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# What's the Matter with Sierra Leone?

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## Abstract

The country of Sierra Leone sits on the coast of West Africa bordering Guinea and Liberia, and are regional neighbors with the Cotton 4 of West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali). The country has geographical features to thrive in agriculture and cotton, but yet the population depends on subsistence agriculture. Sierra Leone emerged from conflict and civil war in 2001, but today over half of the population lives in extreme poverty and the country still carries its post-conflict attributes of high youth unemployment and corruption. Half of the population needs jobs, conflict no longer exists, and the land is prosperous enough to produce cotton. The question that remains is why doesn't Sierra Leone have a cotton or textile industry? This paper will attempt to answer this question by using the textile industry as a metaphor for the challenges Sierra Leone faces to obtain prosperity and reduce poverty. By diving into a brief history of the country, the big misconceptions of the West African textiles, analyzing a few of the barriers the country faces in each step of the value chain for creating a textile industry, and recommending potential solutions to what it could do to have a thriving textile industry, we can understand what is the matter with Sierra Leone.

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## Introduction

Sierra Leone is a small country that sits on the coast of West Africa between Guinea in the North and Liberia in the south. The country has a population of over 7 million people and has a tropical climate where its environment ranges from savannah to rainforests. Freetown, the capital and largest city in Sierra Leone, is home to the largest natural harbor on the West African Coast. Sierra Leone offer multiple other ports along the nation's coast. The dream of the Ministry of Trade and the government is for the port to become the largest transshipment hub in Sub-Saharan Africa. Sierra Leone is the 158<sup>th</sup> largest export economy in the world, and in 2018 the GDP of Sierra Leone was \$4.085 Billion and its GDP per capita was \$533.99. Sierra Leone is known for their precious metals and its top exports are Iron Ore, Titanium Ore, Diamonds, Cocoa Beans and Aluminum Ore (OECD, 2018). In 2016 more than 70 percent of Sierra Leone's exports were minerals with only a small amount of cocoa, coffee and fish products being exported. A country that has rich soil, adequate growing conditions for agriculture and a rich culture in traditional clothing has relied heavily on its minerals to increase its economic development. Unfortunately, this leaves the country extremely susceptible to Dutch Disease--the market failure of relying too heavily on primary goods at the expense of country's broader economy.

With Sierra Leone's heat, rain, humidity, and extensive sunshine, the country would be an ideal location to grow cotton for a textile industry and expand its agriculture sector. A few of its surrounding West African neighbors Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, Togo and Senegal are to varying degrees involved in Fairtrade cotton production and textiles. If you were to pull out a map and see where each of these countries are located, it is interesting to notice how Sierra Leone and Liberia are the only two countries who do not produce or compete in the cotton market. This left me wondering, why are Sierra Leone and Liberia excluding themselves from this highly competitive market that could help diversify their exports, create jobs and industries, and improve their local economies?

To answer this open ended question I chose to focus my methodology in qualitative research by diving into the history of Sierra Leone, the textile industry, and interviewing a number of people involved in textiles and international trade. I interviewed multiple international non-governmental organizations such as United Nations Industrial Development

Organization (UNIDO) and the Aurora Foundation. I spoke with Invest Salone, a private sector company focused on increasing investment into the country for small businesses who would benefit both from investment and in turn help the local economy. In addition to the private sector, I spoke with two separate women who are entrepreneurs and owners of small businesses in fashion and are known for their higher quality fabric. Efforts to speak with government officials in the Ministry of Trade and Industries, the Ministry of Labor, and more were not successful.

This paper will thus focus on identifying potential solutions that different ministries can implement to support the small business owners with a vision to enter the international market. In my discussions with experts from various sectors and from thorough open source research, I found that the answer to the question is not linear. A critical part to the answer stems from the roots of the country and its political history. In order to fully grasp the issue and challenges of international trade in Sierra Leone and to answer “What’s the matter with Sierra Leone?” we must first understand the history and context of how it has become the country it is today.

## **History of Sierra Leone**

### **The Founding and Colonialism**

The country had been inhabited by the Bulom (Sherbro), Temne, and Limba tribes along the coast, while the Vai, Loko, and Mende tribes inhabited the inland parts of the country. These tribes organized their societies around the family unit and tradition and were known for their country cloth—the traditional clothing made from locally grown cotton and dyed from the kola nut and other local plants (UNIPSIL, 2020). Many West African countries such as Senegal, French Guinea, Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), Sierra Leone, northern Gold Coast and Nigeria produced Old World cotton which was a high quality and well grown cotton at the time. The cotton was grown locally and then woven into narrow strips that would be sewn together to make garments. The cotton trade was already well established and was produced throughout many of the West African countries well before the Portuguese mariners sailed down to the Guinea Coast. In 1536, the Portuguese Sailors landed and named the country Sierra Leone. From that point forward, foreign influence began to increase and trade in cotton, slaves, animal skins, palm oil

and unusually colored shells commenced between the locals, the Portuguese, and the Muslim traders along the Rokel estuary and the bay (Kriger, 2005). In the mid 1600's the British began to take interest in trading with Sierra Leone and the Royal African Company captured and established forts on the Bunce and York Island for trading slaves. The slave trade became the country's major commodity in the market, transporting slaves to Europe and America. As slavery commenced and as Europeans infiltrated the West African coastline, the African societal structure and its traditions in wearing traditional garments and more were disrupted.

By 1855, there were over 50,000 freed slaves from Europe, Canada, America and Jamaica all making their way to West Africa. The slaves settled in Freetown and Krio became the lingua franca, while English became its official language. As the slaves began to return to West Africa, Freetown was still colonized by the British. In 1896 the remainder of the territory of modern Sierra Leone was declared a Protectorate of Britain. With the two separate systems in place, Britain only recognized the Crown Colony as part of the British Empire while dividing the Protectorate into many small chiefdoms and then controlling them indirectly. Under this rule, there was no established centralized bureaucracy and the colonial government allowed the Paramount Chiefs to have considerable power. In 1963, under British protection, the chieftaincy became a lifetime and inheritable position allowing them to play principal roles in the local economic development and be able to exert authority over the people. Competition among the paramount chiefs was intense and chiefs often abused their power to receive economic rewards, such as excessive cash levies, unpopular land allocations, and forced labor (Keen 2005, p. 10). Although the two systems in the country further complicated the power structure, they focused their economic activities in mining and agriculture rather than cotton or textiles that surrounding West African countries produced.

The British had a very particular style of colonialism throughout history and across Africa. They tended to choose a preferred ethnic group over all the others in the countries they colonized and supported them to the extent that they worked in the interests of the British leaders rather than their fellow Africans. They also preferred ethnic societies with dictatorial and hierarchical systems like their own and would recruit members of the ethnic societies into their military (Cengage, 2020). The influence of British colonial power formed corrupt practices

among the chiefs as they served the British officials interests. During this time the growth of the country's economy was driven by minerals and agriculture, which in time would become a contributing factor to the failures in the country's economic development. This was partly due to when the British gained interested in the gold and minerals found in the northern provinces of the country where the chiefs were located.

## The Discovery of Diamonds

Around the 1950's diamonds were ~~mining~~ officially discovered in the Kono and Kenema Districts. As a result men from all parts of Sierra Leone and surrounding countries in West Africa began moving to work in the diamond mines both legally and illegally. The mass migration of men coming from all different regions had to first gain access and approval from the local chiefs. Local chiefs soon manipulated citizens and incoming men who worked in the diamond mines, promising protection which they were unable to meet. A government-run licensing system was introduced and foreign firms were adamant on forcing out clandestine mining. The attempt to control the illicit diamond mines created high tension and conflict between corporations, miners, chiefs and national authorities. The extraction of natural resources quickly became the sole interest for many groups in boosting the economy, but it also became one of the key issues to corruption within the country's political system. With the discovery of diamond, gold and other mineral mining, the country put little to no priority in other industries such as agriculture, cotton, textiles, energy and more. During this time the economy was plagued by the Dutch disease, making resource extraction the main source of economic revenue to the country. This prevented the country from creating industries such as a textile industry or even producing cotton to diversify their exports.

## An Independent Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone finally gained independence on April 27th, 1961 and the Republican status on April 19th, 1971. Although the country was now "free" from British rule, the history and political system of chiefdoms and tribes it once valued, was now contaminated from only serving the interests of the British and themselves. The post-independence era inherited many issues and became a state which focused its efforts in controlling natural resources and dealing with illicit

mining activities. William Reno emphasizes the importance of how the country was not founded on conventional concepts of legitimacy, or even on supporting formal bureaucratic institutions. Rather, Sierra Leone's presidents after gaining independence from colonialism have ruled through controlling markets, such as their natural resources in gold and diamonds. They manipulated other people's access to economic opportunities in order to remain and enhance its power as presidents (Reno, 2003).

Post-independence, the All People's Congress (APC) was the first party to rule. Siaka Stevens became the first president of Sierra Leone and ruled from 1968 to 1971. Steven's leadership, intentions, and close relationship with controlling the diamond mines and import/export licenses, allowed him to conduct privatization exercises which benefited himself and increased his and his political allies' wealth. Steven's ability to exercise power despite the citizens best interests, was further strengthened by the patrimonial principles that formed Sierra Leone's traditional society. He served as the "ultimate leader of the Sierra Leone patrimonial system, which were founded on principles of redistributing national resources for personal favor to followers who respond with loyalty to the leader rather than to the institution the leader presents (Richards 1996). He weakened the army and caused a huge deficit of government budgets, making the state system more vulnerable to rebellions. While in power he claimed to support agriculture, education, and other industries in the country, but failed to do so as he exploited the diamond and other mineral mining industries. Textiles and cotton production was the least of the Steven's concerns, despite the potential positive impact it could have had on the country.

With a nearly bankrupt government, Stevens handed over presidential power to Army Commander, Major-General Joseph Momoh in 1985. The government received IMF financial support and Momoh's government implemented strict measures as a result of the nearly bankrupt government. Momoh reduced subsidies in petrol and food and implemented budget cuts in health and education. He was unable to pay civil servants and by 1987 less than 30% of children were registered in school. At this time raw materials price in the international market collapsed and large foreign firms had left the country due to high levels of corruption and depletion of minerals. Without education, industries, and support from the government the small-scale cotton farmers in the provinces suffered and the textile industry was nearly non-existent. The

cumulation of its history, lack of education, unemployment, and political corruption is what led the country into the civil war.

## The Civil War

In 1991 conflict in the provinces of the south-eastern corner of Sierra Leone erupted and the outbreak of war caused many setbacks to the country. The war began when fighters of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), with the support from the Liberian rebel group, National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NFPL) attempted to overthrow the government of the Sierra Leonean President Joseph Momoh. The war began and quickly spread throughout the provinces of the country, where all small-scale cotton farmers were located. During the war over 70,000 people died and 2.6 million were displaced in a nation of four million people. The conflict between the two sides lasted for over 10 years because they were funded by “blood diamonds” which were mined with slave labor (Momodu, 2017). While people fled from their homes, they were unable to continue their farming or continue working in their country.

By the end of 1993, many thought the war had ended because the RUF ceased most of its military operations. During this time the war then received international assistance as the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), Britain, Guinea, and the United States supported the Sierra Leone government. On the other hand, the RUF was supported by Liberia, Libya, and Burkina Faso. Political tensions regarding who should be in power only continued to rise as coups and different parties were put into power throughout the war. This halted the country’s mining industry, education, agriculture and ability to develop economically.

In 1999 when world leaders intervened, they helped begin negotiations, resulting in establishing The Lome Peace Accord. The Lome Agreement proposed a power-sharing plan giving Sankoh; the commander of the RUF, the vice presidency and control of Sierra Leone’s diamond mines in return for the RUF and AFRC forces to cease fighting and surrender their weapons. The UN peacekeeping force was deployed to monitor the disarmament process. Unfortunately, the AFRC and RUF fighters were not compliant with the disarmament process

and rebels began to advance again in 2000, killing, kidnapping, and raping civilians, aid workers, journalists, RUF leaders, UN military observers and more.

It wasn't until January 18th 2002 when the war in Sierra Leone was officially declared over. The political tension between the parties only continued to destroy the country's infrastructure, economy, and power structure. The colonial influence on the country, economic instability, corrupt government, and the effects of the war were all factors that ripped the country of its culture and traditions. Those small-scale cotton producers who could have potentially helped the cotton production in Sierra Leone grow, were forced to leave. Traditional cloth weaving, education, agriculture and cotton production in the provinces were lost as thousands of citizens were displaced due to the war.

## Ebola to Today

After the war and disarmament programs, people began to flood back to Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, in attempt to be reunited with family and find jobs. Post-civil war, a number of economic reform programs and foreign aid supported the country in its redevelopment process. IMF, the World Bank, The African Development Bank, the EU and UK-DFID, Arab Funding Agencies, the US, UN agencies, Japan, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Nigeria and many more helped create support programs in all different sectors. The government with great help began transforming and constructing transportation and roads, Energy and Water projects were implemented, there was a major focus on agriculture in the provinces, and Health and Education programs were launched. The economy recovered strongly in the immediate post-civil war period, with real GDP expanding by an average 16.8 percent during 2000 to 2003. After the financial crisis in 2008 the growth of the economy went down, but still remained 2 percent above average for Sub-Saharan Africa. By 2010, investments in basic infrastructure and the recovery of mining helped continue agriculture expansion and led the country to expand its economies real GDP by 5 percent (Bangura).

About twelve years after the war the country experienced the Ebola crisis, a highly infectious virus killing thousands of people and rapidly spreading in a matter of hours. Due to the outbreak, borders were shut down causing less trade and transportation of goods, it reduced

tourism, decreased agricultural production, decreased mining, there were few investors, high unemployment and high fiscal impact. The private sector alone in Sierra Leone lost half of its workers. All of these factors from Ebola outbreak put productivity to a halt and severely impacted the growing economy. In addition corruption within the government was extremely high during the outbreak. Donations and medical equipment flooded into the country from across the globe, but the government failed to adequately distribute the shipment of equipment and funds to the people. Just in 2015, Sierra Leone estimated a deficit at 4.8 percent of GDP. In a study published in the Journal of Infectious Diseases, they estimated that the total economic and societal costs of the epidemic in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia combined to be \$53 billion (Caroline Huber, 2018). With a major disruption in the country's economic development, the cotton industry did not have the opportunity, means, or support to develop. Foreign aid flooded the country, along with second-hand clothing from the United States and Canada which ultimately impacted a potential textile industry in the country.

Sierra Leone's history beginning from colonialism to a 10 year civil war, to epidemics and pandemics has disrupted the country's economic development and political stability. With resource extraction being the country's main priority and dominant export, a textile industry did not have the opportunity to develop. In addition to the historical factors that hindered the country's potential for a cotton and/or textile industry, I learned about two misconceptions of West African textiles and cotton that give more context to answering "What's the Matter With Sierra Leone?".

## **The Two Big Misconceptions**

The idea that West Africa is famously known for being successful producers in the vibrant and colorful block print fabrics is a misconception. The majority of the textiles and fabric sold in West Africa are not produced in Africa. Rather they are produced in Holland, China and India and then imported by West African countries. It may come as a surprise to many (I certainly was taken back upon learning this), but the reality is West Africa currently does not have a huge market or the capability to mass produce the famously known African

Ankara block print cloth and cannot compete with countries such as Holland, India, and China. In addition there are no factories that transform locally produced cotton into the fabric seen in the local markets.

The history of the Ankara or African block print cloth originated from Indonesia. Since ancient times, Indonesian locals made Batik, a colorful block print designed cloth (see annex 3). When the Dutch colonized Indonesia, their merchants discovered the batik fabrics and brought samples back to the Netherlands. The Dutch textile manufacturers created a way to develop the print fabrics in bulk by machine and produced cheaper batik inspired imitation cloths. The new fabrics did not appeal to the Indonesian people, as they preferred their higher quality original designs. The Dutch needed to find a new market to sell their new fabrics and introduced it to West Africa where it was well received and adopted into the culture in the 1880's. The slaves and mercenaries recruited from West Africa to be part of the Indonesian Army liked the Batik and brought some back with them to West Africa, which helped bring more popularity to the Dutch made fabrics coming into the region. Several different manufacturers in Europe produced the fabric for years before manufacturing expanded to African countries (Kitenge, n.d.). Over 16.7 percent of textiles imported are the light pure woven cotton fabrics (or the African Ankara block prints) are from China, India, and the Netherlands. West Africa had their traditional weaving and garments before being colonized by the British and today a lot of that tradition in Sierra Leone has been lost as the country adopted the colorful African block prints.

The second great misconception is that West Africa is known for their successful and prosperous cotton industry. West Africa is still a producer of cotton and have multiple textile factories spread across 13 countries, but they suffer from unfair subsidies implemented by developed countries in their own cotton production. This was made known globally in 2002 when the Cotton 4; Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali tabled discussions at the WTO for a major reform. Cotton subsidies in developed countries have significantly damaged cotton farmers in developing countries, particularly in West Africa. The subsidies and inadequate effort to reform them, limits the profitability of cotton for West African farmers because the subsidies in developed countries depresses the international price of cotton for all exporters. In 2002, Brazil challenged and won in a case with the US at the WTO regarding unfair cotton subsidies.

West African countries were unable to bring a case against the US for the same issue, but instead have led the discussions for cotton in the WTO. The discussion of cotton at the WTO focuses on two tracks. 1) the trade reforms needed to address subsidies and high trade barriers for cotton, and 2) the assistance provided to the cotton sector in developing countries. These discussions have been ongoing over the past years as a series of proposals to address the cotton sector, and have recently made more progress in the last meeting held on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (WTO, 2020).

With a better understanding of the history of Sierra Leone and context of the cotton and textile industry in West Africa, we can identify the challenges Sierra Leone faces today in producing cotton and establishing its textile industry. In conducting my research for the current issues and challenges Sierra Leone faces in textiles and international trade, I interviewed a few experts from different parts of the value chain in a potential textile industry for the country.

## **Challenges in the Value Chain**

Sierra Leone faces several major challenges to developing a textile industry and engaging in international trade. In this section, I have briefly identified four of the many challenges that the country faces. The barriers identified are complex and will require more thorough research than what I will describe below in order to effectively address them.

### **Cotton Production**

The first step to the value chain is producing the cotton. As explained in the history, in pre-colonial times Sierra Leone was known to have some cotton production where it was traded all throughout West Africa and weaved to make the traditional country cloth. The tradition and cotton trade in Sierra Leone quickly diminished when the British colonized Freetown and when mineral, gold, and diamond mining became the government's main interest in economic growth to the country. The only cotton producers were small-scale farmers in the rural parts of the country in the provinces. When the civil war broke out into the provinces the farmers were

displaced and the cotton farms that existed were abandoned. Today, about 18 years after the end of the war cotton production never came back to the country.

I had the opportunity to speak with the owner of the Country Cloth Communities Development Initiative, an international non-profit and advocacy organization operating in both the UK and Sierra Leone (countrycloth, n.d.). The organization's aim is to promote the work of communities, traditional weavers and cotton farmers in Sierra Leone. To do this, the organization is working to effectively revive the weaving culture in Sierra Leone and re-establish weaving houses across the country to transform economic and social change by helping them generate income. They work with communities in the Kailahun District and Bonthe District of over 50 traditional weavers and cotton farmers. In speaking with the owner she told me “Everything is 100% organic! We grow the organic cotton, harvest it and hand pick it, we spool the cotton by hand and naturally dye it. All the colors you see on the cotton are from plants and flowers from the bush.” They hold three week training programs where they bring 3 to 11 people from the provinces all over the country and teach them how to grow, harvest, weave and dye the cotton so they can go back to their villages and start their own businesses to bring back the traditional country cloth. When asked what are the challenges she faces in cotton production, finding a market and international trade she expressed many.

“First, the harvest isn't strong or full and we have to look at finding agriculture experts to help. Second, because we are all organic in every step, we don't use genetically modified seeds or chemicals for the cotton. Third, there is a huge capacity issue, especially since most of the weavers and learners coming did not have the education or training during the war. The fourth challenge is that cotton is not a priority in the country, because the main focus for agriculture is growing food for cash crop. Farmers here do not get the support they need and unfortunately that puts cotton at the bottom of the priority list.”

Country Cloth Communities Development Initiative also sells their products locally and internationally and can be purchased on their website. The money goes to supporting the

organization and the community in training, capacity building, research and more. When I asked about the challenges associated with international trade she said,

“The distribution process is a challenge because the production of the harvest is never big enough, we work with small-scale cotton farmers which are few. Another challenge is that it is a niche market and because the natural cotton is not colorful, it doesn't appeal to the consumers. I am working on finding ways to add more colors through natural dyes from the plants and flowers in the bush. If there isn't a lot of color, people don't tend to buy it.”

It was very clear that there are many challenges cotton farmers face. If there is more support, then producing traditional cloth organically would appeal to a very niche market. This could be an opportunity for Sierra Leone, by positioning itself for the niche market of natural dye cloths.

I also had the opportunity to speak with Rachel who works for the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), she helped shed some light on challenges the farmer in the provinces experience.

“Rural farmers in the provinces cannot get their products to local markets and especially Freetown. It costs way too much. What often happens is local traders come to them and say they will take their entire harvest and at the end of the season they would pay them back, but they don't. Those who buy the crops cannot get it to certain areas because of supply chain issues and lack of infrastructure throughout the country.”

In a study done by Sierra Agra, rural farmers said they would much rather work with someone who will take everything rather than try to sell in the local market. It is a better income for them which leaves farmers susceptible to being taken advantage of. In addition to infrastructure challenges, investment is extremely difficult to attract and banks are not designed for agriculture investment here. Financing specifically for agriculture is not designed as a typical loan infrastructure. Farmers have to grow, cultivate, harvest, sell, and then they can have the money

to pay back the loan. Financing for agriculture is not available in Sierra Leone or in the banking/financial sector. “They simply do not have the infrastructure” Rachel said.

Without government support in the form of subsidies in the cotton production, it makes it nearly impossible to produce enough cotton to come close to competing in the international market. It also makes it extremely difficult to harvest enough cotton to produce larger quantities of the end product. Sierra Leone currently has a few small-scale cotton farmers and are far from producing at a larger scale.

### Marketing West African Fabric

The second step to the value chain in textile production is finding a market for the African block print fabric. In the 1800’s when the Dutch exported the newly manufactured block print imitated fabrics to West Africa and Sierra Leone, the people accepted it and quickly adopted it into their culture. After the impact of the civil war on the country’s tradition, the United States and Canada increased their exports of used clothing to Africa. Today 30.4 percent of textiles imported into Sierra Leone are second-hand clothing from the US and Canada (OECD, 2018). This destroyed the market for retail and textile producers in the region and country itself as they could not come close to competing with free clothing which are then sold at an extremely low price.

I spoke with the owner of one of the few fashion and high quality fabric stores in the country. Zainab is the owner of Fabrics 4 U, she is a small business owner and imports the majority of her fabric from Ghana, Nigeria, and China. She travels to Ghana to buy from the Woodin factory, which has beautiful African block prints and is a sister company of Vlisco (Vlisco, 2020). Vlisco is the design and manufacturing factory from the Netherlands that has existed since 1846. I asked Zainab why Sierra Leone doesn’t have a textile industry and her reply was simple, “there is no market.” She has struggled in terms of sales because the Sierra Leonean people do not understand the quality of fabric. “100% cotton tends to be a bit more expensive, but if you go into town you will see in all the street markets, they sell a lower quality fabric at a much cheaper price.” The lower quality fabric sold in all the local markets are made in China and imported in Sierra Leone. The majority of the people who purchase the African

block print fabrics cannot tell the difference between a higher and a lower quality. The main concern for local consumers is simply the design. Without a market who appreciates quality fabric, it is extremely difficult for her to compete with Chinese imitated prints.

In addition to not having a market, Zainab explained that she and most of the factories in West Africa currently face challenges with Chinese consumers and street vendors who walk into the factories and take pictures of their fabric. “Even the Woodin Factory in Ghana, a sister company to the famous Vlisco factory in Holland, are currently having issues with Chinese consumers taking pictures and copying/imitating the patterns and designs.” Unfortunately this has allowed many Chinese manufacturers to imitate and produce a much cheaper fabric that is sold for an extremely affordable price in Sierra Leone. “Production cost in China is cheaper because the quality is bad. Its 15,000 Leones (about \$1.50) for two yards and sometimes it can go as low as 5,000 Leones (about \$0.50) for a yard. It is nearly impossible for a factory to come to Sierra Leone and beat that price.” Chinese imported fabric makes it difficult for small businesses owners like Zainab to compete, but the reality is that the majority of Sierra Leone consumers can only afford the cheaper Chinese fabrics.

According to the World Bank’s Findings on Poverty reports in 2018, Sierra Leone’s Poverty Rate is at an estimated 56.8% making less than \$2 a day (Network, 2019). Sierra Leone has a population of 7.65 million people and about 1 million live in Freetown. With more than half of the country living in extreme poverty, many people cannot afford a higher quality fabric. Most of Sierra Leone lives in the informal economy and the middle class of Sierra Leone is extremely low. In addition to the market challenges Zainab faces, she expressed the loss of interest in African prints among the people of Sierra Leone. “At one point everyone wanted to copy Western style and forgot about African prints. Now African prints are beginning to be re-introduced, but it’s not quite there yet.” I asked if she saw a market for a more traditional Sierra Leonean textiles such as country cloth or gara (a different traditional style made from tie-dyeing the cloth in a unique design). She told a story of when she was young.

“I used to watch and learn from my mother who did the gara and sold them to support her family and pay their way for school. In the past the market was huge! But only the older people did it and the younger people were not interested. The youth only

wanted to work real jobs and attend a Western college. In order to be accepted into society here you need to have a big degree and get an office job. The problem is that most of the women who go to school never come back and lost interest in traditional clothing and crafts.”

The combination of not having a local market, competing with Chinese made fabrics, poverty, and the loss of interest in tradition are just a few of the many challenges small business owners like Zainab encounter in working with textiles.

### Creating a Fashion Industry

The third step in the value chain for a textile industry would be actually creating a Fashion industry in Sierra Leone. To understand the challenges Sierra Leone faces in this step, I spoke with Mrs. Fredericka Williams, a Sierra Leone Fashion Designer who studied Economics at the University of Sierra Leone (Ariana Diaries, 2020). Soon after Fredericka graduated from the University, she was waiting for formal employment opportunities when she decided to take up sewing as a hobby. She ended up moving to Nigeria to master the skill because Sierra Leone did not have professional training in fashion design. She moved back to Sierra Leone, opened her own business and began her journey in bringing back Sierra Leonean African fashion. Her greatest accomplishment was when UNIDO celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and she was among the fifty women who received an award for turning their passion into a business.

I asked Fredericka what the barriers are to having a successful textile industry in Sierra Leone and she expressed that “there are no factories and no training programs for people to learn how to sew well.” She told me about Blue Crest, a college in Freetown that has recently opened a certificate and diploma program in fashion design, but unfortunately had to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She is unaware on how they are doing now and if they have opened back up again. Aside from Blue Crest, an affordable and professional training program in fashion design is unavailable. I followed up by asking why the government does not provide support or implement a training school for fashion designers, and she simply replied by saying, “the government curriculum does not prioritize textiles because the focus is on development in education and other things. Fashion design probably won’t be included.” Without the support

from the government or in funding many local fashion designers who took up sewing have decided to open their own small tailoring business. “Each individual has their own niche, I am not threatened to collaborate with other designers. But unfortunately, most of fashion designers/tailors don’t think this way, so we continue working solo.” With the hope that working solo will change in future, Fredericka had a positive outlook for Sierra Leonean fashion in the future.

I asked if Sierra Leone would benefit from a factory and her reply was “as long as there are economies of scale, then yes.” She followed that comment by saying that the awareness for local fabric is gaining momentum. Today the majority of the people you see on the streets wear African prints and in Sierra Leone every Friday is “Africana Friday” where everyone wears their best Africana design outfits. In recent years the people of Sierra Leone have gained a greater appreciation for local products and culture which help motivate African fashion designers like Fredericka Williams to keep working hard.

Fredericka Williams faced many challenges in the 15 years her business has been open. She had to face economic market crashes and inflation, Ebola and now the coronavirus pandemic. The obstacles have not been few, but her vision is to make the Sierra Leone style a globally accepted style. She wants to train other designers to make her unique brand, but in order to do that she needs the space and the resources to do so.

### Developing a Large Scale Industry to Export Internationally

The fourth and final step in the value chain is to develop a large-scale industry that is able to export internationally. Fortunately for Sierra Leone, it is part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). ECOWAS was created to promote economic cooperation among member states in order to raise living standards and promote economic development. Within ECOWAS there is the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) which is a tool to facilitate the working of the Free Trade area. (ECOWAS, 2016) It ensures that goods can be circulated freely without the payment of customs duties and taxes with similar effects on imports. It also includes putting measures in place that reduce red tape and paperwork at borders. The only tax applicable is the Value Added

Tax (VAT) and Community Levy Protocol which is a tax placed on goods and services to generate tax revenues for the community. Under the ECOWAS agreement small textile business owners should be able to go through borders hassle free with no tariffs or customs duties if it is a West African good. Unfortunately barriers still exist at the borders even with ECOWAS in place. Zainab, the small business owner in Freetown expressed a few real concerns she faces at the border when importing or exporting. “ECOWAS doesn’t work” she said.

“...Customs varies and depends on the persons mood. Sometimes I go and have to end up paying \$25-\$30 per 30 kilos for customs duties. Other times I get stopped at customs because they tell me I have to pay \$15 per each piece of fabric. Then I have to pay for transportation to bring everything home. Now with COVID-19, I pay \$3 pers kilo (1 kilo for a good quality fabric is only 6 yards, which is one piece). At the end of the day I make a very small profit.”

The challenge Zainab and many other small business owners face when trading amidst West African states is that there is no standardized price for payments, taxes and fees. VAT taxes vary, customs officials at the border sometimes demand for customs duties, and unfortunately a lot of bribing and corruption is involved. ECOWAS is aware of the corruption involved and have stated that the issues they face include non-compliance with the Community Level Protocol. In speaking with other experts in trade in West Africa, they identified the need for educating business owners on the rights they have through ECOWAS. Many locals starting up a new business are not aware of or understand agreements such as ECOWAS and AGOA and what it means to them.

To identify more troubleshooting challenges businesses and organizations face in exporting internationally and entering the international market I spoke with Rachel who works for United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). Rachel is working on the West Africa Competitiveness Program (WACOMP) which is a project geared on increasing Sierra Leone’s competitiveness through enhanced productivity and trade compliance in selected value chains specifically for Cassava, Cocoa, and Palm Oil (WACOMP, 2019). The project also includes a small part on textiles for helping local tailors and gara (tie-dye) fabric designers get

into the international market. In talking with her about the international trade challenges for these farmers and small business owners, she expressed that many companies here have very limited knowledge of foreign markets and show unawareness of the benefits of international standards. In addition to be able to export internationally, goods have to meet a certain standard and obtain certifications. “Certifications are extremely expensive and each time a business has to move their goods, it is extremely costly and time consuming because of the extensive documentation.” Another issue Rachel has noticed when working with trade and now with the WACOMP project is that each organization or business has its own MOU with the government, making it difficult to move things forward in a timely manner. In terms of working in agriculture, there is also no standardized system to know fees and pricing. “When I worked with Sierra Agra, we had to pay a 2% inspection fee on the container. The import/export list only lists 3 crops that require that inspection fee, but the inspectors are charging that fee on everything aside from the rules. Investors, international businesses, and farmers need to know how much everything actually costs!” The lack of a standardized system or compliance to a system was a common theme I noticed in speaking with each interviewer.

Rachel helped me understand the issues in international trade for business owners and agriculture. In summary, understanding what agreements mean to business owners, bribery, ratifications, signatures, and passing issues through parliament are all barriers to international trade in Sierra Leone. This information gives a better idea of what challenges would arise not only for fashion designers, but also for cotton farmers in international and local trade.

## **Recommendations**

There is no one organization, business, or even president that will resolve all the issues and fix the challenges business and industries in Sierra Leone are facing. It would be impossible to transform Sierra Leone in a year. This section has been written to help industries and small business owners understand that despite all the challenges, the solutions are available and can easily be overcome. This of course is dependent on a few key factors and when I spoke with people in the field, they have identified potential solutions.

## Coordination

In 2014 there were 95 registered International NGOs and 199 National NGOs operating in the Sierra Leone in various sectors of the economy (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2014). Many countries and organizations are willing and able to enter the country to provide support and create programs that will benefit the people and its economy. In terms of textiles and cotton, I was able to speak to Country Cloth Communities Development Initiative, the Aurora Foundation, and UNIDO, but there are many organizations that exist that aim to help reduce poverty and create jobs for the people. For example Country Cloth Communities Development Initiative is working on helping rural farmers in the provinces learn to grow, harvest, weave, and sell organic cotton into the traditional country cloth. UNIDO is helping business owners in tailoring and in agriculture to have access to the international market by certifying their products and creating a standardized process. The Aurora Foundation is an organization that aims to help entrepreneurs meet international standards for their products and then help them export to the US and the EU. Multiple organizations have similar objectives but what lacks is coordination. When speaking with small business owners like Zainab and Fredericka, their vision is to reach the global market with quality Sierra Leonean fashion. They each expressed a lack of support and funding. Their vision can easily be attained through coordinating with NGO's that can provide the funds and training, and with the government to gain national support. Entrepreneurs can coordinate with NGOs who share a similar goal and who already have good government relationships. A few government ministries that can support businesses include the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Labor, Ministry of local Government and Rural Development, Ministry of Youth Affairs, and the Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SLIEPA). Communication and coordinating efforts will ensure that objectives and goals are met, which allows business owners to progress towards their vision in helping Sierra Leone's economy and entering the international market.

## Government Support

Gaining government support for development is critical in developing countries. As we can see from the history of Sierra Leone, the lack of government support in providing jobs and education, and the issue of corruption after Sierra Leone gained its independence, is what

ultimately led the country to a ten year civil war. As a whole, the government cannot make readily available resources for every industry, but there is great opportunity in having the government support small business owners in textiles by funding opportunities, creating spaces, or creating favorable policies.

Building a running factory in textile production is a much bigger solution that may not currently seem fit for the country as priorities are geared towards education, anti-corruption, agriculture and water. On the other hand, Sierra Leone has great talent in tailoring clothes from already made African print fabrics that are imported. Instead of starting a larger project and beginning from scratch in producing textiles on a large scale, the country can use its current strengths to make its way into the international market. The textile may not be an African product,(?) but designing and making a brand that speaks to a market can be something unique that is from Sierra Leone. When speaking with a retail owner in the United States who has worked hard in trying to help West Africa see the great potential African fashion has in the international market, he expressed some simple solutions. “When going to textile trade shows, there are sourcing sections where cotton and designs come from all over the world to show off their products. In the past ten years there has been major African presence, mainly from South Africa, Kenya, and Egypt. If the money is put in the right hands, the opportunities are unbelievable.” He clearly expressed that fashion designers who want to export, should be encouraged because they have access to Europe and the United States through laws such as AGOA. The challenge to doing so has a realistic solution.

“Sierra Leone needs a space to create, formal training in standardized textiles, and financial support. West Africa is not used to standardizing their products. In Sierra Leone the beautiful dresses women wear around the city and the African designed suits men wear, are all custom made. If someone in Sierra Leone wanted to buy a dress, they would go to the tailor in the neighborhood and he would measure them and make a beautiful dress. In America or Europe, when a person wants to buy a dress, they go to the store and buy a S, M, L or XL dress. The government can help support by providing a space and formal training in helping designers learn how to cut a standard Small, Medium, Large or 2XL dress. “

If a fashion designer like Fredricka from JNF Designs had a booth and some buyers at a trade show in the United States or Europe, she would need to be able to make however many items of her product buyers bought, ship it, and wait until the buyer receives the goods before the payment goes through. Unfortunately, fashion designers here do not have the money to do so. This is where government support from different ministries and SLIEPA can help women like Zainab and Fredericka to compete in the international market.

The last step the government and organizations can do is to coordinate with specific ministries and help educate business owners on laws and agreements such as AGOA and ECOWAS which elevate and reduce taxes and duties. AGOA is a preferential trade agreement with sub-Saharan African countries, allowing them to export locally made products to the United States with reduced tariffs and taxes. As expressed in the challenges, ECOWAS contains a regional trade free trade agreement that many business owners find unhelpful. Training and educating entrepreneurs and businesses on laws and international agreements is a simple solution that the local governments can do quickly and would help businesses in Sierra Leone understand their rights and potential.

To address the underlying issue on international preferential trade agreements and regional free trade agreements, Sierra Leone could emphasize the need for implementation after an agreement is ratified. The issue most business owners face begins at the border where corruption and bribery is common. Thus, if during negotiations a plan is established to ensure proper and compliant implementation, then this could reduce the corruption and bribery that causes small business owners to suffer. Other solutions that can help Sierra Leone diversify their exports, eliminate red tape at the border, reduce excessive documentation and have a more efficient international trade process, would be to engage with the WTO and implement Single Window and Trade Facilitation. This is a solution that can help address underlying challenges the country faces with International Trade.

## **Conclusion**

Since the 1800's, Sierra Leone has been plagued by corruption, engaged in a civil war which impacted education and destroyed the development of proper infrastructure. Sierra Leone's economy is dominated by a few large mining enterprises accounting for about 90% of export revenues, rendering the country vulnerable to external shocks. Sierra Leone has great opportunities for success and the current president has focused efforts in developing education, stopping corruption, and improving in infrastructure in roads and energy. Since the end of the civil war in 2002, many NGOs have entered the country providing support and aid to projects in building its economy. The people of Sierra Leone are beginning to take pride in their culture and history again as more people wear traditional clothing and have adopted African prints into their style. For Sierra Leone to create a cotton or textile industry, there are many challenges in each step of the value chain. These challenges range from producing the cotton, the lack of a market, red tape and overwhelming amounts of documentation in international trade, the lack of educating businesses on laws, and the financial and government support. Although there are many challenges, there are also many solutions. The government of Sierra Leone has been working hard in developing an anti-corruption unit to address the issue that plagues all industries and ultimately its own political structure. There are a great number of international and local NGOs that are helping provide technical training and financial aid. Many organizations are willing to help and share a common objective with business owners and local governments. Coordination is necessary and ideally it would ensure effective communication to meet each sectors objectives. Government support is also critical for local business owners in the private sector to reach the international market and ultimately help in developing Sierra Leone's economy.

## Appendix

### Traditional Country Cloth

Name given in Sierra Leone to cloth made from locally grown cotton, carded and spun into thread, and woven into strips on traditional looms. The strips are then sewn together edge to edge to form the finished cloth. The simpler types of country cloth are plain or warp-striped, using threads of natural brown cotton or threads dyed different shades of blue or green using traditional dyes. More elaborately conceived cloths called *kpokpo* are made by sewing together strips with



variations in the weft that combine to form a complex pattern across the cloth as a whole. In the past possession of such cloths was regarded as a sign of wealth and

prestige and they even functioned as a kind of currency. Country cloth is made up into shirts and gowns and headgear, particularly clothing associated with traditional ceremonies, such as the ritual gown of a Temne paramount chief or the gowns worn by boys at the completion of their initiation. Country cloth was used in hammocks and also in wrapping the dead for burial. Country cloth weaving was the centerpiece of Sierra Leone' contribution to the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley.



SPINNING COTTON, TEMNE COUNTRY.

Cotton is raised to a limited degree all over the Protectorate and is spun into coarse thread for making cloth.

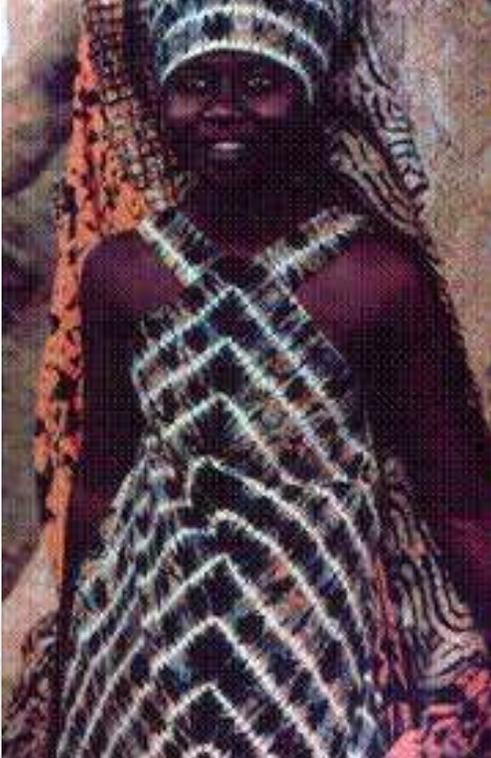


Mal-Carew Brothers, Photo., Freetown, Sierra Leone. Registered.

MAKING NATIVE CLOTH, SIERRA LEONE PROTECTORATE.

MAKING NATIVE CLOTH, SIERRA LEONE PROTECTORATE.

Traditional Gara (Tie-Dye)



Indonesian Batik vs Holland's Imitated Batik

**Original Indonesian Batik**



**Holland's Imitated Batik (African Wax Print Cloth)**



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