THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TRAUMATIZATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPTIVITY IN SIERRA LEONE

How Historical Trauma, Institutional Dependency, Manufactured Narratives, and the Reproduction of Poverty May Sustain Systems of Exploitation

Dr Alpha Grace, PhD

There is a disturbing question at the heart of Sierra Leone's contemporary condition, one that conventional discussions of poverty, corruption, governance, and national development have yet to confront with sufficient intellectual seriousness:

Has Sierra Leone become a society in which the continuous reproduction of hardship, insecurity, and dependency serves the interests of those who control access to political authority, economic opportunity, and institutional resources?

This question requires us to examine the country beyond the visible manifestations of poverty. It demands an investigation into the structures that reproduce deprivation, the psychological consequences of prolonged insecurity, and the ways in which populations struggling to survive may become increasingly dependent upon institutions and powerful individuals whose conduct they possess limited practical means to challenge.

A country can possess extraordinary natural resources, an ambitious population, an extensive diaspora, and significant intellectual potential while remaining trapped within systems that repeatedly prevent those resources from being converted into collective prosperity. The problem, in such circumstances, cannot be reduced to the absence of opportunity. It must also be examined in terms of **who controls opportunity, who determines access to resources, who benefits from dependency, and what institutional arrangements allow these relationships to persist**.

Historical Trauma as a Continuing Social and Institutional Condition

Sierra Leone's contemporary social environment cannot be separated from its history of violence, displacement, economic disruption, and repeated public-health emergencies.

The civil war of 1991–2002 left profound consequences for families, communities, educational continuity, economic security, and public institutions.

The Ebola epidemic of 2014–2016 introduced further experiences of bereavement, fear, social disruption, economic loss, and psychological suffering.

For many individuals and communities, the consequences of these events did not disappear when the immediate emergencies ended.

Traumatic exposure can affect trust, perceptions of safety, expectations of institutional protection, interpersonal relationships, and the capacity to plan confidently for the future.

When these experiences coexist with persistent poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, inadequate healthcare, and weak public services, the processes of individual and collective recovery may become substantially more difficult.

The question concerns whether the country's institutions have adequately addressed the long-term consequences of cumulative social trauma.

A society may formally emerge from war while substantial portions of its population continue to live under the economic, social, and psychological conditions that obstruct recovery.

The absence of war is not equivalent to the achievement of social security. Political stability is not equivalent to institutional justice. And the capacity to endure hardship must never be mistaken for evidence that the hardship is acceptable.

The Normalization of Deprivation

One of the most consequential effects of prolonged deprivation is the possibility that conditions initially recognized as unacceptable gradually become incorporated into ordinary expectations of life.

Unreliable electricity becomes routine. Inadequate medical care becomes an anticipated hardship. Unemployment becomes a prolonged condition rather than a temporary transition.

Access to opportunity becomes associated with personal connections, political relationships, or the discretionary favour of influential intermediaries. Promises of future improvement begin to substitute for enforceable public obligations.Over time, the extraordinary risks of daily survival can become socially normalized.

This normalization does not necessarily indicate public consent.It may reflect the limited practical alternatives available to individuals whose immediate survival depends upon navigating the existing system. The distinction is fundamental.

Adaptation to deprivation is not acceptance of injustice. Survival under oppressive conditions is not evidence of freedom from oppression.

A population may continue to work, create, organize, and hope while facing constraints that substantially limit its ability to transform the institutions governing its daily life. The resulting problem is not an absence of human intelligence. It is the restriction of the conditions under which that intelligence can be exercised effectively.

Psychological Captivity as a Structural Condition

Within this research, *psychological captivity* is proposed as a socio-criminological concept rather than a clinical diagnosis.

It describes a condition in which prolonged exposure to insecurity, limited alternatives, material dependency, institutional unpredictability, and potentially manipulative information environments can narrow an individual's perceived and practical capacity for independent action.

Such captivity does not require physical imprisonment. It may develop through circumstances in which essential needs depend upon relationships that individuals cannot easily refuse.

A young person may recognize the injustice of a political arrangement but remain dependent upon its beneficiaries for employment.

A business owner may encounter improper demands but fear losing access to commercial opportunities. A professional may recognize institutional misconduct but conclude that raising objections could jeopardize employment, security, or future prospects.

A family may accept selective political assistance because immediate survival leaves little room to reject available support. In each case, the apparent freedom to choose may coexist with significant material constraints. This is where the concept of psychological captivity acquires its analytical significance.

The central mechanism is not the destruction of people's intelligence. It is the restriction of their ability to act upon what they know.

Repeated experiences of powerlessness may also affect expectations concerning whether resistance, complaint, or legitimate participation can produce meaningful results. Yet these responses are neither universal nor permanent.

They depend upon individual circumstances, protective relationships, community organization, institutional opportunities, and the availability of credible alternatives.

Psychological captivity must therefore be investigated as a relationship between structural conditions and human agency—not treated as an inherent characteristic of the Sierra Leonean people.

The Political Utility of Poverty and Dependency

A particularly important proposition emerging from this analysis is that persistent deprivation may create opportunities for political, commercial, and criminal exploitation.

Where access to resources is highly unequal and public services are unreliable, individuals may become dependent upon informal arrangements for needs that should ordinarily be protected through transparent institutional systems.

Such dependency can acquire political significance.

Material assistance may be used to cultivate loyalty. Access to opportunities may become conditional upon compliance. Administrative discretion may reward politically connected actors. Economic vulnerability may discourage individuals from challenging abuses of authority. These mechanisms are particularly concerning where they transform public resources or institutional responsibilities into instruments of private influence.

The question is not whether poverty is always deliberately manufactured. The more precise question is whether identifiable actors benefit from its persistence and whether particular policies, decisions, or omissions contribute to maintaining conditions of dependency.

This distinction opens an important investigative pathway. It directs attention toward the allocation of public resources, the beneficiaries of administrative decisions, the repeated failure of institutional reforms, and the incentives that may discourage structural change.

Where dependency becomes politically profitable, the reduction of dependency may threaten established relationships of power.

That proposition deserves investigation at the level of institutions, contracts, policy implementation, and patterns of resource distribution.

The Capture of Public Interpretation

Material vulnerability can become more consequential when combined with the manipulation of public information.

Citizens require access to reliable information to evaluate institutions, identify failures, assess public claims, and participate meaningfully in national affairs.

Where public communication is dominated by selective messaging, undisclosed sponsored content, misleading claims, or coordinated efforts to discredit legitimate criticism, these capacities may be undermined.

The concern is particularly significant in digital environments where repeated messages can acquire an appearance of credibility through visibility alone.

A promotional narrative may represent an isolated project as evidence of widespread national progress.A serious institutional failure may receive little sustained attention. Individuals with legitimate concerns may be dismissed through reputational attacks rather than engagement with their evidence.

The absence of transparent sponsorship disclosures can further complicate the public's ability to distinguish independent commentary from commissioned communication. These possibilities create an important connection between economic dependency and information integrity.

A person preoccupied with meeting immediate needs may have fewer opportunities to investigate public claims independently. At the same time, limited access to reliable information can make it more difficult to identify who bears responsibility for persistent deprivation. The result may be a mutually reinforcing relationship between constrained economic opportunity and constrained civic understanding.

A society's capacity to exercise democratic judgment depends not only upon the formal right to receive information, but upon meaningful access to information whose provenance, accuracy, and interests can be examined.

This is why suspected narrative manipulation must be considered a substantive governance concern rather than dismissed as an ordinary disagreement over public relations.

From the Exploitation of People to the Exploitation of National Possibility

The deepest concern arising from these interconnected conditions is their cumulative developmental consequence.

Sierra Leone's people possess knowledge, skills, entrepreneurial initiative, cultural resources, international relationships, and considerable aspirations for national transformation. Yet these assets cannot achieve their full potential where institutional arrangements repeatedly obstruct productive participation. Where knowledge is appropriated, its originators may be excluded. Where commercial opportunities are diverted, legitimate enterprises may never emerge.

Where institutional accountability is weak, misconduct may recur. Where dependency is rewarded politically, economic independence may receive insufficient support. Where public communication is misleading, national problems may remain inadequately understood or addressed.

These mechanisms can reinforce an economy of unrealized potential.

The country continues to possess resources, intelligence, and ambition, but the institutional processes required to translate them into broad-based prosperity remain insufficiently effective. This produces a form of developmental loss that cannot be captured through national income statistics alone.

It includes abandoned projects, discouraged innovators, weakened trust, interrupted learning, foregone employment, and the loss of confidence that lawful effort will be fairly recognized.

The most devastating extraction from a society may not be the removal of its minerals, money, or material assets. It may be the systematic prevention of its people from transforming their knowledge and labour into an independent future.

The Fundamental Investigative Question: Neglect, Exploitation, or Deliberate Preservation?

The assertion that Sierra Leone appears to function as though impoverishment and traumatization were enduring features of its social order raises a serious question about institutional responsibility. It requires distinguishing among three possible mechanisms.

The first is **structural neglect** : institutions repeatedly fail to provide adequate protection, opportunity, and essential services because of limited capacity, ineffective policy, corruption, or administrative dysfunction.

The second is **opportunistic exploitation** : identifiable actors use existing deprivation, insecurity, and institutional weaknesses for personal, financial, political, or criminal advantage.

The third is **deliberate preservation of dependency** : actors consciously obstruct reforms or manipulate institutional conditions because continued vulnerability serves their interests. These mechanisms may coexist. They may also differ substantially across institutions, geographic areas, historical periods, and networks of influence.

The purpose of this research is to establish how they can be distinguished through evidence, including patterns of decisions, financial beneficiaries, repeated obstruction, documented communications, institutional relationships, and the consequences of specific policies.

The possibility of deliberate preservation must be investigated with seriousness proportional to its implications. At the same time, responsibility should be attributed to identifiable conduct and mechanisms rather than assumed from the persistence of poverty itself. The ultimate question is whether the country's institutional arrangements are organized to expand human capability—or whether particular arrangements continue to reward the management of dependency.

Conclusion – A Nation Must Be More Than a Population Taught to Endure

Sierra Leone's people have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to survive adversity. But national development cannot be defined as an endless demand for

survival. The endurance of a population should not become an excuse for the continued failure of institutions. The resourcefulness of families should not substitute for economic opportunity. The generosity of communities should not excuse the absence of reliable public services.

And the resilience of those who have survived war, epidemic, deprivation, and uncertainty must not be exploited as evidence that further hardship can be imposed without consequence.

The central issue is not whether Sierra Leoneans possess the intelligence or determination necessary to transform their country. It is whether the structures governing their lives consistently protect and expand that capacity.

A nation is not truly developing when its people are merely becoming more skilled at surviving conditions that development was supposed to eliminate.

This is the deeper meaning of the concern that Sierra Leone risks becoming a country in which poverty, trauma, and dependency are treated as permanent social conditions.

Such a condition may serve the interests of those who profit from inequality, discretionary authority, institutional opacity, and the diversion of opportunity.

Sierra Leone does not lack human possibility. The urgent question is why so much of that possibility remains unable to translate into independent, secure, productive, and dignified lives.

A generation should not inherit dependency as its expected condition. A nation should not demand psychological endurance as a substitute for institutional responsibility. And a people should never have to accept permanent vulnerability as the price of belonging to their own country.

The true measure of national transformation is not how successfully people survive within a failing system, but how decisively the system changes so that survival is no longer their principal struggle.

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