SIERRA LEONE'S KNOWLEDGE CRISIS

When a Nation Outsources Not Only Development, but Confidence in Itself

From epistemic dependency to national capability: a doctrine for economic sovereignty, strategic partnership and institutional reconstruction

For more than twenty years, I have followed major projects, investments, reforms and international partnerships announced in Sierra Leone with close attention and genuine hope.

Roads have been promised and constructed. Mines have opened, closed and reopened. Development programmes have arrived under new acronyms. Foreign consultants have produced reports. Investors have signed agreements. International institutions have financed reforms. Governments have changed. New ministries, agencies, commissions and strategies have appeared.

Yet beneath these cycles of activity, one question has increasingly troubled me: *What has Sierra Leone actually learned, retained, institutionalised and become capable of doing for itself?*

That question is more important than whether a particular investor is Chinese, European, American, Indian, Turkish, Arab, African or otherwise. It is more important than whether a project is financed by a development bank, a bilateral partner, a multinational corporation or the Sierra Leonean state itself.

The central problem is not foreign participation.No serious modern economy develops without international capital, technology, expertise, markets and partnerships.

The problem begins when a country repeatedly imports ***solutions without acquiring the knowledge behind those solutions; infrastructure without the capability to maintain it; consultants without institutional memory; technology without technological mastery; investment without domestic linkages; and expertise without systematic transfer of expertise.***

That is not merely economic dependency. It is **epistemic dependency**: a condition in which a society gradually loses confidence in its ability to define its own problems, identify its own experts, generate its own evidence, negotiate from its own knowledge base and design solutions appropriate to its own circumstances.

And when epistemic dependency becomes embedded in procurement, education, investment, administration and national psychology, a country can remain politically independent while functioning intellectually as a subcontractor in its own development.

1. The Invisible Infrastructure of a Nation

Development is normally discussed through visible assets: roads, hospitals, electricity, ports, schools, telecommunications networks, factories and housing.

But beneath every successful modern state lies another infrastructure that is less visible and ultimately more important: **knowledge infrastructure.**

This consists of engineers who understand national energy systems; economists capable of modelling the domestic economy; agronomists who know the country's soils and food systems; *doctors and epidemiologists who understand its disease burden; hydrologists who understand its rivers; planners who understand its settlements; lawyers capable of negotiating complex international contracts; geologists who understand what lies beneath its soil; procurement specialists who understand global supply chains; intelligence professionals who understand security threats; technologists capable of adapting imported technologies; and researchers able to generate reliable national data*.

A country may purchase equipment. It cannot permanently purchase sovereign competence. Sovereignty therefore has an intellectual dimension. A sovereign state must progressively acquire the capacity to **define, diagnose, design, negotiate, implement, maintain, evaluate and improve** the systems upon which its population depends.

This is where Sierra Leone's development debate requires a fundamental shift. The question should no longer be merely: ***What project are we receiving?*** It should also be: ***What capability will Sierra Leone possess when this project is completed that it did not possess before it began?*** That single question could transform the economics of development.

2. The Economics of Dependency: Exporting Resources, Importing Capability

Sierra Leone possesses extraordinary natural advantages: mineral resources, fertile agricultural land, fisheries, rainfall, a strategic Atlantic coastline and a young population. Yet the structure of the economy continues to reveal significant vulnerabilities.

Mining accounts for more than 70% of export earnings. In 2023, China received approximately 66% of Sierra Leone's merchandise exports and supplied around 33% of its merchandise imports; India supplied another 14%. China is also identified as the major foreign investor in mining and infrastructure. Meanwhile,

Sierra Leone imported approximately 361,000 metric tonnes of rice worth about US$160 million in 2024.

These numbers reveal something deeper than trade statistics. They demonstrate the continuing structure of an economy that exports large quantities of what nature has provided while importing a significant proportion of what human organisation, industrialisation and technological capability should increasingly produce. This is the classical problem of weak **domestic economic linkages**.

A mine can generate exports without creating a diversified national industrial economy. A road can be constructed without creating a domestic civil-engineering industry. A power plant can produce electricity without creating national expertise capable of designing the next power plant. A hospital can import machines without developing biomedical engineering capacity. A telecommunications network can operate while much of the underlying technology, software and specialised maintenance remains external.

The economist Albert Hirschman famously emphasised the developmental importance of *backward and forward linkages*: productive activity becomes transformative when it creates demand for local suppliers upstream and generates processing, manufacturing and new industries downstream. Without those linkages, an economy risks becoming an **archipelago of projects** rather than an integrated productive system.That distinction matters enormously for Sierra Leone.

- *Minerals leaving the country are not the same thing as industrialisation.*
- *Foreign direct investment is not automatically technological transformation.*
- *GDP growth is not automatically capability accumulation.*
- *Infrastructure expenditure is not automatically institutional development.*
- *And employment is not automatically knowledge transfer.*

Recent macroeconomic improvements deserve recognition. The World Bank estimates real GDP growth of around 4.5% in 2025 and projects approximately 4.5% in 2026. Inflation fell dramatically before rising again to 8.1% in February 2026 following energy-price pressures. Yet foreign-exchange reserves remained equivalent to only about 1.7 months of imports, while both the World Bank and IMF continue to identify debt distress and limited buffers as significant vulnerabilities.

The African Development Bank adds another important dimension. Between 2020 and 2024, it estimates average real GDP growth at 3.9% annually, while per-capita GDP growth averaged only 1.6%. In other words, aggregate economic expansion has not translated proportionately into rapidly rising economic capacity per citizen.

This is why Sierra Leone cannot evaluate development simply by counting projects. It must measure **capabilities accumulated**.

3. From Foreign Investment to Knowledge Investment

There is nothing inherently problematic about Chinese investment, British assistance, American technology, European finance, Indian entrepreneurship, Turkish cooperation, Gulf capital or multilateral development financing. The relevant question is not the nationality of the partner. It is the **structure of the relationship**.

- *Does the investment deepen Sierra Leonean capability or merely utilise Sierra Leonean territory?*
- *Does a major infrastructure contract include Sierra Leonean engineers at the design stage—or only labourers during construction?*
- *Does a mining agreement create domestic geological, metallurgical, environmental and commercial expertise?*
- *Does an energy contract transfer operational knowledge, maintenance capability, software access, technical documentation and management competence?*
- *Do foreign consultants work alongside national counterparts who will subsequently own the methodology and data?*

When expatriate specialists leave, is there a Sierra Leonean team capable of replacing them? When a donor-funded programme closes, does the institution retain its databases, models, procedures and trained personnel?

These are not secondary questions. They determine whether foreign investment becomes **national capital formation** or simply external economic activity occurring within national borders.

Sierra Leone already possesses a Local Content Agency and a statutory framework intended to prioritise Sierra Leonean employment, procurement, enterprise development, skills and technology transfer. The Local Content Agency Act dates from 2016, and the Agency explicitly describes workforce development, local procurement and technology transfer as part of its mandate. The existence of that framework is important. But the more difficult challenge is implementation.

A 2025 Local Content Agency audit of several mining companies and contractors reported missing procurement documentation, insufficient evidence of local-content planning and weaknesses in documented training and succession arrangements at some operations.

These are findings reported by the regulator and should be understood as regulatory assessments rather than a blanket characterisation of the entire mining sector. Nevertheless, they illustrate precisely why legislation alone is insufficient. Local content must therefore evolve beyond counting how many Sierra Leoneans appear on a payroll. **Local content must become knowledge content.** The ultimate measure should be whether Sierra Leoneans progressively occupy the technical, managerial, scientific, financial and strategic layers of an industry.

4. The Geopolitics of Knowledge

Knowledge has become one of the central currencies of twenty-first-century geopolitics.

Advanced states do not compete only for territory or natural resources. They compete over semiconductors, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, satellite systems, critical minerals, telecommunications standards, energy technologies, financial infrastructure, intellectual property, logistics networks and data.

The countries controlling these systems possess power beyond the value of the physical products themselves.

This has profound implications for small states. Sierra Leone should welcome international partners. But it should do so with a clear understanding that every major economic relationship also has a geopolitical dimension.

- *Where does financing originate?*
- *Who designs the infrastructure?*
- *Who owns the technology?*
- *Who controls the operating system?*
- *Who has access to the underlying data?*
- *Who provides maintenance?*
- *Where are replacement parts sourced?*
- *Who controls logistics?*
- *Who controls export markets?*
- *Who possesses the technical knowledge required to renegotiate the arrangement ten years later?*

A country that cannot answer these questions may own an asset legally while remaining operationally dependent upon somebody else. Sierra Leone's substantial trade concentration with China, its reliance on imported goods and services, its relationships with Western development institutions, its dependence on global commodity markets and its growing engagement with multiple emerging powers should therefore not be understood as an argument for choosing one geopolitical bloc over another.

The wiser objective is **strategic diversification combined with domestic capability accumulation**. Sierra Leone should be able to work with Beijing without becoming dependent on Beijing; with Washington without becoming dependent on Washington; with London, Brussels, Delhi, Ankara, Rabat, Riyadh or any other capital without allowing any partnership to replace national strategic thinking.

That is what mature non-alignment should mean in the twenty-first century:

- not isolation,
- not hostility,
- and not neutrality without strategy,

- but **the deliberate multiplication of partnerships while steadily increasing domestic capacity to choose among them.**

5. Sierra Leone's History Already Contains the Warning

The history of Sierra Leone demonstrates both the necessity and the danger of external capability. During the civil war, the private military company Executive Outcomes played a significant role in fighting the Revolutionary United Front.

Later, Britain's Operation Palliser in 2000 contributed decisively to stabilising the security situation, supporting UN deployment and subsequently strengthening Sierra Leone's armed forces through training.

The lesson is subtler. **External capability is most valuable when it progressively reduces the need for external capability.**

The British government's stated long-term objective after its intervention was precisely to strengthen Sierra Leone's security institutions until they could protect the country's security and territorial integrity without substantial external assistance. That principle should extend far beyond security. Every important international partnership should contain within itself a strategy for increasing Sierra Leonean autonomy.

6. The Diaspora Paradox: Exported Knowledge, Imported Consultants

Perhaps nowhere is the contradiction more striking than in Sierra Leone's relationship with its diaspora. For decades, civil war, economic hardship and limited professional opportunities pushed substantial numbers of highly educated Sierra Leoneans abroad.

They became doctors, academics, engineers, bankers, researchers, entrepreneurs, public-health specialists, lawyers, scientists, executives, technologists and institutional leaders across Europe, North America, Africa and elsewhere.

Yet Sierra Leone can sometimes find itself paying international consultancy rates to acquire expertise that Sierra Leoneans themselves possess abroad. This does not mean that every diaspora professional is automatically qualified for every national assignment, nor that foreign experts should be excluded.

It means that a state serious about knowledge sovereignty should know **where its people are, what they know and how to mobilise them**.

Sierra Leone's own National Migration Policy recognises this problem explicitly. It calls for transforming brain drain into brain gain, creating a database mapping diaspora skills, promoting short-term professional exchanges and facilitating investment and knowledge transfer.

This is not merely symbolic. Remittances already represent approximately 4.6% of Sierra Leone's GDP, demonstrating that the diaspora is economically connected to the country. But money is only one diaspora asset. **Knowledge may be more valuable than remittances.** The development objective should therefore move from *brain drain* to **brain circulation**.

A Sierra Leonean surgeon in London should not necessarily have to abandon London permanently to contribute.

A Sierra Leonean engineer in Germany should be able to participate remotely in a national technical panel.

A cybersecurity specialist in Canada should be able to advise a Sierra Leonean institution securely.

A professor in Switzerland should be able to supervise students and researchers in Freetown.

A financial specialist in New York should be capable of joining a sovereign debt advisory pool.

Technology now makes permanent physical return unnecessary for many forms of national service.

The missing infrastructure is often not human capital. It is **institutional connection**.

7. The State Does Not Merely Need Institutions. It Needs Institutional Memory

Sierra Leone has created numerous institutions since the end of the civil war. That progress should not be dismissed. The deeper challenge is whether institutions accumulate knowledge over time.

Too frequently across developing states, institutional knowledge is attached to individuals, donor projects or consultants rather than embedded within organisations. A consultant arrives. Research is conducted. Workshops are organised. A report is produced. Officials attend presentations. Funding expires. Personnel change. Files disappear. Another project begins three years later and commissions another diagnostic of essentially the same problem.

This is extraordinarily expensive. The country pays repeatedly to rediscover itself. The problem therefore is not simply lack of knowledge. It is failure to **retain knowledge institutionally**.

Every ministry and national agency should possess a structured institutional memory capable of preserving datasets, feasibility studies, contracts, evaluations, maps, technical specifications, research, lessons from failed projects and records of previous negotiations. In the twenty-first century, a state that does not control its institutional memory cannot exercise sophisticated sovereignty.

8. The Emergency-Preparedness Test

Nothing exposes institutional capability more brutally than catastrophe. Sierra Leone has experienced civil war, Ebola, devastating landslides, floods, fires and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The National Disaster Management Agency was established by an Act of Parliament in 2020, the NDMA has responsibility for disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery and for developing national, regional, district and chiefdom-level coordination structures.

The important question therefore is no longer whether an institution exists. It is whether national capability matches national risk. The NDMA itself has acknowledged continuing limitations in resources and the need for stronger technical and financial support. Recent external cooperation has included capacity-building discussions with international partners.

This distinction is crucial. **Institutional existence is not the same as operational readiness.**

A country is resilient when institutions can communicate under pressure; hospitals have emergency power; telecommunications remain operational; logistics systems can move equipment rapidly; engineers can assess damaged infrastructure; laboratories can detect biological threats; specialised rescue personnel are available; data can be shared across agencies; district systems can operate without waiting for Freetown; and national command structures have been repeatedly tested through realistic simulations.

Emergency preparedness therefore provides perhaps the clearest measure of whether knowledge has actually been converted into state capacity.

9. Employment Without Knowledge Accumulation Is Not Transformation

Sierra Leone faces another structural challenge: employment. The World Bank estimates that approximately **75,000 new jobs must be created every year merely to maintain the existing employment-to-population ratio**, while private-sector expansion remains constrained by finance, electricity, land, skills and other structural factors.

Electricity illustrates the scale of the challenge. World Bank data indicate that only about 39.2% of Sierra Leone's population had access to electricity in 2024. But the employment problem should not be reduced to job numbers.

The strategic question is: **What kind of jobs?** A country cannot industrialise primarily through low-skill employment surrounding high-skill foreign-controlled systems.

Young Sierra Leoneans must increasingly move into engineering, machine maintenance, laboratory sciences, logistics, software, construction management, agricultural processing, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy, financial analysis, biomedical technology, mining sciences and other productive capabilities.

Education policy, industrial policy, procurement policy and investment policy therefore cannot remain separate. They must become one system. When government knows that major investments are coming in energy, mining, agriculture or infrastructure, technical institutions should already be training Sierra Leoneans for the competencies those investments will require. *Investment agreements should become workforce-planning documents.*

10. From Local Content to National Capability: A Proposed Architecture

Sierra Leone now requires something more ambitious than conventional local-content policy. It needs a **National Knowledge and Capability Architecture** built around the principle that every major public investment, foreign investment and international partnership must leave behind measurable domestic capability.

Such an architecture could contain eight connected mechanisms:

1. **A National Skills and Expertise Register** mapping Sierra Leonean expertise at home and across the diaspora by profession, specialisation, location, sector and willingness to contribute.
2. **A National Capability Audit** conducted sector by sector—health, agriculture, engineering, mining, energy, digital technology, justice, security, education, finance and disaster response—to identify precisely what Sierra Leone can currently do, what it cannot do, and where strategic capability gaps exist.
3. **Mandatory Knowledge-Transfer Clauses in Strategic Contracts**, requiring meaningful Sierra Leonean participation in design, management, technical operations, data systems and maintenance rather than limiting local participation to peripheral employment.
4. **A National Project Memory Repository** containing major contracts, feasibility studies, evaluations, engineering documentation, datasets and lessons learned, with appropriate security classifications where necessary.
5. **A Diaspora Brain-Circulation Programme** enabling short-term placements, virtual appointments, visiting professorships, technical missions, mentoring and national expert panels without demanding permanent relocation.
6. **A Strategic Procurement Capability Test**, under which major contracts would be assessed not only for price and delivery but also for domestic

supplier development, technological transfer, maintenance sovereignty, training, data ownership and long-term fiscal implications.

7. **A National Emergency Capability System** centred on the NDMA but integrating healthcare, military, police, fire services, engineering, telecommunications, energy, local government, universities and community structures through recurring simulations and interoperable command systems.
8. **An Annual National Capability Statement**, published alongside conventional economic indicators, measuring how many critical functions Sierra Leone can perform independently, which remain externally dependent and what progress has been made in closing those gaps.

The principle underlying all eight mechanisms is simple: ***Every major national contract should leave Sierra Leone with three assets: a physical asset, a stronger Sierra Leonean capability, and institutional knowledge that remains after the contractor has departed.*** If only the first remains, the project is incomplete.

11. Knowledge Sovereignty Is Not Isolationism

There is a danger that this argument could be misunderstood as economic nationalism in the narrow sense or rejection of international expertise. It is neither. No country possesses all the knowledge it requires.

Germany imports expertise. Singapore recruits internationally. The United States attracts scientists from across the world. China has spent decades acquiring, absorbing, adapting and eventually producing technologies initially developed elsewhere. The issue is not whether knowledge crosses borders. **Knowledge must cross borders.** The issue is whether Sierra Leone becomes progressively more capable because it crossed the border.

A sophisticated country imports what it does not know while learning how to know more. An epistemically dependent country imports the same expertise repeatedly. The difference is enormous.

12. The Economics of Self-Recognition

There is therefore an economic cost to failing to recognise one's own people. When competent Sierra Leonean firms cannot access procurement opportunities, capital accumulates elsewhere. When diaspora expertise is invisible to national institutions, consultancy expenditure leaks outward.

When engineers are not integrated into foreign projects, technological knowledge remains external. When universities are disconnected from industry, graduates

emerge without pathways into productive sectors. When traditional and community knowledge is dismissed without scientific investigation, potentially valuable intellectual assets remain undocumented.

When public institutions repeatedly commission external studies because previous knowledge was not preserved, scarce fiscal resources are spent recreating information that should already belong to the state. This is why **self-recognition is not sentimental nationalism.** It is economics. It determines who captures value. Who acquires skills. Who owns firms. Who becomes investable. Who manages technology. Who negotiates contracts. Who receives procurement revenue. And ultimately, who accumulates capital across generations.

13. A Different Measure of Development

Sierra Leone should continue measuring GDP growth, inflation, debt, exports, investment and employment. But these indicators are insufficient. A deeper national dashboard would ask:

- *How many major infrastructure systems can Sierra Leonean engineers design? How many can they maintain? How much mineral processing occurs domestically?*
- *How many national datasets are owned and managed by Sierra Leonean institutions?*
- *What percentage of strategic procurement reaches competitive Sierra Leonean firms?*
- *How many international contracts contain enforceable technology-transfer provisions?*
- *How many diaspora specialists are integrated annually into national institutions?*
- *What percentage of imported technical services can progressively be provided domestically?*
- *How rapidly can Sierra Leone mobilise specialised national expertise during a catastrophe?*
- *How many sectors possess credible Sierra Leonean succession pipelines for senior technical positions?*

These indicators would measure something GDP cannot fully reveal: *the accumulation of national capability.*

Before Reconstruction Comes Recognition

Sierra Leone does not lack intelligence. It does not lack talent. It does not lack natural resources. It does not lack people capable of imagining, designing and building sophisticated systems.

What it has too often lacked is an architecture capable of **recognising, organising, financing, trusting and deploying its own knowledge.** That is why the deepest development challenge may not be simply poverty, infrastructure or foreign dependence. It may be the failure to see the connection between them.

A country that does not recognise its engineers will import engineering. A country that does not organise its scientists will import scientific advice. A country that does not map its diaspora will import consultants who may possess no greater expertise than its own citizens abroad. A country that does not preserve institutional memory will repeatedly pay to rediscover what it once knew.

And a country that exports raw materials while importing both finished products and the knowledge required to produce them will struggle to convert natural wealth into sovereign prosperity.

The answer is not to close Sierra Leone to the world. The answer is precisely the opposite. **Sierra Leone should engage the world more intelligently, more confidently and from a stronger knowledge base.**

Foreign investment should be welcomed where it creates value. International expertise should be welcomed where it expands capability. Technology should be imported where it accelerates transformation. Development finance should be mobilised where it strengthens national systems. But every partnership must eventually confront one fundamental test:

When the foreign experts leave, when the consultants finish their reports, when the contractors hand over the keys, when the donors close the programme and when the investors repatriate their returns—what does Sierra Leone now know how to do that it could not do before?

That question should sit at the centre of national development policy. Because ultimately, development is not the accumulation of projects. It is the accumulation of **capability**. And sovereignty is not merely possessing a flag, a constitution or internationally recognised borders.

Sovereignty is the capacity of a people to understand their circumstances, mobilise their knowledge, negotiate their interests and progressively build the systems upon which their future depends.

Sierra Leone's next great transformation may therefore begin with something deceptively simple: **recognising what—and whom—we already possess.** And from that recognition, building the capacity to stand in the world not as a country refusing partnership, but as a country finally capable of determining the terms, purpose and legacy of partnership itself.

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