

Enabling Social Innovation in Sierra Leone



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Country Snapshot

Social innovation: "the processes and outcomes of developing novel approaches to address societal challenges facing people and planet." ¹

This snapshot represents a descriptive, non-exhaustive overview of key highlights from Sierra Leone's social innovation ecosystem.

Direct focus on social innovation Connected but indirect focus on social innovation No focus on social innovation

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Official Definition of Social Innovation



No formal legal definition of "social innovation" is established in Sierra Leone's primary law. The concept is embedded in the "Big Five Game Changers" agenda of President Bio (2023–2028), which identifies Feed Sierra Leone, Human Capital Development, Youth Employment and Empowerment, Made in Sierra Leone, and Governance and Accountability as five transformative national priorities — each requiring social innovation for delivery. ²

Government Body for Social Innovation



Social innovation is addressed through multiple bodies, with the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation playing a uniquely prominent cross-government role:

- Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI): The primary government body for innovation; directly embedded in the Office of the President; promotes data-driven governance, GovTech and innovation-for-development across all ministries. ²
- Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning: Leads the National Development Plan 2024–2030 and Poverty Reduction Strategy; coordinates development partner programming. ³
- Ministry of Youth Affairs: Oversees youth enterprise, employability, skills development and social innovation programmes. ⁴
- Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (SMEDA): Supports MSME formalisation, training and access to finance — a key vehicle for social enterprise development. ³
- National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM): Regulates ICT and the digital economy; expanding digital infrastructure as a foundation for digital social innovation. ²

Government Strategy for Social Innovation



- "Big Five Game Changers" Agenda 2023–2028: President Bio's five transformative national priorities; each pillar requires social innovation — particularly Human Capital Development (education and skills reform), Youth Employment and Empowerment (enterprise and skills), and Made in Sierra Leone (local value chain and product innovation). ²
- National Development Plan 2024–2030: Seven-year plan aligned with the Agenda 2030 remaining implementation period; covers economic transformation, human capital development and governance reform. ³
- Digital Economy Strategy: Promotes digital skills, e-government services, digital financial services and ICT entrepreneurship to build a digital innovation ecosystem. ²



Policies, Laws & Regulations

Directly or closely linked:

- National Development Plan 2024–2030: Overarching seven-year policy framework embedding innovation across all sectors; unprecedented alignment to the SDG deadline provides a strong accountability structure. ³
- DSTI Mandate and Legal Framework: Establishes DSTI's mandate to embed data-driven governance, GovTech and innovation across all government institutions. ²

Broader enabling:

- Investment Promotion Act: Governs business registration and investment; supports social enterprise incorporation and FDI for innovation-intensive activities. ²
- NGO Policy and Legal Framework: Governs civil society organisations, which are primary vehicles for grassroots social innovation and post-conflict community development. ⁴



Official Statistics

Sierra Leone is not included in the GII 2024 due to insufficient data coverage. Key available development indicators include:

~60% of the population living below the poverty line, driving urgent demand for social innovation in livelihoods, basic services and enterprise development. ⁵

~60% of the population is under age 25 — a significant youth dividend for social innovation if supported by education, skills and enterprise access at sufficient scale. ⁵

DSTI — GovTech leader Sierra Leone's Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation is recognised as one of West Africa's most dynamic government innovation bodies, delivering data-driven COVID-19 response, national ID systems and GovTech solutions embedded directly in the Presidency. ²



Government Programs

- "Feed Sierra Leone" Agricultural Innovation Initiative: Government-led agricultural transformation programme promoting modern farming, food systems innovation and improved rural livelihoods across the country. ²
- Human Capital Trust Fund: Government and development partner co-funded mechanism for education, health and skills development — the foundational investment in social innovation human capital. ³
- Youth Enterprise and Employment Programme: UNDP-supported youth skills, digital literacy and enterprise development, aligned to the Big Five youth empowerment agenda. ⁴
- DSTI COVID-19 Digital Response: DSTI pioneered contact tracing applications, digital health tools and e-governance during the COVID-19 pandemic — widely cited as a model for GovTech innovation in fragile and post-conflict states. ²
- World Bank Safety Nets Programme: Cash transfers and livelihood support for the most vulnerable households; a foundational social innovation in state-delivered social protection. ⁵

ECOSYSTEM



Stakeholders

- DSTI (Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation): Leads government innovation; builds national data systems, GovTech platforms and digital public goods; embedded directly in the Office of the President. ²
- UNDP Sierra Leone Accelerator Lab: Community-driven social innovation, foresight and experimentation across SDG areas; complements DSTI at the community level. ⁴
- iCampus Sierra Leone: A growing digital innovation hub in Freetown supporting tech startups, social entrepreneurs and digital skills development. ²
- Njala University and University of Sierra Leone: Primary academic institutions providing applied research and human capital for social innovation. ⁴
- Civil society organisations and faith-based organisations: Primary vehicles for grassroots social innovation; historically central to post-conflict community reconstruction and social development. ⁴



Support Initiatives

Support modalities include DSTI GovTech innovation, UNDP AccLab community experimentation, World Bank social protection, AfDB economic diversification and international NGO community-based programming. DSTI's model of embedding innovation governance directly in the Presidency — with a mandate to serve all ministries — is increasingly cited as a best practice for building innovation capacity in fragile and post-conflict states across Sub-Saharan Africa. ^{2 7}



Collaboration

Collaboration is structured through the UN Cooperation Framework, bilateral donor coordination mechanisms and the Big Five implementation architecture. DSTI serves as a cross-government innovation coordination body, breaking down siloes between ministries. Civil society plays a critical role, with active CSO participation in NDP development and delivery monitoring. ^{2 4}

FINANCE



Financing Schemes

- Government: Human Capital Trust Fund, NDP sector budget allocations, DSTI innovation programmes. ¹
- World Bank: Safety Nets, Human Capital Project, agricultural productivity and digital economy financing. ⁵
- AfDB: Economic diversification, infrastructure and enterprise development. ⁷
- UN agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, WFP): Social protection, child development, food security and youth enterprise support. ⁴
- International NGOs (Mercy Corps, Concern Worldwide, IRC): Community-level social innovation financing across health, livelihoods and enterprise. ⁴



Financing Inclusivity

Safety net and social protection programming explicitly targets vulnerable households, including women-headed households and youth. DSTI and World Bank programmes prioritise women's digital skills and youth enterprise. Access to formal enterprise financing for social innovators remains limited but is improving through SMEDA support and growing mobile money infrastructure. ^{4 5}

SOCIETY



Public Awareness of Social Innovation

Awareness is growing, driven by DSTI's visible public innovation profile and the Big Five national transformation narrative. DSTI's COVID-19 digital response brought GovTech innovation into national public consciousness. iCampus and digital startup culture are building awareness among urban youth in Freetown. The "Made in Sierra Leone" programme has built public enthusiasm for local product and enterprise innovation. ^{2 4}



Research

Research capacity is limited but growing. DSTI is building national data infrastructure and open data systems. University-based applied research is growing in agriculture, health and ICT. UNDP AccLab solution mapping provides the primary social innovation evidence base at the community level. International partnerships with UK (FCDO), US (USAID) and UN research programmes support growing evidence capacity. ^{2 4}

Education & Human Capital



The Human Capital Trust Fund and Big Five agenda prioritise education quality, access and relevance across all levels. Digital skills development is a growing national priority. The post-Ebola, post-COVID and post-conflict recovery has constrained human capital development over multiple decades, but the 2024–2030 NDP provides a dedicated seven-year framework to address this systematically. DSTI is embedding data literacy and technology skills across government institutions.^{2 3}

Entrepreneurship



EIU Business Environment Ranking



Innovation Capacity

The "Made in Sierra Leone" programme is actively building local product innovation culture and consumer demand for domestically produced goods.^{2 3}



Social entrepreneurship prevalence

Sierra Leone's entrepreneurial ecosystem is nascent but growing, anchored by DSTI's GovTech innovation, iCampus digital hub and UNDP AccLab. The National Development Plan 2024–2030 explicitly prioritises enterprise development and youth employment.

Social & Environmental Consciousness



Solidarity

Community solidarity and faith-based giving are deeply embedded in Sierra Leonean social culture.⁸



Political participation

Sierra Leone faces significant climate vulnerabilities including coastal flooding, inland flooding, mudslides and sea-level rise; climate resilience is an urgent social innovation priority.²



Volunteering

Sierra Leone-specific data not separately reported in the 2024 index.

CAFWorld Giving Index 2024



Sustainability

Sierra Leone-specific EPI ranking not publicly available at time of publication.

Environmental Performance Index (EPI) 2024: