to register because he wants to vote for a candidate who is running there. After completing voter registration in his home town, he returns to Freetown and waits for the exhibition period of the provisional voter register. He travels a second time to his home town to verify that his details are correct. He returns to the capital city and waits for the distribution of the voter ID card and travels a third time to collect his voter ID. He will have to travel a fourth time to vote and in the event of a second round of election, a fifth trip will be necessary to fulfil his right to vote. Not all voters are as motivated to vote as he is.

A 19-year-old first time voter who was not on the 2017 voter register, completes the civil registration procedures in 2021. He goes to the registration center to register for the 2023 elections but the electoral commission notes that some details are missing from his civil register entry. His age is questioned because he is quite short and he is asked to go provide a birth certificate, which he does not have. He goes to the civil registration authority and, after a complex process, gets a birth certificate, which he takes to the registration centre and he is then registered. During the duplication process he is accused of having registered twice and is handed over to the police for prosecution. The details, which were not in the data extracted from the civil register, now show up during duplication. His young friends and relatives decide registration is not worth the risk.



Barriers to Youth Voter Registration

The experiences of young people with voter registration have been mixed and require nuanced analysis. During the 2018 and 2023 elections, young people participated in the registration exercise as election officials, domestic observers, political party agents and civic educators, as well as registrants. Sierra Leone's leading citizen election observation group, National Election Watch (NEW), reported that voter registration staff were mostly young and that there was a visible gender balance.[10]

Data released by the ECSL for the 2022 voter registration exercise only captured districts, gender and voters registered as persons with disabilities (PWDs). It was not disaggregated by age. (see Figure 1 below). Of the 3,374,258 voters in the 2023 elections, 1,759,529 were women and 22,385 were PWDs.

Gender and disability analysis of final voter registration figures

No	Districts	Male	Female	District	Total Disability	Disability %
1	Kailahun	91,340 (47,18%)	102,238 (52,82%)	193,578 (5,74%)	1,189	0,61%
2	Kenema	153,426 (48,25%)	164,552 (51,75%)	317,978 (9,42%)	2,628	0,83%
3	Kono	88,724 (50,93%)	85,481 (49,07%)	174,205 (5,16%)	1,221	0,70%
4	Bombali	95,222 (46,17%)	111,028 (53,83%)	206,250 (6,11%)	1,738	0.84%
5	Falaba	31,844 (46,07%)	37,284 (53,93%)	69,128 (2,05%)	357	0.52%
6	Koinadugu	39,561 (46,40%)	45,697 (53,60%)	85,258 (2,53%)	506	0.59%
7	Tonkolili	94,272 (45,47%)	113,070 (54,53%)	207,342 (6,14%)	1,601	0.77%
8	Kambia	70,041 (45,91%)	82,508 (54,09%)	152,549 (4,52%)	992	0.65%
9	Karene	45,405 (45,34%)	54,740 (54,66%)	100,145 (2,97%)	907	0.91%
10	Port Loko	106,848 (45,10%)	130,075 (54,90%)	236,923 (7,02%)	1,503	0.63%
11	Bo	150,563 (47,41%)	167,022 (52,59%)	317,585 (9,41%)	1,699	0.53%
12	Bonthe	51,007 (47,44%)	56,525 (52,56%)	107,532 (3,19%)	848	0.79%
13	Moyamba	68,374 (45,52%)	81,836 (54,48%)	150,210 (4,45%)	1,440	0.96%
14	Pujehun	56,968 (49,20%)	58,821 (50,80%)	115,789 (3,43%)	1,296	1.12%
15	Western Area Rural	166,243 (48,64%)	175,521 (51,36%)	341,764 (10,13%)	1,990	0.58%
16	Western Area Urban	304,891 (50,98%)	293,131 (49,02%)	598,022 (17,72%)	2,470	0.41%
	NATIONAL TOTAL	1,614,729 (47,85%)	1,759,529 (52,15%)	3,374,258	22,385	0,66%

Figure 3. Voter turnout for the 2023 general election (Source: ECSL)

Standard barriers to voter registration, especially for those living in isolated areas, include distance to registration and civil registration centres, inadequate transportation and lack of mobile registration units in rural and remote areas. Access to registration and voter register exhibition centres was also challenging for some young people, for example, students in boarding schools could not visit the exhibition locations to check the provisional voter list during holiday periods.

Voter registration is itself free of charge. There is no fee and ECSL registration centres are established in communities all across the country. However, some isolated communities still lack ready access due to distance or topographic barriers. There are several indirect costs which can be burdensome for some voters. For example, first-time voters or individuals whose age cannot be easily verified may be required to produce birth certificates, which are not always readily available. Alternatives, such as attestations from community or religious leaders, may have cost implications in terms of transportation and payment for the attestation itself. Additionally, individuals who, due to employment, study or other commitments, do not reside in their home area will be required to travel and register in their residence locations, if they wish to vote there. This results in multiple trips: for registration, verification during the exhibition period, collecting their voter identity cards, and finally, voting. This makes the voter registration process expensive and time-consuming. Those with online access could, however, check their voter registration details on the ECSL Android mobile application when this was belatedly made operational. The loss of time from work or school is also a barrier to registration.

10 National Election Watch (NEW), "Press Statement on Phase One of the Voter Registration Exercise", September 7, 2022

These costs are a particular burden for those from poorer households. Documentation of residency can be problematic for students or internal migrants. Due to travel costs, voter registration is not a realistic option for many young diaspora voters, and there is no provision for out-of-country registration or voting.

In addition to these indirect costs, several barriers to youth registration are typical of Sierra Leone, including bureaucratic and administrative obstacles. As Sierra Leone's voter register is generated from the NCRA civil register database, first-time voters must first register with the NCRA and obtain a National Identification Number (NIN). Bureaucratic delays and inefficiencies in the civil registration process can result in eligible youth being excluded from the voter register.

Another major administrative challenge for first-time voters is defective registration of vital statistics at birth, resulting in citizens without records or birth certificates. This is often the result of a historical lack of registration infrastructure in rural communities. Defective birth certificates also greatly complicate the verification process. Whilst there are no reliable estimates of the number of people affected, there were reported instances where registrants presented falsified birth certificates and multiple birth certificates, which posed difficulties for inexperienced ECSL staff. Some first-time voters who lacked a birth certificate or a valid national identity card found it challenging to register. These potential voters were asked to visit the NCRA office to register, resulting in renunciations. Despite legal provisions for traditional or religious authorities or community elders to attest to the applicant's age, these attestations were not always accepted by the authorities, possibly because this non-documentary process is open to abuse, including underage voting.

Some youth allegedly did not show up for registration because of reported arrests of young would-be registrants deemed to be underage or with questionable documentation.[11] In general, first-time voters not in possession of authentic birth certificates faced difficulties in verifying their age.

For the 2022 voter registration exercise, the database was not programmed to capture applicants who would turn 18 by election day (June 24, 2023). This was a significant concern during the first few days of the registration exercise, but was eventually addressed by the ECSL. Additionally, an earlier school-based civil registration process was undertaken by NCRA; however, the data was not timely entered into the system, resulting in most of these young people having to re-register with NCRA.

Most young people use voter identification cards to access education, employment and banking services, although this is set to change. The government established March 2024 as the deadline by which the national identification card issued by the NCRA will become the exclusive means of accessing state services. This is viewed as a positive step towards resolving the issue of undocumented citizens and the problems associated with personal attestations from traditional and religious leaders. This deadline was subsequently extended to 31 December 2024.

Another administrative obstacle is that voter cards are not issued at the moment of data capture and registration, but only upon a follow-up visit to the registration centres or district offices of the ECSL. While the ECSL claims that most centres are within walking distance of the communities where citizens reside, evidence has emerged of politicians and other influential individuals busing citizens from their constituencies to distant registration sites for easier access to registration. Otherwise, transportation is not provided for voters to collect their voter cards, resulting in uncollected cards at ECSL offices.

The interference of adults, particularly politicians and party activists, in the political engagement of young people is a significant concern. Economically disadvantaged young people are paid to cause targeted disruption, attack opponents during the campaig[12] or are induced to falsify their age in order to vote or to register multiple times.

When the ECSL released the provisional list of 3,374,258 registered voters for the 2023 elections, 607 underage voters (0,018%) were identified. This prompted an investigation by the Sierra Leone police. Underage and duplicate registrations are significant concerns in communities where political parties urge parents to permit their children or wards to be exploited for electoral malpractice. In rural areas, underage girls with babies are permitted to register before they turn 18, as traditionally, such girls are considered women. In a meeting convened by the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) in August 2022, political party leaders agreed to inform their members and supporters about the legal consequences for multiple or underage registrations. A stern warning was issued by the Chief Electoral Commissioner ahead of the 2022 registration process, stating that "… those who intend to do or encourage double or underage registration should not attempt because they will be caught and prosecuted."[13]

The lack of robust and coordinated voter education, noted above, is a disincentive to youth registration. In recent elections, the overall lack of operational clarity about the division of institutional responsibilities between the ECSL and the NCRA resulted in confusion and diminished trust among registrants. There is a need for enhancement of voter education and information in general, but even more so in view of the introduction of new national identity cards.

11 National Election Watch (NEW) "Press Statement".

12 EU-EOM, Final Report Republic of Sierra Leone General Elections 24 June 2023, 32.

13 "Press Statement by Chief Electoral Commissioner and Chairman on the update of field data capture," ECSL, September 14, 2022

Youth Voter Registration Initiatives

Electoral threat assessments for Sierra Leone identify violence as the primary concern. Consequently, nonviolence has been the focus of most election-related youth initiatives. Young people, particularly first-time voters, are the target group for advocacy for peaceful and participatory elections, which aims to empower youth to resist exploitation by politicians for violent or other disruptive acts during elections. National and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in this area include the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), which has a regional non-violence and peace education programme (NAPE)[14] to promote peer-to-peer mediation, peace clubs in schools, and peace education curricula at various levels; the Centre for Coordination of Youth Activities (CCYA), a Sierra Leonean youth-serving NGO, works to reduce levels of violence, as well as alcohol and substance abuse among youth, while also supporting youth empowerment and participation;[15] and Talking Drum Studio (TDS) which promotes peace and inclusion through radio and television, participatory theatre and dialogue activities.[16]

The ECSL conducts voter education at various stages of the electoral process to support effective and informed participation in elections. This involves some messaging on youth inclusion. As there is no legally mandated timeline for voter education and information dissemination, the ECSL has been recommended to address this through regulation and to develop a new electoral cycle voter information strategy in the first year of each electoral cycle.[17]

ECSL voter education focuses on operational aspects, such as how to mark the ballot and where and how citizens can register to vote. In the 2023 elections, the ECSL utilised radio and television ads, videos, animations, songs and jingles (broadcast in 12 languages on local radio stations) along with posters for its voter education and information messaging. Election observers, however, noted that the penetration was, at best, uneven and insufficient in rural areas. They found that voters were "not often" aware that civil registration was a prerequisite for voting.[18] The report of the prestigious cross-party committee established after the 2023 elections found that "while ECSL does provide some voter information, it is not timely or comprehensive…[and] the quantity of voter information initiatives has declined" over recent elections. The cross-party committee also recommended that the ECSL "devote more resources to the provision of voter information as per Public Elections Act Section 7(1)(e) and (g) and improve the capacity of its staff at headquarters and district levels to perform these functions."[19]

The ECSL develops and distributes educational and communication materials to community groups and organisations, ensuring consistent messaging. The ECSL manual outlines the various aspects of the registration process and addresses the needs of specific categories, including women, youth and persons with disabilities (PWDs). The ECSL also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with 27 civil society organisations (CSOs)[20] for the dissemination of voter education, as well as with four broadcasters for a weekly slot dedicated to the electoral process. The ECLS also contracted town criers and some 1,800 Locality Electoral Education Committees to disseminate information on the local level. Young people are well represented on these bodies. Strengthening cooperation with civil society to deliver targeted civic and voter education is recommended by election observers[21] and local actors.

Funding is not specifically allocated for campaigns supporting the registration of young voters. Youth groups can, however, access funding for general voter education programmes and for non-violence campaigns, such as the ECOWAS 2023 election funding for the ECSL, which targeted civic education for the reintroduction of proportional representation and the promotion of non-violence. Information required by first-time voters, such as documentation requirements, is not always provided by voter education initiatives. This needs to be addressed.

Civic education is being incorporated into the educational curricula following the establishment of the National Council for Civic Education and Democracy (NaCCED) in 2022. Currently, however, voter registration is not incorporated into school programmes and schools and universities play no direct role in supporting electoral participation.

Generally, voter education was conducted proactively by CSOs, yet it was largely uncoordinated. The impact of these efforts is not documented, as ECSL field staff's monitoring

14 "Non-violence and Peace Education (NAPE)," West Africa Network for Peacebuilding

15 Centre for Coordination of Youth Activities

16 Talking Drum Studio

17 Cross-party Committee on Electoral Systems and Management Body Review, Report July 2024 (Freetown: Tripartite Committee, 2024), Recommendation 12, page 25

18 EU-EOM, Final Report Republic of Sierra Leone General Elections 24 June 2023, 16.

19 Cross-party Committee, Report July 2024, Recommendation 11, page 25.

20 Some of the organisations supported by the ECSL to undertake civic and voter education included the Women's Forum, Legal Link, Bike Riders Union, Human Rights Defenders and the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy.

21 EU-EOM, Final Report Republic of Sierra Leone General Elections 24 June 2023, 16. Recommendation 4 reads: "Conduct continuous campaigns to ensure all eligible voters are duly recorded in the civil register and develop targeted civic and voter education with a continued collaboration between the ECSL, other governmental institutions, civil society, and media"

of CSO voter education is minimal. Consequently, the influence of voter education on youth registration and overall participation cannot be assessed. There is no consolidated information available on voter education costs.

Voter education in Sierra Leone is not only under-resourced but also faces additional challenges such as high rates of illiteracy and limited access to media in rural areas. Civil society groups engaged in voter education for the 2023 elections included the Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), which conducted a public information campaign on the new electoral system and the Advocacy Movement Network (AMNet) which organised town hall meetings in localities across the country for local women's groups, first-time voters, and persons with disabilities.

A disinformation-debunking site called i-Verify was established by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, in partnership with the Independent Radio Network (IRN), with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). International observers considered this a valuable contribution to the electoral process.[22] There was no campaign specifically focused on registration, nor is there any CSO with a particular focus on this issue.

The youth wings of political parties conduct outreach to young people and can effectively mobilise their communities, but these activities are largely ad hoc and uncoordinated. Posters in support of youth registration and voting were used, as well as short videos and animations on social media.

Political parties utilise young people extensively as party agents on election day.

The private sector is not involved in voter education and is generally disinclined to engage in activities that may be perceived as political, including the promotion of democratic practices.

A lack of trust in politics and electoral processes is widely perceived as the primary disincentive for young people to participate in elections and, consequently, to register to vote. The main challenge for youth registration and electoral participation initiatives is to address this deficit of trust. Young people need to be persuaded that their votes will lead to good governance that responds to their basic needs. This is clearly a much broader issue than voter education.



22 The Carter Center, Final Report General Elections in Sierra Leone June 24, 2023, 32.

Lessons Learned

Many problems associated with voter registration in Sierra Leone stem from an incomplete and cumbersome transition from an active registration model to a civil registry-based system. The issues experienced during the 2017 and 2022 voter registration periods underscore the necessity to review the operational framework to establish a clear structure for the integrated registration process. The new reality of a national identity card managed by the NCRA offers an opportunity for a thorough review of the legal and regulatory framework to enhance reliability and reduce the burden of voter registration on young people. Streamlining the process would eliminate the principal obstacle to registration for first-time voters.

Document requirements, such as birth certificates and age verification, emerge from this research as a significant challenge for first-time voters. The issuance of valid birth certificates must be guaranteed for all citizens.

Distributing ECSL voter identity cards for each election has proven cumbersome and costly. The blurred, substandard cards issued for the 2023 elections underscore the need to move from stand-alone voter identification to the new high-quality, permanent biometric national identity cards.

Although young people make up the majority of the voting population in Sierra Leone, they are often exploited to perpetrate abuses such as underage and multiple registrations. Female youth have yet to be fully integrated into the discussions on youth and elections and programmes aimed at inclusion have mostly focused on mobilising participation. Electoral education for young people primarily emphasises non-violence behaviours and pays little attention to the social importance of voter registration. Funding support for youth participation and youth voter registration remains limited.



Recommendations

The issuance of valid birth certificates and other necessary documentation for registration must be facilitated and access to this documentation simplified.

The registration process should be streamlined and made less burdensome for registrants and less costly to administer. Consideration should be given to automatically including all eligible voters from the civil register in the voter register without requiring them to appear in person at the registration centre to confirm their data. Enhanced options for online verification and confirmation of voter data should be provided. The civil register should include all the data fields required for voter registration.

The legal and regulatory framework should be reviewed to clarify the potentially conflicting interpretations of ECSL and NCRA's institutional mandates and ensure that the civil registration process is transparent, permanent, reliable and user-friendly. Input and validation for the draft electoral legal reform should be sought from all stakeholders to ensure that the future registration process is straightforward for registrants and voters.

A key element of the integrated system should be the timely introduction of the new, permanent biometric national identity card, which, together with a unique national identity number for each individual, will significantly simplify voter registration and address issues such as age verification, underage registration and multiple registrations. Data protection legislation should be finalised to provide clarity on which voter data should be made public and which should not.

For registration processes to be inclusive and participatory, the ECSL should collaborate with the NCRA and key stakeholders to review the ECSL operational plan for voter registration.

The ECSL should exercise its prerogative to issue regulations detailing all voter registration steps, to provide clarity and unambiguity over key issues such as required documentation, registration periods, number of registration centres.

All preparations and plans for voter registration should be made open and transparent to ensure the informed participation of the public. There is a risk of disenfranchisement when eligible voters do not understand the process and the administrative requirements. This was the case in the 2022 voter registration campaign, which was conducted in two phases due to insufficient registration equipment to service all centres simultaneously.

Voter education and information should be prioritised by the ECSL, and a comprehensive election-cycle-based communication and education strategy should be developed for each cycle. Coordination and cooperation with civil society actors should be enhanced. Consideration should be given to outsourcing voter education, especially for voter registration. The National Commission for Democracy (NCD) is one institution to collaborate with because the institution has the infrastructure and personnel for such an exercise.

Out-of-country civil registration should be conducted in preparation for the eventual implementation of the legal requirement for out-of-country voting envisaged by the Public Elections Act.

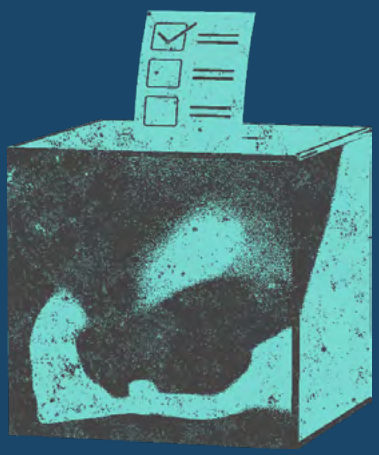
The media, especially community radio, which is present in every district, should be encouraged to participate in the public media campaign on voter registration. Community radio has the advantage of communicating information about voter registration in local languages.

The ECSL should make public detailed election budgets and proactively disclose disaggregated data on electoral processes to help support meaningful analysis on issues such as youth participation and voter registration.

This report is supported by an EU-funded project, WYDE Civic Engagement, led by EPD, the European Partnership for Democracy. The WYDE project is a component of the European Commission's Women and Youth in Democracy Initiative (WYDE). The aim of the project is to strengthen the participation of young people in democratic processes at national, regional and global levels. The findings and recommendations of this report are based on the authors' assessments only and do not in any way reflect the official position of the European Union.

This case study was conducted by National Election Watch (NEW), Sierra Leone's leading independent, non-partisan coalition of approximately 497 civil society organizations (CSOs) committed to promoting democratic governance through credible, peaceful, transparent, inclusive, and accountable electoral processes. Established in 2002, NEW has become the country's foremost domestic election observation organization, working to safeguard the integrity of elections and strengthen democratic institutions.

Operating throughout the entire electoral cycle, NEW conducts nationwide election observation, civic and voter education, policy advocacy, and electoral reform initiatives. Through its extensive network of trained observers, regional and district coordinators, and member organizations, the coalition monitors electoral processes, engages citizens and stakeholders, and provides independent, evidence-based assessments of elections. NEW also works closely with state institutions, political parties, development partners, and civil society organizations to promote electoral transparency, public confidence, and citizen participation. By fostering collaboration, accountability, and informed civic engagement, NEW continues to play a pivotal role in advancing democracy, good governance, and sustainable peace in Sierra Leone.



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YOUTH VOTER REGISTRATION COSTS & CHALLENGES

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