Policy Brief

SIERRA LEONE: Urban Mobility, Accessibility & COVID-19

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What policies have been put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19 in relation to mobility and accessibility?

- Sierra Leone declared a state of public emergency on March 24, 2020 for a period of twelve months in response to the emerging global COVID-19 Pandemic

- Given Sierra Leone's experience with Ebola, the Emergency Operations Centre (now COVID-19 National Response Emergency Operations Centre (EOC)) was reactivated on March 31st 2020

- A reduction in the maximum capacity of collective transport (i.e. to observe spacing between passengers – from 4 to 3 passengers in taxis (1 in front and 2 at the back) and for mini-buses – from 4 per seat to 2, with only 1 in front

- The closure of schools and Higher Education Institutions came into effect on the 31st March 2020 – which helps to reduce pressure on the limited transport system. Schools have resumed, but only for pupils taking exams

- Since 25th April 2020, movements between districts are restricted an Electronic Pass (E-Pass) is mandatory

COVID-19 Overview in Sierra Leone

- The first COVID-19 cases were registered on 31st March 2020

- As of July 15h 2020, there are 1,668 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 64 deaths. 1,200 people have recovered. Freetown is the epicentre of the outbreak, although there are now cases reported in all districts in Sierra Leone

- Collective transport is essential for residents and workers to access basic services and employment, whom they depend on to survive, most days

- However, collective transport has been a key vector for transmission. This has led official restrictions to limit the capacity of passengers and operating hours

- For more information on COVID-19 in Sierra Leone see here

- Masks are compulsory in public spaces including government offices, hospitals, markets and public transport

- In addition, all transport operators, drivers/riders (motorbikes, tricycles and minibuses) must wear a facemask and carry hand sanitizer at all times. Whilst these measures are mandatory, rigorous enforcement remains challenging for public authorities

- There is a ban on all public gatherings of not more than 100 people (e.g. concerts, sporting events). Religious gathering have only recently been allowed

- A curfew was imposed initially from 9PM and 6AM (local time) but later relaxed to between 11PM and 6AM. To respect this, shops have reduced opening times between 7AM and 8PM (local time)

- There have been two short lockdowns (3 days each) – First Lockdown (from Sunday, April 5th to Tuesday, April 7th and Second Lockdown (from Sunday, May 3rd to Tuesday May 5th)

- Social relief packages have been offered to the disabled by the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) as part of their Social Safety Net (SSN) Programme

The challenge (for public authorities, drivers, and transport owners and the public)

Public Authorities

- The overarching objective is to limit social and economic activity to slow the spread of the virus and preventing the overwhelming of healthcare facilities. However, governments must balance this with other national development priorities (such as education, economic development, agriculture, transport, environment) within the limited available public resources and the potential disastrous impact lockdowns are likely to have on livelihoods, as a large proportion of the population lives hand to mouth. If not managed appropriately policies restricting movement and access to services and opportunities can ultimately lead to increased poverty

- The limitations imposed on transportation are challenging to implement for a range of reasons, including:

  o Existing road infrastructure projects, such as the Limkokwing-Regent road and hillside bypass road, make it very difficult to implement particularly social distancing measures along major trunk roads within the city

  o The main preventative measures - hand washing and social distancing - are extremely challenging to effectively implement in Freetown, a densely populated city of 1.2m where 47% of the population does not have access to running water and 35% live in severely overcrowded informal settlements

  o Inter-district restrictive movement, as one of the COVID-19 response measures (even though recently lifted), had negative effects on revenue generation from tax levies on fuel, reducing the ability to undertake road maintenance and rehabilitation work within the city

  o Daily revenue generation from the National Revenue Authority (NRA) through the main seaport fell considerably at first but it has now started to recover

Drivers and Transport operators

- Limited working office hours (9AM – 4PM) impacts considerably on productivity of government workers

- Loss of revenue for drivers and transport owners is due to the cap in vehicle occupancy

- Loss of drivers livelihoods, as some transport owners withdraw their vehicles, is due to lack of profit

- Limited availability of seats and wheelchair space for the disabled and physically challenged in minibuses is due to physical distancing measures

General Public

- Inter-district restrictions limits freight transport across the country and the availability of goods

- Restrictions on the number of passengers combined with curfews, has increased congestion. The waiting and travel times have augmented, as rush hour starts earlier and extends for a longer period of time

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Proposed institutional & governance measures to ensure the safe movement of people & maintain essential accessibility

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General considerations

- Set-up inter-sectorial collaboration and coordination mechanisms involving health and transport authorities (at the national and local level)

- Strengthen enforcement of National-and-District COVID-19 Emergency Operations Response Centre (EOC) measures, especially curfew and quarantine

- Extra measures can be put in place to ensure that transport is safe for women and girls

- Ensure safety and availability of public transport to facilitate economic activity and minimize environmental impacts

- Promote the use of non-motorised transport to prevent an increase use of private vehicles through increased public awareness to achieve sustainable urban mobility

- Change the policy mindset and rethinking of transport, urban/city planners to take into consideration situations such as natural disasters and disease outbreaks such as the Ebola, Cholera and COVID-19 pandemic

Reorganise public and collective transport

- Establish a dialogue with private operators to understand the difficulties they face in complying with the new rules

- Prioritize the circulation of public and collective transport to reduce travel time (for instance, by creating bus lanes)

- Establish incentives to support collective transport operators and workers. This could include:

- o   Providing fuel
- o   Providing disinfection material
- o   Reducing taxes
- o   Providing subsidies

- Develop electronic ticketing systems for improved hygiene and greater control over the implementation of the measures required by the Government
- Use collective transport vehicles or hubs to communicate with the public (e.g. by distributing information leaflets or putting posters indicating medical help numbers, anti-violence numbers, etc.)Reorganise public and collective transport

Road Safety

Expand/improve public transportation systems and diversify the modes to increase mobility and access of people and freight. This will likely lower crash and fatality rates while also reducing the carbon emission rates

A decrease in public transport is likely to lead to increased vehicle speed as the roads are less congested, increasing the risk of accidents. It will also lead to more people being forced to walk or cycle and are likely to face higher road risks:

- Lower speed limits
- Ensure that speed limits are respected
- Encourage walking and cycling

Accessibility

Establish measures to reduce the need for displacement by ensuring minimum access to essential services, and employment in neighbourhoods

Increase virtual communication is also key to increase accessibility to information and interactions. Telecommunication providers have an important role to play. Telephone operators must reinforce the capacity of the telephone and data network so that they can support the increase in call and internet traffic in a way that facilitates remote work and preserves social connections in the context of physical distance.

- Public and private companies must strengthen their web platforms, telephone answering services and applications so that citizens can resolve basic issues without having to leave their homes
- There is a need to take into considerable access from informal vendors that bring goods and services to neighbourhoods.

Street rearrangement

- Rearrange street space for increasing space for walking
- Discourage on-street parking that reduces the possibility for social distancing in public space