LABOUR MARKET PROFILE

Sierra Leone

2026

Key Labour Market Indicators

Population
9 mio

Workforce
3 mio

Informal Employment
95%

Trade Union Rights Violations
4 out of 5

danish trade union development agency

LABOUR MARKET PROFILE

Sierra Leone 2026

FACT SHEET

Labour Force Participation Rate

66%

4%

of population covered by at least one social protection benefit

Trade Union Density

19%

48%

of employees covered by CBAs

Child Labour Rate

21%

32%

Working-age population (15-24 years)

42%

Poverty Rate

26%

of youth not in education, employment or training

danish trade union development agency

PREFACE

The Danish Trade Union Development Agency (DTDA) is the development organisation of the Danish trade union movement. DTDA's work aligns with the International Labour Organization's global Decent Work Agenda (DWA), based on its four pillars: creating decent jobs, guaranteeing rights at work, extending social protection, and promoting social dialogue. The overall development objective is to eradicate poverty and support the development of just and democratic societies by promoting the DWA.

The DTDA collaborates with trade union organisations in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. The programmes' immediate objective is to assist the partner organisations in becoming change agents in their own national and regional labour market context, capable of achieving tangible improvements in the national DWA conditions and the labour-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The labour market profile brings insights to the labour market model and its trends, status, and challenges. It is prepared in collaboration with national partner organisations, providing annual narrative progress reports as part of programme implementation and monitoring. National statistical institutions and international databanks (e.g., ILOSTAT and NATLEX, World Bank Open Data, and other internationally recognised labour-related global indexes) are also used as sources of data and information.

The profile is regularly updated to reflect the latest developments. Labour Market Profiles for more than 20 countries are available on DTDA's website, ensuring stakeholders have access to the most recent information: https://www.dtda.dk/.

The DTDA supports development programmes in Sierra Leone in collaboration with the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sierra Leone's economy has delivered periods of growth but has struggled to generate broad-based structural transformation, productive employment, and inclusive income. Workers' incomes have been negatively affected by alarmingly high inflation in recent years, putting poverty reduction in limbo. Although the unemployment rate is very low, this masks that most workers are engaged in informal, low-productivity activities. This results in a narrow income tax base, constraining investment in social welfare. As a highly climate-vulnerable country, it further faces risks to workers, particularly in the agriculture-dominated economy, while a comprehensive Just Transition agenda is lacking.

The country has significantly improved the labour market's legal and policy framework in recent years. Although progress is generally strong on paper, achieving in practice is not easy for most workers, who operate in the informal economy and face weak enforcement of labour regulations. Central regional trade agreements are evolving but have weak binding labour provisions.

Social dialogue has contributed to labour reforms at the national tripartite level, benefitting cooperation between social partners. About 48% of employees are covered by collective bargaining, but they are still a minority of the total employment. Bipartite social dialogue at the enterprise level persists fragile and uneven reflected in the underdeveloped economic transformation.

Sierra Leone has a young and rapidly growing workforce, but the labour market delivers limited opportunities in the formal sector. The industry sector stays narrow, with a modest employment expansion. An ambitious digital policy framework has become a regional example of government-led digital transformation, and the gig economy is growing but continues emerging. Skills gap, restricted vocational training, and a mismatch between education outcomes and labour market still impede employment prospects. A boost of emigrated workers has gained weight on the domestic economy through remittance inflows, costing the loss of skilled labour. Gender inequality is visible in a sharp employee gender gap and women's relatively low business management positions.

Important legal and policy steps were taken to strengthen social protection in the country, but not many workers are covered by formal schemes. Limited fiscal resources, institutional capacity gaps, and weak social contribution undermine the system. Some alternative informal social protection arrangements are present, but they remain exposed and provide limited protection.

COUNTRY MAP

Source: National Online Project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Tables

Figures

Boxes

ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

Key Findings

- The economic development model's challenge remains unresolved → not creating enough productive, formal-sector jobs to match demographic growth.
- Poverty reduction has been in limbo in recent years.
- Narrow income tax base undermines the welfare system.
- Highly climate-vulnerable country → lack a green jobs strategy.

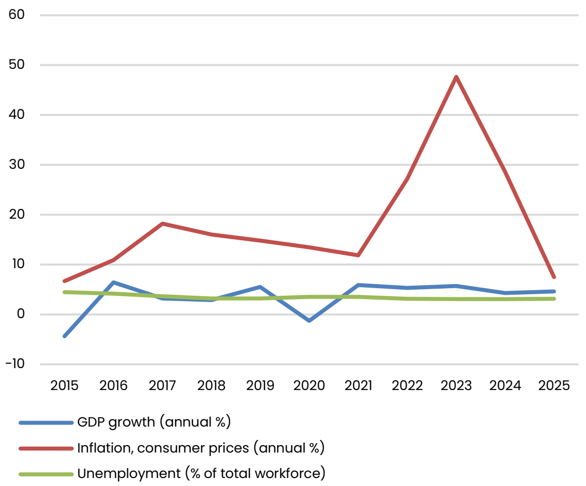
Strained Economic Development Model

Sierra Leone's economic development model has produced periods of GDP growth, but it has struggled to generate broad-based structural transformation and productive employment (Figure 1). The economy remains heavily dependent on extractive industries, subsistence agriculture, and a very large informal economy. A central feature of the model is its reliance on natural resources — especially mining — combined with low levels of industrialisation and weak productivity growth outside extractive sectors. Agriculture remains the largest employer, while mining contributes significantly to exports and fiscal revenues but creates relatively few jobs.

Inflation Eroded Earnings

Consumer price inflation declined sharply from its 2023 alarming peak (Figure 1), supported by tighter monetary and fiscal policies, exchange-rate stability, easing international food and energy prices, and stronger domestic food production. The easing of price pressures has reduced the erosion of workers' purchasing power and improved conditions for household consumption and private investment (see more in the Working Conditions section).

Figure 1: Gross domestic product, inflation, and unemployment growth trends in Sierra Leone, %, 2015-2025



Source: World Bank Group, World Development Indicators.

Misguiding Low Unemployment

Sierra Leone's official unemployment rate remains relatively low (Figure 1 above), but this masks widespread underemployment and informality in the labour market. Most workers are engaged in low-productivity activities such as subsistence agriculture, petty trade, and informal services because the economy has not generated enough formal-sector jobs.

Poverty Reduction in Limbo

Poverty declined slowly and unevenly over the long term due to post-conflict recovery, economic growth, and expansion in mining and services. Latest data from 2018 show that around 42% of the population was living below the $3.0-a-day poverty line.[1] A central structural weakness in the economy is the limited broad-based income growth. The negative impact of sharp increase in consumer prices in recent years has reduced real incomes, which most likely increased poverty and economic vulnerability.

Narrow Income Tax Base

Sierra Leone struggles with a narrow income tax base because most economic activity takes place in the informal economy, where incomes are low and difficult to tax. On this background, government tax revenues remain limited, reducing fiscal space for investment in education, skills development, and social protection.

Just Transition Agenda

Highly Climate-Vulnerable Country

Sierra Leone is considered highly vulnerable to climate change due to its heavy dependence on climate-sensitive sectors, limited infrastructure resilience, widespread poverty, and low adaptive capacity. The country frequently experiences floods, landslides, coastal erosion, heat stress, and irregular rainfall patterns, all of which affect livelihoods, food security, and economic stability.

Agriculture — which employs most of the workforce — is particularly exposed to changing rainfall patterns, droughts, and soil degradation. Climate shocks reduce crop yields and rural incomes, increasing food insecurity and poverty. Coastal communities around Freetown and other low-lying areas are also increasingly threatened by sea-level rise and flooding.

Lack Fully Green Jobs Strategy

Sierra Leone has not yet launched a standalone national green jobs strategy in the way some larger economies have. But it has recently developed and launched several policy frameworks that strongly integrate green growth, clean energy transition, and job creation objectives. However, financing and implementation capacity remain limited relative to the scale of the challenge and dominance in informality.

Demands for Just Transition Agenda

At the regional level, African unions under ITUC-Africa are actively promoting climate justice, green jobs, and worker protections within energy and economic transitions. Sierra Leone's unions are part of these broader continental networks, including a Just Transition Agenda (see also Appendix Table 6). The practical integration of Just Transition into national labour and industrial policy remains limited due to weak institutional capacity, high informality, and limited industrialisation. In practice, the trade union movement could be described as "emerging" rather than leading in the Just Transition agenda, but its participation in regional and international labour-climate platforms is growing.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Key Findings

- Reforming the labour-related legal framework has improved workers conditions in paper → benefitting tripartite consultations.
- Weak binding labour provisions in regional trade agreements → limits ability to improve labour standards.
- High informality creates deep gaps between laws and practices.

Reforming the Legal Framework

In recent years, Sierra Leone has revamped and significantly improved the legal labour-related framework (Box 1). Reforms were broadly prepared through tripartite consultation processes involving the social partners: government, employers' organisations, and trade unions. All main labour laws are outlined in Appendix Table 3.

Workers' Rights Legal Flaws

In Sierra Leone, the right to freedom of association is enshrined in the Constitution and recognised by law but strictly regulated, besides does not specifically protect workers from anti-union discrimination. The right to collective bargaining is recognised by law but strictly regulated. The right to strike is not specifically protected in law, but neither is it explicitly prohibited except for workers in essential services.[2] Several specific legal barriers that restriction workers to practice their rights are detected (see Appendix Table 4).

Box 1: Labour Law Reforms in Sierra Leone

The main features of main labour-related law reforms:

The Employment Act of 2023 – moving toward a more rights-based and regulated employment system. The Act introduced clearer and more enforceable labour rights, strengthened protections for women at work, businesses now face significantly higher compliance obligations, and encourages movement from informal employment toward more formal labour arrangements.

The Industrial Relations and Trade Union Act of 2024 – promoting a more formal and rules-based industrial-relations system. Its main effects are stronger institutional recognition of trade unions, clearer dispute-resolution procedures, modernization of collective bargaining, and closer alignment with international labour standards.

The Work Permit Act of 2023 – regulating the employment of foreign workers, protecting local employment opportunities, and strengthening government oversight of expatriate labour.

RTAs with Labour Provisions

Sierra Leone has signed two important regional trade agreements (RTAs) with strong labour provisions: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).[3] The labour law reforms depicted in

Box 1 above were connected to regional and international integration processes. However, the RTAs do not contain strong binding labour standards or enforceable sanctions mechanisms tied to workers' rights. It limits their ability to improve labour standards. Trade unions across Africa, through the Tunis Declaration, have called for the inclusion of labour rights and social clauses in the AfCFTA to ensure alignment with international labour standards and the Decent Work Agenda.[4]

Gaps Between Law and Practice

Although Sierra Leone has modernised and improved its labour framework through important reforms, major gaps remain between the law and its implementation in practice. This situation is due to several factors, such as weak enforcement capacity, widespread informal employment, limited labour inspections, weak access to justice, gender inequality, child labour, and low social protection coverage.

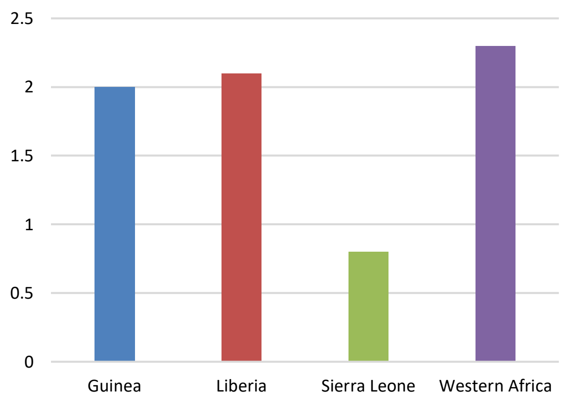
Ratified ILO Conventions

International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions enumerate international principles and rights at work. Appendix Table 5 shows that ten out of ten Fundamental Conventions and two of four Governance Conventions have been ratified, and ten of 178 Technical Conventions are up-to-date and actively promoted. The latest ratified conventions are the Social Security Convention (C102), the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), and the Labour Statistics Convention (C160), all from 2022.

Relatively High Rights Compliance

The Sustainable Development Goals indicator 8.8.2 measures compliance with fundamental labour rights. Based on ILO textual sources and national legislation, Sierra Leone's scoring has been stable during the last decade, landing well compared with other Western Africa countries (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Level of national compliance with labour rights among Sierra Leone and neighbouring countries, 2024



Note: The value ranges from 0 to 10, with 0 being the best possible score, indicating higher levels of compliance with freedom of association and collective bargaining (FACB) rights) and 10 the worst.

Sources: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT.

Observing Workers' Rights Violations

The ILO's independent supervisory system body – the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) – has observations and direct requests for conventions. The CEACR noted that Sierra Leone's laws restrict certain public servants from exercising their rights to association and assembly, and that any relevant review of the laws to afford them these rights would first require an amendment of the Constitution, which is currently under review.[5]

SOCIAL PARTNERS

Key Findings

- Coordination among state governance institutions is often fragmented.
- Unionism benefits a relatively well organised structure → A significant trade union density.
- The employers' organisation structure remains relatively centralised but limited in outreach.

The social partners constitute the tripartite labour governance system, and the central institutions are summarised below:

Government

Authority for Labour Issues

In Sierra Leone, the primary government institution responsible for labour matters is the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MLESS). The ministry oversees labour and employment policy, employment regulation, industrial relations, occupational safety, social security coordination, and workers' rights.

The MLESS is involved in social and labour relations governance with other ministries and agencies, including:

- National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT).
- Ministry of Technical and Higher Education.
- Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education.
- Ministry of Youth Affairs.
- Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs.
- National Commission for Social Action.

Recently, MLESS has promoted several labour governance initiatives, such as labour market information systems, job-tracking systems, digital labour cards, and work-permit modernisation.

Institutional Governance Weaknesses

The labour market landscape is dominated by informal employment, making enforcement of labour laws and social protection coverage difficult. It mirrors weak institutional capacity within labour administration bodies, including inadequate labour inspection systems and reduces the government's ability to monitor working conditions and enforce labour standards.

Coordination among governance is often fragmented, contributing to weak alignment between skills development programmes and labour market demands.

An impact of these governance weaknesses leads to vulnerable employment, poor wages and working conditions, and limited social security coverage. These conditions also contribute to outward migration of skilled labour, social instability among underemployed youth, and slower economic transformation. This limits Sierra Leone's ability to achieve sustainable and inclusive development.

Trade Unions

The trade union movement in Sierra Leone is active, playing an important role in representing workers' interests, engaging in collective bargaining, advocating for labour rights, and participating in national social dialogue.

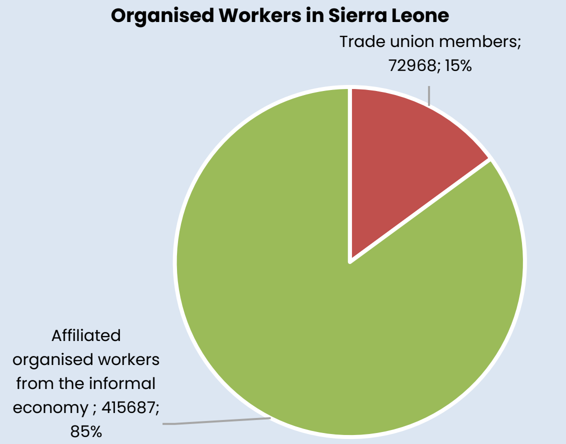
Unionism Structure

The main umbrella organisation for the trade union movement is the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC), serving as the national federation. The congress coordinates labour advocacy and engages with social partners on labour policy, as well as represents Sierra Leonean workers in regional and international labour forums and networks.

The trade union structure in Sierra Leone generally consists of:

- **National Trade Union Centre:** SLLC acts as the apex body coordinating affiliated unions nationally.
- **Sectoral and Industrial Unions:** These organise workers within specific sectors such as education, mining, transport, healthcare, public administration, and construction.
- **Enterprise-Level Unions:** Workplace-based union branches represent workers within individual companies or institutions.
- **Tripartite Labour Relations System:** Trade unions are engaged with social partners and labour institutions. This structure supports dialogue on wages, labour law reform, dispute resolution, and working conditions.

Box 2: Status of Trade Unions



- Trade unions in Sierra Leone organise 489,000 workers, of which 15% are traditional formal trade union members.
- A broad trade union density reached 19% of total employment (or 28% of employees, which was higher than the OECD average of 16%).[6]
- A distinctive feature is the inclusion of organised workers from the informal economy such as bike riders, petty traders, fishermen, and porters.

Unions Show Resilience amid Challenges

The labour market is dominated by informal employment, where workers often have unstable incomes, limited legal protection, and low capacity to pay union dues. It makes organisation and collective bargaining difficult. Trade unions also struggle with weak enforcement of labour legislation, and the effects of recurring economic crises, including inflation and underemployment. These hurdles negatively affect social dialogue and trust in labour institutions.

Trade unions have shown resilience by expanding the organisation of informal economy workers, engaging in tripartite dialogue, and cooperating with civil society actors to defend workers' rights and promote labour market reforms. Nevertheless, the development of strategies or representative structures for workers in the digital platform or gig economy is at an early stage.

Systematic Violations of Rights

Sierra Lerone is ranked 4 out of 5 (5 is the worst) on the Global Rights Index: Systematic violations of workers' rights have weakened labour protections and contributed to a labour market by widespread informality, vulnerable employment, and poor working conditions.[7]

Employers' Organisations

Actor in the Industrial Relation System

Employers' organisations in Sierra Leone are mainly structured around **the Sierra Leone Employers' Federation (SLEF)**. It serves as the main national umbrella organisation, representing employers' interests; for instance, in tripartite consultations with the government and trade unions. SLEF participates in labour policy discussions, supports employers on compliance with labour legislation, and is represented on institutions such as the National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT). Thus, they play an important role in social dialogue and labour market governance.

Box 3: Main Employers' Organisation

- **Sierra Leone Employers' Federation (SLEF)** is composed of affiliated companies and sector-based business members from industries such as manufacturing, mining, transport, finance, commerce, and services.

- The structure includes a governing executive council, a secretariat responsible for daily administration, and specialised committees dealing with labour relations, policy, training, and social dialogue.

SLEF Encounters Hurdles

The federation's structure remains relatively centralised and limited in outreach, reflecting the small formal private sector in Sierra Leone. It causes financial and institutional capacity challenges, partly due to the dominance of small and informal enterprises in the economy. This situation complicates employers' organisations in expanding membership, strengthening regional representation, and increasing institutional capacity.

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SOCIAL DIALOGUE

Key Findings

- Recent labour law reforms improved Sierra Leone's industrial relations system.
- Demonstrating a relatively high collective bargaining coverage among employees.
- The labour dispute resolution system is currently in a transition phase.

The role of social dialogue in addressing labour-related socio-economic issues encompasses negotiation, consultation, and the exchange of information among governments, employers, and workers. Its functioning depends on mutual trust, institutional capacity, and an enabling legal environment.

Social Dialogue Model

The adoption of the Employment Act 2023 and the Industrial Relations and Trade Union Act 2024 marked significant progress in strengthening the legal and institutional framework for labour relations and reaffirmed the role of tripartite consultations in labour governance. These reforms improved provisions related to trade union recognition, collective bargaining, labour dispute resolution, and workers' protections.

Social Dialogue Tripartite Forums

The country has several national institutions for bi- and tripartite social dialogue (see Box 4). But they still face challenges related to limited financial and technical resources, weak labour inspection systems, and the dominance of informal employment.

Box 4: Main Social Dialogue Institutions

The leading tripartite mechanisms in Sierra Leone linking with the recent law reforms are listed below:

- **Joint National Negotiating Board (JNNB)** - discusses wages and employment conditions, and various ad hoc tripartite consultations on labour law reforms, minimum wages, occupational safety and health, and employment policies.

- **National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT)** – involves tripartite representation in labour and social protection governance.

- **Trade Group Councils** – to strengthen sector-level dialogue and collective bargaining between employers and workers.

Constrained Bipartite Social Dialogue

Bipartite social dialogue between trade unions and employers' organisations exists, particularly in formal sectors, where collective bargaining agreements are more common. Dialogue remains fragile and uneven in the private sector, facing micro-enterprise-dominated economic structure, limited implementation of labour standards, weaker policy effectiveness, and reduced social cohesion and trust.

Status of Social Dialogue

There are some positive steps ahead in social dialogue via the National Labour Conference in 2025. It has been registered as a landmark tripartite event that brings together the social partners to shape inclusive labour policies. It is a new set up, which is more functional at the national level than at the workplace level, and its impact on the labour market is too early to assess.

Collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) coverage signals the social dialogue scope: Sierra Leone's government listed 19 collective agreements were in force in 2025; lack of data available on the number of workers covered.[8] At the end of the 2010s, other data from SLLC suggested that CBAs covered 186,000 workers, equalling 48% of employees.[9] However, these employees were just one out of ten (12%) of total employment. In other words, the informal employment dominance undermines the CBA coverage in practice.

Social Dialogue Obstacles

The main barriers for social dialogue in Sierra Leone stem from structural weaknesses in the labour market, limited institutional capacity, weak enforcement of labour rights, linking with the overwhelming size of the informal economy. These hindrances significantly reduce the effectiveness of collective bargaining, labour regulation, and worker representation, ultimately affecting employment quality, wages, productivity, and social stability.

Industrial Relations Dispute System

Improved Labour Dispute Resolution

The recent legal and institutional reforms modernised labour laws included to improve the labour dispute resolution system framework (revisit Box 1). It linked with strengthening trade union rights, clarified procedures for collective bargaining and industrial action. The use of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) methods was expanded, such as conciliation, mediation, and arbitration. The government has moreover introduced administrative modernisation measures, involving digital labour systems. A brief overview of the resolution system is available in Appendix Table 7.

Resolution System's Weaknesses

Although reforms have improved the labour dispute resolution system in paper, major challenges remain. For instance, institutional constraints such as understaffing and inadequate training, and disputes may take significant time to resolve, especially in formal judicial channels. Enforcement weaknesses are complicating the processes, not to mention even positive rulings or settlements may face compliance challenges. Political influence concerns and ministerial involvement in industrial disputes could raise concerns about neutrality in highly sensitive cases. Alongside, the widespread informal economy brings exclusion since most workers operate outside formal employment relationships and rarely access ADR institutions.

STATUS OF WORKING CONDITIONS

Key Findings

- Reforms improved the wage system with stronger national-level tripartite processes → progress is still partial.
- Deteriorated real minimum wage growth → eroding low-income workers' income.
- Most unskilled and informal workers often earn below a decent standard of living.

Working conditions directly affect workers' well-being, productivity, and job satisfaction. The state of these conditions has broader implications for the labour market, influencing economic performance, employment patterns, and social stability.

Dual Wage System

Sierra Leone has a small formal sector with government-regulated pay structures and minimum wage rules, and a dominating informal economy where wages are mostly market-driven and weakly enforced.

Minimum Wage Limitations

The Employment Act 2023 significantly improved the legal framework for the wage system on several ways, such as strengthening minimum wage regulation, increasing public-sector salaries, and improving collective bargaining structures.

The practical impact is strongest in the formal sector, concentrated in public employment, larger private firms, and unionised workplaces. Weak enforcement, especially in the informal economy, complicates the applications of the system.

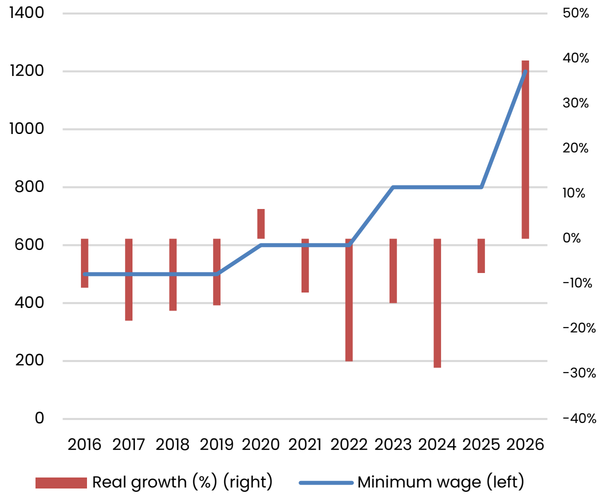
Generally, the reforms impact on the labour market remains gradual due to the high informality employment, enforcement institutions are weak, and high inflation has stymied the real value of wage increases.

High Inflation Weakened Real incomes

High inflation in consumer prices in Sierra Leone hit hard, reducing workers' incomes purchasing power. It led to weakened living standards, intensified wage demand, and exposed the vulnerability for informal workers.

These abovementioned conditions are further affected by irregular minimum wage adjustments, which have failed to keep pace with inflation and have consequently eroded the minimum wage in real terms (see Figure 3). Calculations show that despite significant nominal minimum wage hikes in 2020, 2023, and 2026, the real minimum wage (with deduced inflation) declined by an average of 7% per year over the period. In other words, although recent labour reforms and wage increases provided some relief, inflation has limited how much workers benefited in real economic terms. It likewise indicates that poverty has most likely been on the rise.

Figure 3: Nominal Monthly Minimum Wage (new Leone) and Its Real Growth (%) in Sierra Leone, 2016-2026



Note: Real minimum wage is based on nominal minimum wage growth deducted by inflation.
Source: WageIndicator.org; DTDA's estimations on real minimum wage growth.

Although Sierra Leone has strengthened the legal and institutional framework for collective bargaining through recent labour-law reforms, and collective bargaining is relatively well established in parts of formal and unionised sectors, the effectiveness and quality of CBAs remain uneven in practice.

Pressures on Wage Tax Systems

The country's wage and income-tax systems are becoming more modern and legally structured. Both remain constrained, though, due to the informal employment dominance, weak enforcement capacity, and inflation pressures. These factors combine broader labour market structures, intertwining limited formal job creation, weak social protection coverage, and inequality between formal and informal workers.

TRENDS THAT AFFECT THE LABOUR MARKET

Key Findings

- The population growth and very young population are significantly shaping the workforce landscape.
- Productive, formal job creation is not keeping pace with labour supply.
- An early-to-mid stage of 4IR development → strong political commitment but encounters ongoing structural constraints.

The workforce is shaped by a combination of structural challenges and evolving global trends. The following contemporary issues influence employment dynamics, job quality, and labour market inclusivity:

Fast Growing Young Workforce

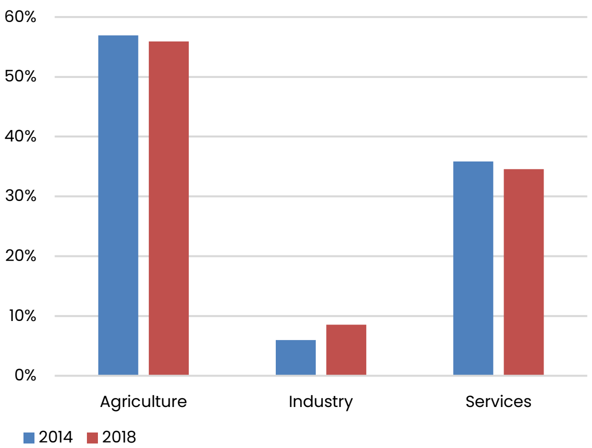
Sierra Leone's population growth has slowed in the last two decades, which is reflected in birth rates are falling bit by bit, life expectancy and healthcare are improving, and urbanisation is increasing. Currently, the population represents 8.7 million.

The young population is shaping the workforce. Every year, large numbers of Sierra Leonese young people enter the labour market, increasing pressure to create sufficient jobs and training opportunities. While the demographic development offers potential for economic growth and a future demographic dividend, many workers currently depend on informal and low-paid employment due to limited formal job opportunities. The urbanisation rate of 44% of the total population is driven mainly by migration to cities such as Freetown, demanding for skills development for transforming labour-market needs.

Small Employment Structural Shifts

Sierra Leone's employment structure appears a minor shift from agriculture towards industry and services in urban-based employment (see Figure 4). This alteration remains incomplete, with a large share of workers concentrated in informal and low-productivity activities. Sectors capable of generating higher-skilled employment — such as manufacturing, technology, and modern services — remain relatively underdeveloped. It is worth mentioning that that just one out of 10 of total employment are registered as employees (i.e., more formal workers).

Figure 4: Employment by economic activity trend in Sierra Leone, %, 2014-2018



Source: Sierra Leone's Labour Force Survey and the Integrated Household Survey.

These imbalances are caught by high informal employment, skills mismatches, migration of skilled workers, and frustration among educated young people seeking decent work.

4IR in Progress, but Facing Hurdles

Sierra Leone is making some progress toward the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) through ambitious digital transformation policies, growing investment in artificial intelligence, digital governance, fintech, and technology education. The government's National Innovation and Digital Strategy has positioned the country as an emerging digital policy leader in Western Africa.

The transition toward the 4IR is expected to reshape the labour market in the country. They are gradually expanding opportunities in online freelancing, digital services, customer support, data entry, mobile-based work, and remote outsourcing through improvements in internet connectivity and digital skills development. It helps to create flexible work opportunities, including platform-based jobs.

The phenomenon still faces challenges, including weak digital infrastructure, unreliable electricity, limited broadband access, shortages of advanced digital skills, and low international investor confidence. Platform work remains largely unregulated; many gig jobs are informal, unstable, and lack social protection or long-term security.

Box 5: Trade Unions and the 4IR

The SLLC recognises the rapid growth of digital labour platforms and the increasing number of workers engaged in platform-based work. Key dynamics of 4IR:[10]

- The widespread informal economy is challenging workers, like digital gig-workers, under collective bargaining umbrellas and unionism.
- The federation is concerned about the working conditions, labour rights, and social protection of platform workers, many of whom remain outside formal labour protection mechanisms.
- Preliminary initiatives to organise or recruit platform workers into trade unions emerged, regarding their presence, contribution, and rights within the broader labour discourse.
- Initial steps for platform for dialogue among social partners on the realities of digital work and the need for adequate labour protection frameworks.
- The SLLC's priority is to raise awareness about the growing presence of platform workers in the labour market and to advocate for the recognition and protection of their rights, including decent working conditions, fair remuneration, social protection, freedom of association, and access to collective representation.

THEMATIC DIMENSIONS SETTING THE WORKFORCE

Cross-cutting issues notably affect the labour market when intersecting with various economic, social, and environmental dimensions, impacting workers and employers across multiple sectors.

Informal economy

The informal economy plays a dual role in labour markets – providing a critical employment buffer with a structural constraint on labour productivity, wages, and social protection.

Dominating Informality

About 95% of employment in Sierra Leone operate in the informal economy (those concentrated in 'non-agriculture' reach 88%, such as trade, transport, small-scale manufacturing, and services).[11] This stance is characterised by small businesses, self-employment, casual labour, and family-based enterprises, often without formal registration.

Formalise Labour Market Initiatives

The country has introduced several formalisation initiatives to reduce the massive informal economy. Important reforms have included one-stop business registration systems, awareness campaigns, small and medium enterprise tax exemptions, and programmes to strengthen social protection and digital finance adoption. The government has additionally promoted financial literacy and digital payment systems to help informal businesses build financial records and gain access to institutional credit.

The government further presented a national blueprint to extend social protection to workers in the informal economy in 2025, which could improve the formalisation of the employment structures (see more in the Social Protection section).

Tripartite Informal Economy Forum

A Tripartite Informal Economy Forum remains at an emerging developing stage, representing a platform for dialogue between social partners on informal economy issues. They have focused on improving representation of informal workers, expanding social protection, supporting formalisation initiatives, and integrating informal economy concerns into national employment and development policies. Organised informal workers, unions (traders and transport), cooperatives, and labour groups have increasingly participated in consultations on labour market reforms and economic governance.

This forum is not a fully operational, institutionalised body. It exists mainly as a policy concept and series of initiatives, rather than a permanent forum. They struggle with insufficient funding, fragmented informal worker representation, and inconsistent follow-up on policy implementation. The lack of sustained dialogue between government and informal entrepreneurs continues to hinder formalisation and labour market transformation efforts.

Organising Informal Workers

The SLLC and some sector-based unions have expanded efforts to include informal workers within broader labour movement structures. As previously indicated, five out of six (85%) of SLLC's members are organised workers from the informal economy (revisit Box 2).

Many informal worker organisations lack stable funding, legal recognition, negotiation power, and nationwide coordination. High levels of poverty, low literacy, and distrust of public institutions further make collective organising difficult.

Informality Impact on Labour Market

Sierra Leone's labour market is heavily affected by the large number of informal workers who are sidelined for labour rights, social protection, occupational safety, and collective bargaining mechanisms. This results in job insecurity, low wages, unsafe working conditions, and high vulnerability to poverty and economic shocks. Weak worker protection also limits productivity, skills development, and economic formalisation, while reducing workers' ability to negotiate fair conditions.

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Migration

Migration flows significantly influence the labour market by shaping labour supply and demand, wage levels, skills distribution, and social dynamics.

Developing Migration Framework

Sierra Leone is moving from an ad hoc migration system toward a more structured labour migration governance model. They have made advancement in aligning migration governance with regional and international standards, especially through ECOWAS free-movement rules and labour migration policies.

Major recent developments have been the National Labour Migration Policy (NLMP), launched in 2020, and the Overseas Employment and Migrant Workers Act of 2023. The Act established the first comprehensive legal framework, regulating overseas employment and protecting migrant workers. It strengthened oversight of recruitment agencies, introduced safeguards for migrant workers' rights and welfare, and forms part of a broader package of labour market reforms aimed at improving labour governance. Although it is expected to promote safer and more orderly labour migration, evidence of its measurable impact on labour market outcomes remains limited due to its recent implementation.

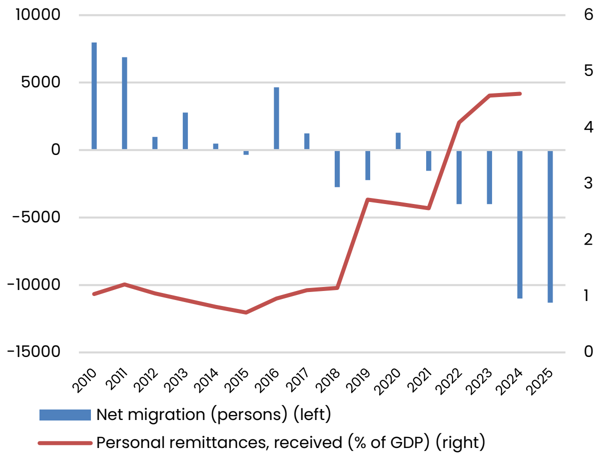
Cancelling Labour Migration Ban

A key turning point was the lifting in 2021 of Sierra Leone's temporary labour migration ban. The ban had been imposed because of several factors, such as exploitation of migrant workers abroad, unregulated recruitment, and trafficking concerns. After the ban was lifted, the government shifted toward a more regulated labour export model, using licensed recruiters, and stronger oversight mechanisms.

Growth of Labour Export Migration

Sierra Leone has experienced increasingly negative net migration in recent years; or stated differently, more people leave the country for better economic opportunities abroad than enter it (see Figure 5). This trend is linked to the mentioned labour migration ban, along with persistent youth underemployment, limited formal job creation, and a series of negative economic impacts with rising living costs. The government has also expanded regulated overseas labour migration through bilateral agreements and recruitment reforms, particularly with Gulf countries, which has supported outward migration.

Figure 5: Net Migration and Personal Remittance Trends in Sierra Leone, 2010-2025



Source: The World Bank, World Development Indicators.

Remittances Help Poverty Mitigation

The outward migration and remittance inflows have started to play an increasingly important role in the economy (see Figure 5 above). The impact of the NLMP supported a significant source of household income in recent years, backing consumption, education, healthcare, and small business activities for many families. However, a large share of transfers still moves through informal channels, making the full scale of remittance flows difficult to measure accurately. Dependence on remittances also reflects broader structural weaknesses in the domestic labour market, including low formal job creation and limited economic diversification.

Worker Migration Flow Results

The widespread informal economy complicates the management of labour migration flows, while limited decent work opportunities continue to drive workers towards migration. For example, weak institutional capacity and limited enforcement of migration regulations make it difficult to effectively monitor recruitment agencies, protect migrant workers, and collect reliable migration data.

Many migrant workers remain vulnerable to exploitation, unsafe working conditions, trafficking, and irregular migration channels, particularly in low-skilled overseas jobs. Some bring brain drain as skilled professionals leave for better opportunities abroad, while growing dependence on remittances highlights continuing structural weaknesses in the domestic labour market.

Trade Unions and Labour Migration

Sierra Leone's trade union movement increasingly participates in discussions on labour migration policy, migrant worker protection, fair recruitment, and workers' rights. They have supported awareness campaigns on safe migration, ethical recruitment practices, and protection against exploitation and trafficking.

Although the trade union density is relatively high and they do not ignore migrant workers, their engagement in migration governance is still emerging and constrained by institutional capacity, informality, and the rapid growth of outward labour migration.

Child Labour

Child labour has several adverse effects on the labour market. It provides a source of cheap labour, allowing employers to pay lower wages. This factor is often connected with a lack of decent wages and job opportunities, forcing families to rely on child labour for survival. These child labourers grow into unskilled adults and are more likely to remain in low-paying, unstable jobs.

Laws Combating Child Labour

Although Sierra Leone has a legal framework for combating child labour that is aligned with international standards, enforcement remains weak in practice.[12] The gap between legislation and implementation is a central issue.

High Child Labour Rate

Sierra Leone's child labour rate (i.e., economic activity) is in line with the sub-Saharan Africa average, both at 21% for children aged 5–17.[13] This condition echoes an environment in which child labour becomes both an economic survival strategy and a symptom of broader structural weaknesses in the labour market and social protection system.

Underlying Factors Drive Child Labour

The country's high child labour rate is sustained by persistent poverty, widespread informal employment, limited access to quality education, and weak enforcement of labour and child protection laws.

Many families depend on children's work for household survival, particularly in agriculture, artisanal mining, fishing, street vending, and domestic work, where regulation is limited. Economic shocks, inflation, and food insecurity have further increased household vulnerability and reliance on child labour as a coping strategy. Shortages of labour inspectors, weak institutional capacity, and social acceptance of child work in some sectors also continue to make child labour difficult to reduce despite existing legal protections.

Trade Unions and Child Labour

Trade unions are increasingly recognised as important social partners in Sierra Leone's child labour response, especially in promoting rights-based labour standards, decent work, and stronger labour governance. Their role is supportive rather than leading, with government agencies and international organisations still drive most large-scale anti-child-labour initiatives. Moreover, many unions primarily represent formal-sector workers, while child labour is concentrated in informal family-based or subsistence activities that are difficult to monitor and regulate.

Gender

Gender shapes labour market dynamics, affecting employment opportunities, wages, job security, and economic growth.

Strong Legal Gender Equality

Sierra Leone has strengthened its legal framework for gender equality in the labour market through constitutional protections, international commitments, and recent reforms; for instance, the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act of 2022 promotes equal pay, non-discrimination, and improved representation of women. The Medium-Term National Development Plan (MTNDP) 2024-2030 further sets gender equality as a crosscutting issue. Nevertheless, the gap between legal protections and actual labour market outcomes remains considerable.

Employment Gender Disparities

Sierra Leonean women workers are heavily concentrated in informal and low-paid work, with weaker access to formal employment, vocational training, land, finance, and social protection.[14] Data show that the relatively higher women share of the working-age population reflects a combination of male migration, higher male mortality, and the large participation of women in informal economic activities, not to mention a very low rate as employees (see more in Table 1).

Table 1: Key indicators for employed gender gaps in Sierra Leone, %, latest data

	Men	Women
Working-age population share	46%	54%
Employment share	48%	52%
Unemployment rate	2.1%	1.2%
Employees rate	20%	4.6%
Self-employed rate	77%	95%
Employers rate	2.1%	3.4%

Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT.

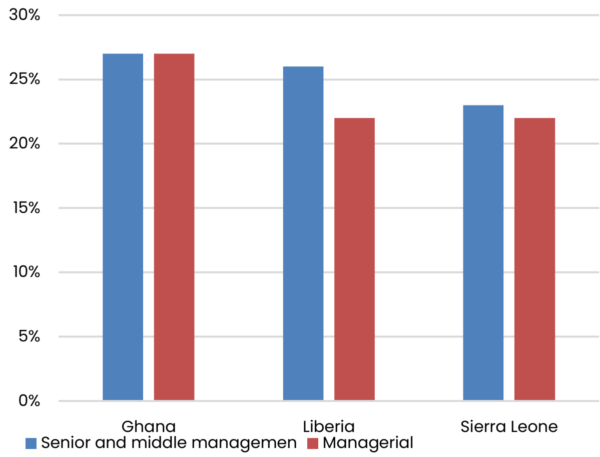
High poverty levels, unpaid care responsibilities, and limited childcare support reduce women's economic participation. Traditional gender norms, gender-based violence, unequal educational opportunities, and workplace discrimination also continue to restrict women's advancement in higher-paying and decision-making positions. Although legal protections for gender equality have improved in paper, implementation remains uneven, particularly in the informal economy where most women work.

Status of Women's Leadership

At the policy level, the country has made progress in increasing women's representation in management positions, supported by the mentioned gender equality reform. However, Sierra Leonean women workers remain underrepresented in managerial and decision-making roles in practice, particularly in the private sector and higher-paying industries, which basically is in line with neighbouring countries (see Figure 6).

Structural barriers such as unequal access to education, finance, professional networks, and formal employment. It is combined with other previously mentioned issues, continue to limit women's advancement. This underrepresentation reduces gender diversity in leadership, contributes to labour market inequality, and limits the full use of the country's human capital and economic potential.

Figure 6: Proportion of women in senior & middle management and managerial position in Sierra Leone and neighbouring countries, %, latest data



Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT.

Trade Unions and Gender Equity

Sierra Leone's trade unions are engaged in promoting gender equality through advocacy for equal pay, non-discrimination, maternity protection, and stronger protections against workplace harassment and gender-based violence.

Women's participation in unions has improved, particularly in public sector unions. Instead, they remain underrepresented in many senior union leadership positions.[15]

Trade union efforts are constrained by the large informal economy, where many women work outside formal union coverage, as well as by limited institutional resources and persistent traditional gender norms. On this background, unions play an important but still developing role in advancing gender equality in the labour market.

Youth

Youth is the labour market's future backbone, playing a central role in shaping employment trends, productivity, and economic growth.

A Young Country

In Sierra Leone, over 70% of population under the age of 35.[16] A massive youth bulge enters the labour market in large numbers each year – approximately 600,000 jobs need to be created in the coming years.[17] While this creates potential for economic growth, the country currently struggles to generate enough productive jobs, dependence on informal activities, and emigration. The youth bulge places considerable pressure on the labour market and poses massive social and economic challenges.

Ambitious Youth Policy Framework

The country updated its labour framework with the new labour law package (revisit Box 1), benefiting a stronger labour regulation. A more active youth-employment policy is promoted with integration of youth employment into national development planning. A major recent initiative is the Youth Employment Scheme (YES), which is designed to create 500,000 new jobs for young people across public and private sectors by 2030.[18] The authorities further expanded technical vocational and education training (TVET) reform and supported apprenticeship systems (see more in the Education and Training section).

Trade Unions and Youth

The trade union movement in Sierra Leone has increasingly engaged in advocacy on issues affecting young workers. Nevertheless, this particularly population group is not easy to involve in unionism due to a lack of awareness and/or incentives; for instance, most youth work outside the formal sector, often with irregular or temporary employment, which is making it difficult to organise.

Youth Employment Characteristics

Youth employment in Sierra Leone is characterised by high levels of informal and vulnerable work, with most young people engaged in small-scale trading, agriculture, transport, mining, or other low-productivity activities rather than formal wage employment. Underemployment and unstable incomes are more common than complete unemployment, especially among urban youth seeking limited formal-sector jobs.

The labour market is observed by significant skills mismatches, weak school-to-work transitions, and strong gender and urban–rural inequalities. This situation leads many young people rely on necessity-driven self-employment and multiple income-generating activities to survive in an economy with limited formal job creation.

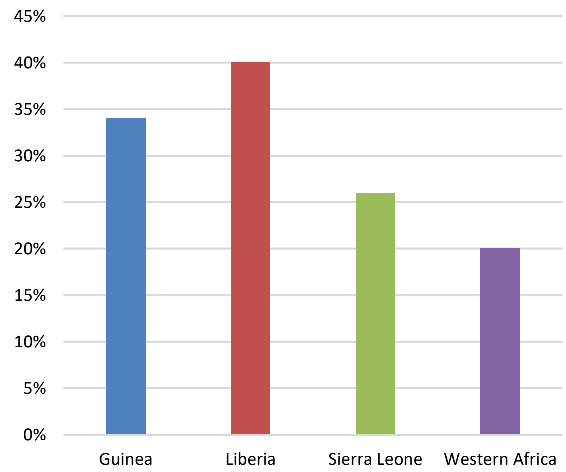
Misguiding Low Youth Unemployment

The country has a low youth unemployment rate of 2.2% based on the standard labour-force definitions. This statistically measurement masks extensive underemployment and informal, low-productivity work among young people. As mentioned, most youth are active in informal survival activities rather than securely employed in stable formal-sector jobs.

High Detachment from Labour Market

The not-in-education, employment, or training (NEET rate) is considered a more severe condition than unemployment, as they include young people who have stopped actively seeking work. Although Sierra Leone's NEET rate is relatively low, it still covers one out of four (25%) (see Figure 7). These circumstances reflect discouragement and detachment from the labour market, reducing the effective labour supply. A segment of the youth population becomes instead economically inactive, weakening labour force participation rates and long-term employability.

Figure 7: Proportion of youth (aged 15-24 years) not in education, employment or training in Sierra Leone and neighbouring countries, %, latest year



Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Key Findings

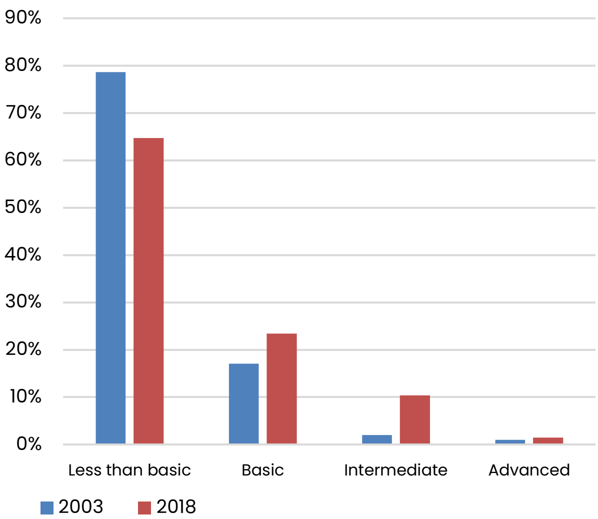
- Major education reforms in recent years → expanded access to primary and secondary education.
- Sierra Leonese workers are only slowly getting better educated.
- Although TVET reforms improve skills alignment, they are missing large-scale formal employment opportunities.

Education connection to the labour market refers to the relationship between the education system, vocational training programmes, and the market's needs. It highlights how education and skills development prepare individuals to meet employers' demands, improve employability, and support economic growth.'

Workers Slowly Getting Better Educated

One of the most notably education reform in Sierra Leone in recent years is the Free Quality School Education programme, launched in 2018. This reform has improved educational access. Still, Sierra Leonese workers are only slowly getting better educated, with a mean year of schooling at 3.5.[19] This is further reflected in dominance by employment with less than basic education and a very weak level at the advanced level. On the positive side, there has been some improvements at the basic and intermediate levels during the last two decades (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Sierra Leone's employment by education trend, %, 2003-2018



Source: Sierra Leone Integrated Household Surveys.

The weak results of employment by education lead to problematic influence on labour market performance: Low level of educational attainment, high youth underemployment, and NEET rate remains elevated because a mismatch between skills taught and those demanded by employers. On the positive side, it is likely that the Free Quality School Education programme has boosted the education levels.

Expanding Education, Limited Job Creation

Educational attainment is increasingly outpacing formal job creation in the country. Although expanded access to secondary and tertiary education has increased in the number of educated youths entering the labour market, the formal economy has not grown fast enough to absorb them into stable and productive employment. Many graduates are instead pushed into informal and low-income work. It does not match their qualifications, contributing to growing frustration, skills mismatches, and intensified competition for a limited number of formal-sector jobs.

Vocational Training

Reforming TVET System

In Sierra Leone, the government has introduced reforms in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), mainly guided by the 2019 National TVET Policy and the 2023 Dual Apprenticeship Policy. Both policies promote a demand-driven and industry-linked approach to skills development (see more in Appendix Table 8). These initiatives have helped place greater emphasis on practical skills, entrepreneurship, and employer involvement in training. It is worth mentioning that trade unions have been included in some national discussions and multi-stakeholder platforms connected to TVET reform.

Governance TVET Model

The TVET governance model is centrally coordinated by the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education (MTHE), overseeing policy development, planning, and sector coordination through its TVET Directorate. The National Council for Technical, Vocational and Other Academic Awards (NCTVA) is responsible for accreditation, certification, and quality assurance of training institutions. This system involves multiple actors, including trade unions, through platforms such as the TVET Coalition.

Trade Unions Involved in TVET

Trade unions are mostly involved in multi-stakeholder dialogue structures rather than through direct management of training institutions. Within the TVET system, unions mainly advocate for decent work standards in apprenticeships and training, as well as stronger school-to-work transitions. Inclusion of informal workers and vulnerable youth, labour rights awareness, and demand-driven skills development aligned with employment opportunities have also been promoted.

TVET System with Mixed Results

The TVET model has produced some positive results, including stronger sector coordination, expansion of government technical institutes, improved attention to competency-based training, and greater emphasis on work-based learning and employability.[20]

On a broader view, the TVET labour-market impact remains gradual and constrained by weak formal-sector growth, limited training infrastructure, insufficient equipment and funding, and the continued dominance of informal employment. For example, Sierra Leonese firms offering formal training has been below the sub-Saharan Africa average, 21% vs. 28%, respectively.[21]

For firms themselves, weak investment in training can reinforce a low-skill, low-productivity economic structure. It further increases pressure on public TVET institutions to supply job-ready graduates, even though employer engagement is essential for effective labour-market alignment. This stance links with the recent TVET reforms, emphasising stronger employer participation, dual apprenticeships, and work-based learning.

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SOCIAL PROTECTION

Key Findings

- The first comprehensive Social Protection Act of 2025 → the Social Protection Authority (SPA).
- Weak social protection coverage → broadly low CBA coverage, a narrow social contribution base, and high informality.
- Pension provides subsistence support but not retirement security.
- Informal workers are not covered by social insurance schemes → most rely on informal coping strategies.

Social protection and the labour market are closely connected to develop a country's welfare, as social protection programmes play a central role in enhancing the well-being of workers, promoting job security, and reducing poverty.

Breakthrough Social Protection Reform

The status of Sierra Leone's National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT) Act of 2001 has been the core legal framework, governing the national pension and social insurance system. The Act created NASSIT as the statutory body responsible for administering mandatory social security coverage for formal-sector workers.

The Sierra Leone Social Protection Act of 2025 marks a major shift from fragmented and donor-driven welfare programmes toward a more coordinated and institutionalised national social protection model. This legal framework establishes a Social Protection Authority (SPA) to improve coordination across both public and private sector programmes, addressing historical deep gaps in delivery. Information on the governance of SPA is still limited, so it is not yet fully certain whether trade unions hold formal board seats within the structure.

Another instrument is the National Social Protection Strategy (2022-2026), aiming to transition away from poverty-targeted approaches to a "lifecycle" social protection system. In addition, the Medium-Term National Development Plan (2024–2030) will also shape future social protection priorities.

Weak Social Protection Coverage

The social protection system remains constrained by limited fiscal space, high informality, fragmented delivery and weak implementation capacity. This situation resulting in low coverage and limited ability to respond to widespread vulnerability. It suggests that the previous social protection model has failed to work, focused on poverty relief and vulnerability reduction, strongly donor supported, and concentrated on social assistance rather than comprehensive insurance.

Data show that just 4.4% of population is covered by at least one social protection benefit. Table 2 below glimpses the country's deep gaps in social protection services and the labour market.

Table 2: Proportion of population covered by social protection services in Sierra Leone and Western Africa (WA), %, latest data

Indicator	Sierra Leone	WA
Population covered by at least one social protection benefit	4.4%	13%
Persons above retirement age receiving a pension	7.0%	12%
Persons with severe disabilities collecting disability social protection benefits	-	2.1%
Unemployed receiving unemployment benefits	0%	0%
Mothers with newborns receiving maternity benefits	-	8.7%
Labour force covered in the event of work injury	6.1%	9.4%
Children/households receiving child/family cash benefits	0.8%	11%
Vulnerable persons covered by social assistance	1.4%	5.0%

Source: International Labour Organisation, ILOSTAT.

Underdeveloped Pension System

The country's pension system is still relatively young and is centred on the state-run National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT). Membership is mandatory for formal-sector workers and voluntary for the self-employed and informal workers. Retirement age of 60 years old for standard employees.

Although public and private formal-sector workers in Sierra Leone are covered, the country's labour market is overwhelmingly informal. It causes pension participation remains very low at about 7% (revisit Table 2). Many workers simply cannot afford regular pension contributions.

The average pension is only slightly above Sierra Leone's statutory monthly minimum wage, which place around SLE 1,200 (US$52) per month. So, in practice, the average pension provides subsistence support, not middle-class retirement security.

Demographic ageing is not yet a major immediate pressure on the pension system. But longer survival and continued population growth are likely to increase future demand for old-age income security, healthcare and eldercare. These pressures could become increasingly relevant for NASSIT as pension coverage expands, while the widespread informal economy and limited fiscal space continue to constrain broader social protection coverage.

Importance Informal Social Protection

Informal social protection systems remain very vital because most Sierra Leonese workers operate in the informal economy, which are sidelined for the formal welfare benefits and pension system. Most still rely primarily on family networks, community reciprocity, religious support, rotating savings groups, remittances, and local mutual-aid arrangements.

These informal forms are based on trusted, locally embedded, and flexible even to very poor households. Some constraints are limited financial capacity and dependence on reciprocity (e.g., support is often conditional on social participation and reciprocal obligations). Urbanisation and migration pressures are also weakening traditional kinship structures.

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL DATA

Table 3: Main Legal Labour-Related Framework in Sierra Leone

Acts
Employment Act 2023 – governing employment structures, such as employment contracts, wages and minimum standards, working hours and overtime, leave entitlements, termination and severance, maternity and paternity rights, discrimination and equal treatment, and occupational safety and health.
Industrial Relations and Trade Union Act 2024 – regulating trade unions, collective bargaining, labour disputes, strikes and industrial action, and employer–employee relations.
Work Permit Act 2023 - governs employment of foreign workers, including work permits, employer obligations, immigration compliance, and restrictions and renewals for non-citizen employee.
Minimum Wage Act 1997 – establishing the legal basis for setting a national minimum wage through consultation mechanisms such as the Joint National Negotiating Board.
National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT) Act – setting Sierra Leone's social insurance system, covering pensions, employment injury benefits, survivor benefits, invalidity benefits, and employers and employees are required to social contribution.
Factories Act / Occupational Safety provisions – older factory and workplace safety provisions still operate alongside the Employment Act 2023, regulating workplace health and safety, hazardous working conditions, and employer duties toward worker protection.
Public Holidays Ordinance 1932 – providing the statutory framework for recognized public holidays and paid holiday entitlements.

Source: DTDA research.

Table 4: Legal reservations in Sierra Leone concerning the industrial relations' rights

Right to organize
• Barriers to the establishment of organisations: Prior authorisation or approval by authorities required for the establishment of a union, and power to refuse official registration on arbitrary, unjustified or ambiguous grounds. • Categories of workers prohibited or limited from forming or joining a union, or from holding a union office: Other civil servants and public employees, and other formalities or requirements which excessively delay or substantially impair the free establishment of organisations. • Restrictions on trade unions' right to organise their administration: Administrative authorities' power to unilaterally dissolve, suspend or de-register trade union organisations; absence of recourse to an independent body in the event of administrative refusal to register a trade union; sanctions imposed for organising or joining an organisation not officially recognised.
Right to collective bargaining
• Barriers to the recognition of collective bargaining agents: Previous authorisation or approval by authorities required to bargain collectively. • Restrictions on the principle of free and voluntary bargaining: Prohibition or limitation of collective bargaining at a certain level (local, regional, territorial, national; enterprise, industry, sector or general)- • Restrictions on the scope of application and legal effectiveness of concluded collective agreements: Endorsed collective agreements not regarded as legally binding or enforceable • Undermining of the recourse to collective bargaining and his effectiveness: Absence of appropriate mechanisms to encourage and promote machinery for collective bargaining; imposition of fixed and unreasonable procedural requirements (e.g. short time-limits for reaching an agreement); restrictions on the duration, scope of application or coverage of collective agreements. • Limitations or ban on collective bargaining in certain sectors: Absence of criteria or discretionary, unclear or unreasonable criteria for determining representative organisations; authorities' approval of freely concluded collective agreements; Authorities' power to intervene in the preparation of collective agreements.
Right to strike
• Ban or limitations on certain types of strike actions: Restrictions with respect to the objective of a strike (e.g. industrial disputes, economic and social issues, political, sympathy and solidarity reasons). • Undermining of the recourse to strike actions or their effectiveness: Absence of specific protection for workers involved in lawful strike actions (e.g. against dismissal). • Limitations or ban on strikes in certain sectors: Discretionary determination or excessively long list of "essential services" in which the right to strike is prohibited or severely restricted; absence of compensatory guarantees for categories of workers deprived of the right to strike. • Barriers to lawful strike actions: Excessively long prior notice / cooling-off period.

Source: International Trade Union Confederation, Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights, Sierra Leone, May 2026.

Table 5: Status of ratified ILO Conventions in Sierra Leone

	Convention	Ratification date
Fundamental Conventions		
Freedom of association and collective bargaining	C087 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, 1948	1961
	C098 - Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949	1961
Elimination of all forms of forced labour	C029 - Forced Labour Convention, 1930	1961
	C105 - Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957	1961
Effective abolition of child labour	C138 - Minimum Age Convention, 1973	2011
	C182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999	2011
Elimination of discrimination in employment	C100 - Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951	1968
	C111 - Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958	1966
Occupational safety and health	C155 - Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981	2021
	C187 - Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006	2021
Governance Conventions		
Labour inspection	C081 - Labour Inspection Convention, 1947	1961
	C129 - Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969	Not ratified
Employment policy	C122 - Employment Policy Convention, 1964	Not ratified
Tripartism	C144 - Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) Convention, 1976	1985
Technical Conventions (Up-to-date)		
Wages	C094 - Labour Clauses (Public Contracts) Convention, 1949	1961
	C095 - Protection of Wages Convention, 1949	1961
Migration	C097 - Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949	2021
	C143 - Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975	2021
Social security	C102 - Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952	2022
Tripartite consultation	C150 - Labour Administration Convention, 1978	2021
Labour administration and inspection	C160 - Labour Statistics Convention, 1985	2022
Employment policy and promotion	C181 - Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997	2021
Seafares	MLC, 2006 - Maritime Labour Convention, 2006	2022
Specific categories of workers	C189 - Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)	2021

Source: International Labour Organization, NORMLEX, Sierra Leone, May 2026.

Table 6: The main demands of the African trade unions in the declaration statement calling for the Just Transition agenda, 2023

Main demands in the declaration statement calling for the Just Transition agenda
1. Decent work and quality jobs: Trade unions insist on the creation of quality jobs as part of climate change policies. They demand that these jobs uphold labour rights and prioritise decent working conditions for all. This includes investments in skills development and training for workers to adapt to emerging green industries.
2. Social protection: Workers adversely affected by climate change must benefit from social protection measures, including income support, access to health care, education, and training to facilitate their professional reorientation. Trade unions are committed to protecting the most vulnerable workers and communities from the potential impacts of climate policies.
3 Worker Participation: Workers must be involved in the development and implementation of climate-related policies and projects, as they have valuable insights into the realities of their industries and communities.
4. Community Engagement: Local communities and stakeholders must be involved in decision-making on climate initiatives. Priority should be given to investment in sustainable infrastructure, green technologies and community resilience.
5 Gender equity: Trade unions demand that gender considerations be integrated into climate policies, recognising that women are often the most affected by the effects of climate change. They call for the empowerment of women through training, leadership and gender-sensitive policies.
6. Investment in green jobs: Trade unions call for substantial investment in green technologies, renewable energy and sustainable agriculture. They believe this investment will boost economic growth, create jobs and help preserve the environment.
7. Labour rights and just transition plans: Trade unions demand that labour rights be enforced and upheld in the context of climate policies, including the right to organise and the right to collective bargaining. Comprehensive just transition plans must be developed to outline pathways for affected workers and communities through the transition period.
8. Reskilling and Upskilling: Trade unions call for reskilling and upskilling programmes to equip workers with the skills needed for the transition to green industries by adapting to the needs of the labour market.
9. Support for impacted industries: The industries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change policies should be given targeted support and resources to help them transform their operations while safeguarding jobs.
10. Transparency and accountability: Trade unions call for transparency in the allocation of resources and the distribution of benefits resulting from climate initiatives. They also call for accountability mechanisms to be put in place to hold stakeholders accountable for meeting their just transition commitments.

Source: *ITUC-Africa, Africa Climate Summit: African trade unions call for a just transition.*

Table 7: Structure Labour Dispute Resolution System in Sierra Leone

Level / Institution	Main Role	Disputes Handled	Resolution Method
Workplace / Employer	First-stage grievance handling.	Wages, discipline, dismissal, workplace complaints.	Internal grievance procedures, negotiation.
Trade Unions & Shop Stewards	Worker representation.	Collective grievances, labour rights, bargaining disputes.	Collective bargaining, negotiation.
Ministry of Employment, Labour and Social Security	Labour administration and oversight.	Individual and collective labour disputes.	Conciliation, mediation, investigation.
Labour Officers / Inspectors	Enforcement and complaint investigation.	Labour-law violations, safety, unpaid wages.	Inspection, settlement facilitation.
Conciliation Services	Prevent escalation of disputes.	Industrial relations conflicts, strikes.	Conciliation.
Arbitration Panels / Arbitrators	Formal ADR determination.	Unresolved industrial disputes.	Arbitration (binding or advisory).
Industrial Court / Judiciary	Formal legal adjudication.	Wrongful dismissal, union disputes, contract interpretation.	Court judgment / judicial settlement.
Tripartite Social Dialogue Bodies	Policy consultation and industrial harmony.	National labour and wage issues.	Social dialogue, negotiation.

Source: DTDA research.

Table 8: Sierra Leone's Key TVET Policy Documents

Law / policy
The National Council for Technical and Vocational Education (NCTVE) Act of 2025.
Tertiary Education Commission Act of 2024.
Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan: Transforming learning for all 2022-2026, launched in 2022.
National policy on radical inclusion in schools, launched in 2021.
National Technical and Vocational Education and Training Policy for Sierra Leone, launched in 2019.

Source: UNESCO, TVET Country Profile: Sierra Leone.

Table 9: The structure of Sierra Leone's social protection system

Component	Main Institutions / Programs	Who Is Covered	Main Benefits	Main Challenges
Contributory Social Insurance	National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT).	Formal-sector workers, civil servants, some voluntary informal workers.	Old-age pensions, disability pensions, survivor benefits, retirement grants.	Very low coverage due to labour informality, weak compliance, low contribution base.
Social Assistance (Non-Contributory)	Government cash transfer programs, UNICEF, World Bank support.	Ultra-poor households, elderly poor, disabled persons, vulnerable children.	Cash transfers, food support, child welfare support.	Limited funding, donor dependence, targeting and delivery constraints.
Food & Nutrition Programmes	World Food Programme, school feeding initiatives.	Schoolchildren, food-insecure households.	School meals, emergency food aid, nutrition support.	Coverage gaps, rural logistics, dependence on aid financing.
Labour-Market & Public Works Programmes	Government employment schemes, donor-funded youth programmes.	Unemployed youth, poor rural and urban workers.	Temporary jobs, wages, skills training, livelihood support.	Temporary impact, limited scale, weak private-sector job creation.
Informal / Community-Based Protection	Family networks, "osusu" savings groups, religious groups, burial societies.	Majority of the population, especially informal workers.	Emergency support, savings, funeral support, remittances, old-age care.	Financial fragility, exclusion of isolated people, weakened by urbanisation and poverty.
Shock-Response Protection	Emergency programs during Ebola, COVID-19, floods.	Crisis-affected households.	Emergency cash transfers, food aid, temporary relief.	Short-term financing, weak institutional capacity.
Governance & Coordination	Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Social Welfare, NASSIT, local councils, donors.	System-wide administration.	Policy coordination, registries, payment systems.	Fragmentation, low fiscal capacity, administrative weaknesses.

Source: DTDA research.

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