

# Spotlight on Sierra Leone

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Lessons from the AFRICAB and  
EVALDIS projects

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## Introduction

**Bournemouth University Disaster Management Centre (BUDMC)** first developed a relationship with disaster management partners in Sierra Leone during the Ebola epidemic in 2014-16. Since then, the Centre have continued to work with the West African country to support wider resilience efforts, including capacity building and disaster management evaluation. In the last 5 years, this included the delivery of two award-winning projects:<sup>62</sup> – AFRICAB (Driving African Capacity-Building in Disaster Management, 2018-2021)<sup>63</sup> and EVALDIS (Evaluating Local Disaster Management in Sierra Leone (2022-2023)).<sup>64</sup> In this article Professor Lee Miles, Professor of Crisis and Disaster Management and Deputy Dean of the University's Business School, shares the lessons that prompted the work and the findings that followed.

ranked 47th out of 181 nations on the World Risk Index 2021,<sup>66</sup> recording high scores for vulnerability, susceptibility and lack of coping capacities.<sup>67</sup> Combined, climate hazards and existing vulnerabilities have resulted in significant losses across sectors and communities. For example, Freetown, the country's capital, has experienced over 25 major urban fires since February 2021. This included the **Susan's Bay fire disaster**<sup>68</sup> of 2021, that resulted in 7,000 people losing their homes in one night.<sup>69</sup> The country is also prone to water shortages, floods and mudslides. Given the trajectory of climate change, building resilience and strengthening disaster management capacity have been key priorities at both local and national levels.



### Professor Lee Miles

Professor of Crisis and Disaster Management and Deputy Dean of the Bournemouth University Business School

## Country profile

Sierra Leone is counted among the top 10 percent of countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.<sup>65</sup> It was also

62 AACSB, 'Innovations that inspire | Building African Capacity to Manage Disasters', 2023

63 Bournemouth University, 'Driving African Capacity Building in Disaster Management (AFRICAB)', 2024

64 Bournemouth University 'Evaluating Local Disaster Management in Sierra Leone (EVALDIS)'

65 UN Sierra Leone, 'Climate Action for Sierra Leone partnership resource brief', July 2022

66 University of Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 'World Risk Index 2021: Country Index'

67 Miles, L, 'The Conversation – Targeting disaster management: New research evidence from Sierra Leone', November 2021

68 International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), 'Fire disaster makes more than 1,000 homeless in Freetown', March 2021

69 Miles, L, 'The Conversation – Targeting disaster management: New research evidence from Sierra Leone', November 2021

In 2018 the Centre's activities in Sierra Leone took a notable step-change, resulting in the design and delivery of AFRICAB. The project design drew upon learning from the Centre's prior work:

## Key lessons

1. There is often a pressing need for local policymakers to possess the most contemporary evidence base to support disaster risk reduction, preparedness, response and recovery. For this evidence-base to have legitimacy and impact it needs to be (i) developed with the country's own domestic priorities in mind (rather than being dictated by the external preferences and perceptions of what other actors think they need) and (ii) co-created within national and local cultural contexts.
2. New technologies and large-scale climate-solutions are important in addressing climate resilience. However, there are often numerous, specific actions that local and national actors can undertake within their existing powers and scarce resources to leverage sizeable, scalable local and national enhancements in climate resiliency and disaster management. We had learnt that by accurately identifying specific 'gaps' that cause policy, process, or practice to 'fail' (which we refer to as single points of failure (SPOF)), understanding and assessing how severe/critical those gaps were; and then applying any immediate actions to address deficiencies could make tangible differences in practice. It was just a case of knowing where those gaps (and the lessons they represented) were.



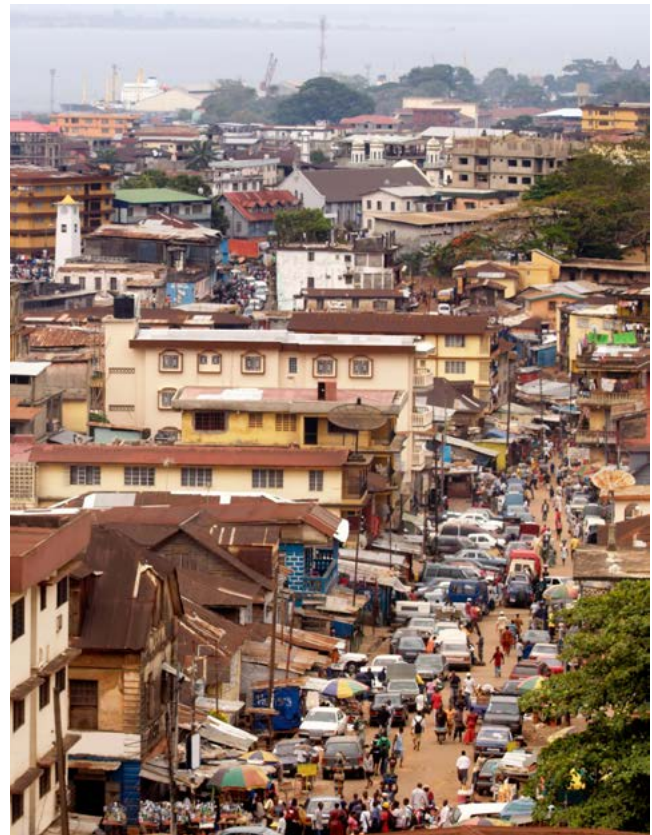


## Driving African Capacity-Building in Disaster Management (AFRICAB)

To identify SPOF in Sierra Leone, AFRICAB took the form of a 3-year, country-wide field research project involving 559 participants. Funded by the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), we worked closely with all tiers of government, from the highest national level to local district and ward leaders. Knowing the importance of building local disaster management from the bottom up, discussions also extended to responders, community leaders, disaster management volunteers and informal settlements country wide.

The findings clearly identified areas where national and local stakeholders agreed that there were resolvable gaps<sup>70</sup> (SPOF). The SPOF spanned 8 thematic learning areas including: technical coordination; communication; capacity-building; procedural; human; physical and economic<sup>71</sup> (see Figure 3).

Assessing the severity and potential impact of each SPOF in turn led to 27 key recommendations for action. These would address urgent local needs; enhance disaster response planning; and facilitate the development of best practice documentation. The implementation of these recommendations resulted in contextualised, learning-led and co-created disaster management solutions,<sup>72</sup> including new guidance and training.<sup>73</sup>



70 Miles, L, 'The Conversation – Targeting disaster management: New research evidence from Sierra Leone', November 2021

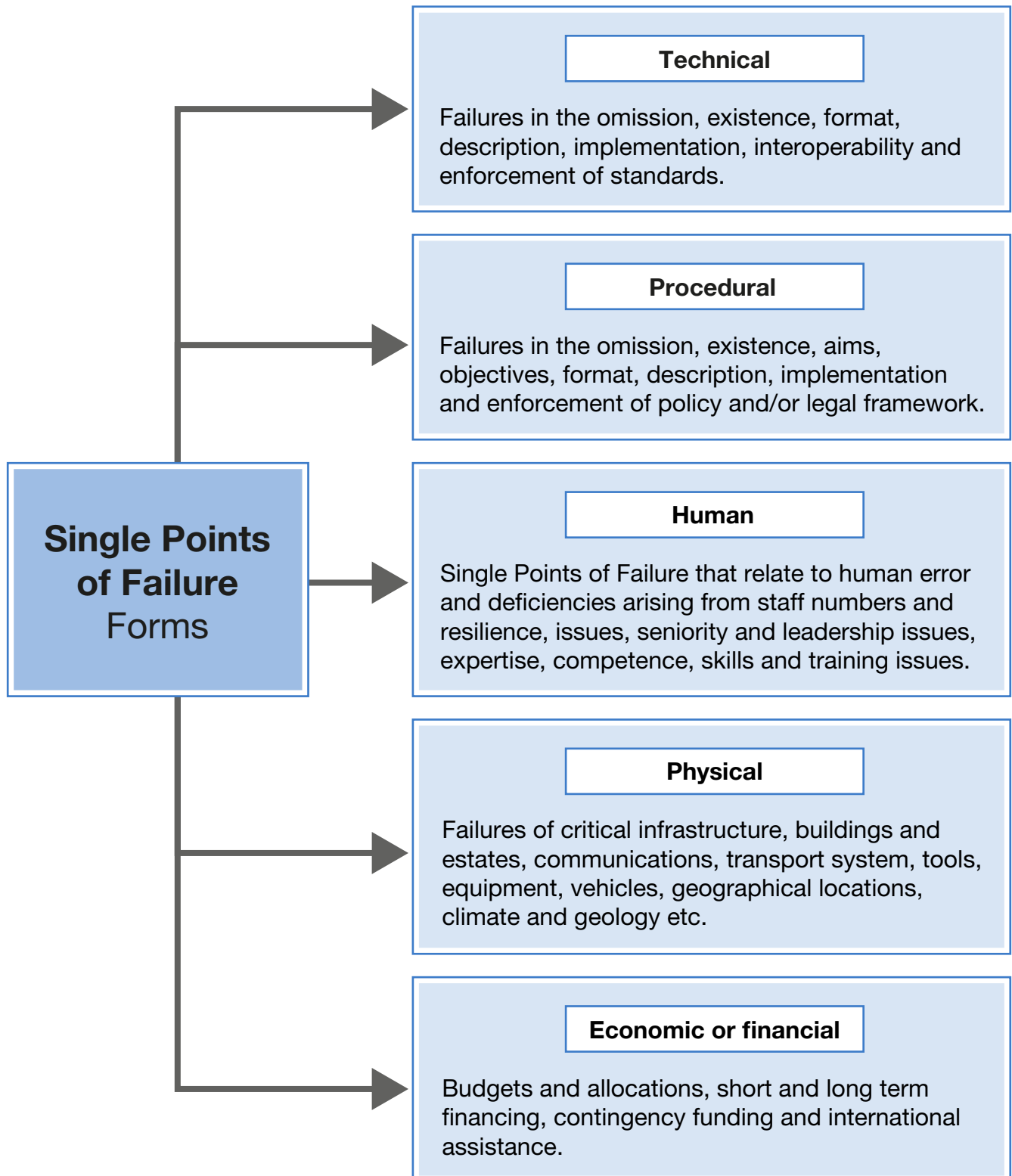
71 Miles et al., 'Improving Subnational Disaster Management in Sierra Leone: Evaluating Local Disaster Management in Sierra Leone (EVALDIS) Final Report 2023 No. 1, p.19', 2023

72 Miles, L, 'The Conversation – Targeting disaster management: New research evidence from Sierra Leone', November 2021

73 Bournemouth University, 'BUDMC helps develop first-ever Disaster Management Minimum Requirement for Freetown', 2020

### Figure 3: Forms of SPOF

Source: AFRICAB Final Report (Miles et al, 2021, p. 15). © Bournemouth University Disaster Management Centre



## Evaluating Local Disaster Management in Sierra Leone (EVALDIS)

Following AFRICAB, EVALDIS then provided one of the most contemporary research evaluations of the existing state of disaster resilience at a subnational level. Funded by Research England's (RE) Participatory Research Programme, it comprehensively assessed wider challenges confronted at provincial, district, and local levels. Stakeholder engagement included working with the capital Freetown's City Council (FCC), which has a leading climate resiliency profile in Africa, and with volunteer-led Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMC). This represented 1.2 million people across 48 wards combined. The research provided more valuable evidence-based lessons and recommendations that helped to shape Sierra Leone's National Disaster management Agency's (NDMA) thinking, direction and outputs to develop stronger regional capacities across the country in 2023.<sup>74</sup>

The combined AFRICAB and EVALDIS evidence-base went on to inform the development of the FCC's first ever Climate Action Strategy, which launched in 2022/23. It also supported two policy papers developed on climate resilience and disaster early-warning by the Sierra Leone Government, which were presented at the 27th Conference of the Parties (COP 27), in Sharm El-Sheik in 2022.

## Lessons Identified

Two key, transferable lessons that were clearly identified through this work were:

1. Research projects that are **co-created with national actors and engage local stakeholders are highly influential in providing evidence that has greater immediacy for policy transfers.** This process can be visualised as an Integrated Knowledge Translation cycle (see Figure 4).<sup>75</sup>
2. It should always be recognised that there are **many informal local solutions and approaches on the ground that reduce propensities for single points of failure in climate resilience.** These are not always readily captured in external data sets and policy reckonings. Bringing national and local stakeholders together supported both disaster risk reduction and climate resilience.

In conclusion the integrated, multi-stakeholder, research-based approach in Sierra Leone closed the gap between valuable, informal (often indigenous) solutions, and official policies and plans. It provides an impactful example of finding the 'sweet spot' in formulating compatible, progressive climate relevant policies; generating meaningful solutions; and enhancing local resilience in practice.

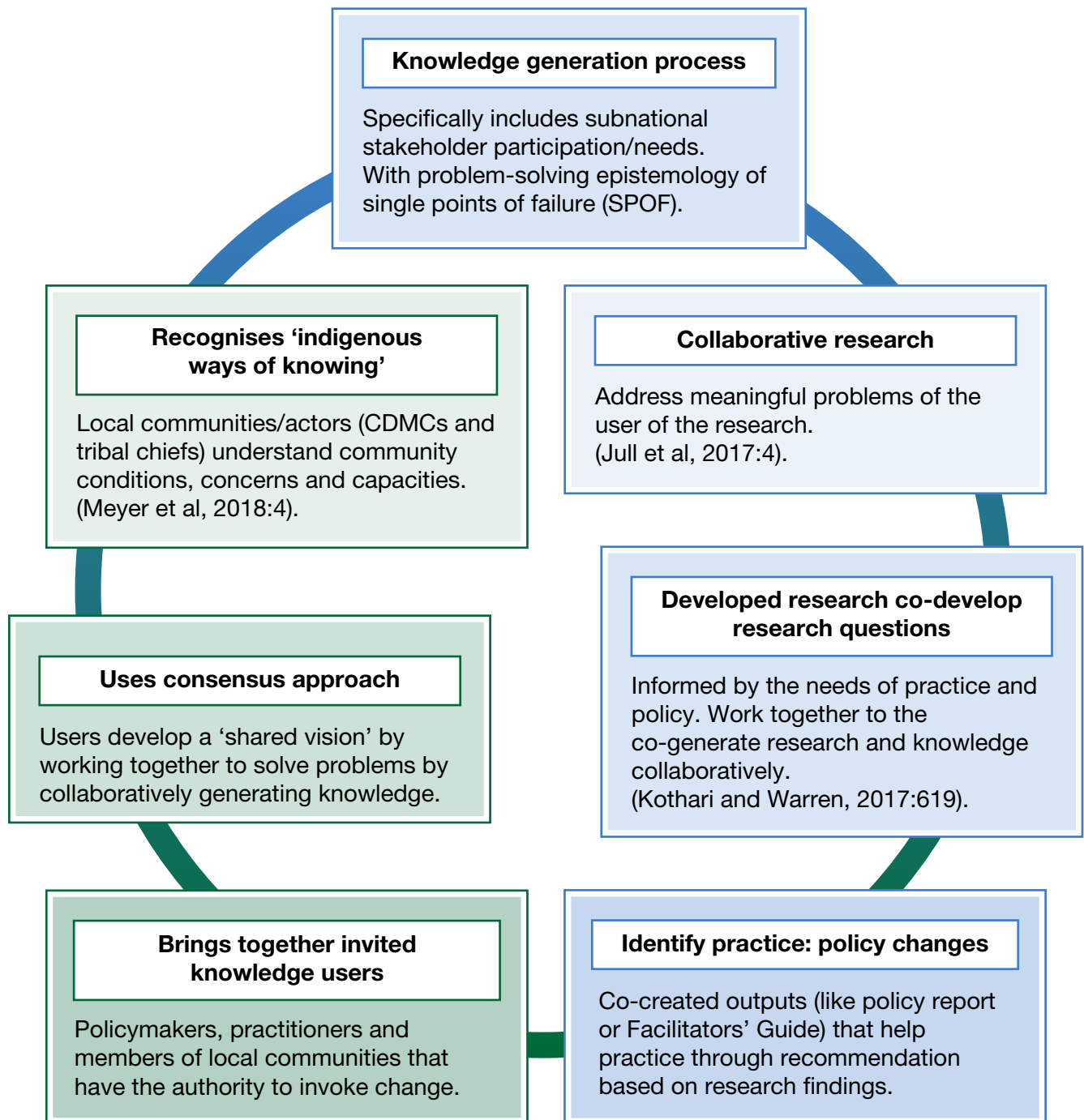


<sup>74</sup> Bournemouth University, 'New disaster management report launched in Sierra Leone', March 2023

<sup>75</sup> Miles et al., 'Improving Subnational Disaster Management in Sierra Leone: Evaluating Local Disaster Management in Sierra Leone (EVALDIS) Final Report 2023 No. 1, p.25' 2023

**Figure 4:** Integrated Knowledge Translation (IKT)

Source: Evaluating Local Disaster Management in Sierra Leone (EVALDIS) Final Report 2023 No. 1, p.25. (Miles et al, 2023). © Bournemouth University Disaster Management Centre



For in-diagram references, please see source document:

Miles et al., 2023. **Evaluating Local Disaster Management in Sierra Leone (EVALDIS) Final Report 2023 No.1.**

