

Sierra Leone:

Strong Laws.

Resourced Services.

Every Child Protected.

A civil society contribution to the dialogue with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), on the implementation of the African Charter in Sierra Leone

Submitted to: African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC)

Prepared by:

West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOFF-FOSCAO), in coalition with child rights civil society organisations in Sierra Leone and independent child protection practitioners with support from The Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN) and technical support from NovaHub Consulting

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

A shared vocabulary for a shared effort.

ACRONYM	MEANING
ACERWC	African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
ACRWC	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
CRA	Child Rights Act
CRC	UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FOSCAO	Forum de la Societe Civile de l'Afrique de l'Ouest
FQSE	Free Quality School Education
FSU	Family Support Unit (Sierra Leone Police)
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GoSL	Government of Sierra Leone
GoSL SPR 2026	Government of Sierra Leone State Party Report 2026
ICC	Interim Care Centre
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoGCA	Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs
MoSW	Ministry of Social Welfare
NCC	National Commission for Children
NCRA	National Civil Registration Authority
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
OSC	One Stop Centre
SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SL-DHS	Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey
SOMC	Sexual Offences Model Court
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WACSOF	West African Civil Society Forum

Important note. This document is a respectful contribution from citizens to the dialogue about child rights in Sierra Leone. It is not a political document and should not be used for any political purpose. Citizens commend the authorities for the work done and responsibly identify areas where further improvement is possible. Civil society stands ready to work together with the State to strengthen child rights in the country.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A strong legal architecture, built to be felt in every chiefdom.

- **Purpose.** This Complementary Report is submitted by the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF-FOSCAO), with WACSOF Sierra Leone, in coalition with Sierra Leonean child rights organisations and independent child protection practitioners. It contributes to the dialogue between the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) and the Republic of Sierra Leone on the Combined First, Second and Third Periodic Report of the State party on the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), covering 2015 to 2025 (hereafter "the State Report"). It is offered in a spirit of partnership, in line with the Committee's mandate under Article 42 of the Charter.
- **Core message.** Sierra Leone has undertaken a meaningful modernisation of its child protection law: the Child Rights Act 2025, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, the Anti Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act 2022 and amendments to the Sexual Offences Act. WACSOF-FOSCAO commends these reforms and does not dispute the State Party's account of them. The next step is to make this framework reach every child with the same speed and quality, through implementing regulations, adequate recurrent funding and monitoring systems.
- **Five messages for the Committee.**
 - **The explicit FGM prohibition.** The Child Rights Act 2025 was passed on 3 July 2025 without an express prohibition of FGM, after the ACERWC raised the matter on 24 October 2024 and, jointly with the African Commission's Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa, on 19 May 2025. Restoring a clear statutory ban would align national law with the Committee's guidance, the Charter and the Maputo Protocol.
 - **Scale of harmful practices.** Nationally representative data put FGM prevalence among women aged 15 to 49 at about 83 percent (SL-DHS 2019), and 33.7 percent of women aged 18 to 49 have experienced both child marriage and FGM (UNICEF data). The State Report does not state current absolute prevalence, which would help planning.
 - **Resourcing of frontline services.** The State Report discloses that social sector spending on children represents 2 percent of the recurrent (goods and services) budget (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 9). This is the binding constraint on Family Support Units, One Stop Centres, Interim Care Centres and case management.
 - **Access to free education.** Free tuition applies to the 40 percent of schools that are government approved, and an estimated 524,000 children aged 6 to 18 were out of school in 2018 data cited in the State Report (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. 38, 154).
 - **Enforcement and data.** Child labour, trafficking and juvenile justice reforms are in place on paper, and implementing regulations, labour inspectors, monitoring frameworks and reconciled data series are the next priorities.
- **Validation by civil society.** Among the organisations that responded, three Sierra Leonean organisations accepted to be cited, 2 accepted to be named. Their responses confirm the findings on limited recurrent funding, case attrition, the absence of child labour inspection and the early stage of the diversion policy. They also add nuance on the scale of FGM, on early signs of enforcement of the child marriage ban, and on the reach of free education. Their views are integrated in each section and summarised in Annex A.
- **Evidence base.** The report combines a desk review of the State Report with independent sources (UNICEF, UNFPA, the US Department of State, SL-DHS 2019, MICS and prior ACERWC instruments) and the written validation consultation. It follows the ACERWC reporting guidelines. Section 3 describes the method and its limits.
- **Way forward.** WACSOF-FOSCAO proposes **44** numbered recommendations, consolidated in Section 15, and eleven suggested questions for the constructive dialogue (Section 14). Participating organisations stand ready to support the State party in implementation and follow up.

2. PRIORITY ISSUES FOR ACERWC CONSIDERATION

Eight issues where early progress would change children's lives fastest.

PRIORITY ISSUE	CHARTER ARTICLES	WHY IT MATTERS	SECTION
Explicit statutory prohibition of FGM	1, 16, 21	Not expressly prohibited in the Child Rights Act 2025. ACERWC appeals of 24 Oct 2024 and 19 May 2025.	11
Scale of FGM and child marriage	3, 16, 21	FGM about 83% (women 15 to 49). 33.7% of women 18 to 49 affected by both practices.	4, 11
Financing of child protection and social welfare	1, 4, 18	2% of the recurrent budget for children's social sectors. Heavy reliance on donor and NGO co-financing.	5
Free education and school quality	11	40% of schools approved. About 524,000 children out of school. 58.7% of teachers with minimum qualifications.	10
Child labour, trafficking and inspection capacity	15, 29	Tier 2 (US 2025 TIP Report). No dedicated child labour inspectors. Prevention funding fell sharply.	12
Children with disabilities	13, 21	67% chance of being in school versus 73%. About 10% of schools have ramps.	12
Juvenile justice implementation	17	Diversion Policy approved July 2025. Regulations, budget and monitoring still to come.	12
Digital, climate and migration risks	5, 16, 24, 27	No dedicated assessment of online risks, climate risks or cross-border cooperation.	13

Ranking by participating organisations. Among the responses, two of the organisations that accepted to be cited and named ranked the priority issues. Both placed FGM related issues first (the removal of the explicit prohibition, and the scale of FGM and child marriage) and the under-resourcing of child protection and social welfare services second. One of them added child labour, trafficking and labour inspection capacity, and weak data on and services for children with disabilities, as its third and fourth priorities. The third organisation did not rank the issues and identified protected reading time in primary schools as the reform most likely to produce change (Section 13.4).

3. INTRODUCTION, METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

How the evidence was gathered, and who stands behind it.

- **Mandate and scope.** WACSOF-FOSCAO is the regional platform of civil society organisations across the fifteen ECOWAS Member States, including Sierra Leone (see Annex B). It has a mandate to support citizen participation in, and independent monitoring of, regional governance and human rights commitments, including the ACRWC. This report is submitted under the ACERWC Guidelines for the Submission of Complementary Reports by Civil Society Organisations. It sits alongside, and does not replace, the State Report submitted through the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs.
- **Previous review.** Sierra Leone ratified the ACRWC in 2002 and was reviewed by the Committee in 2017 (Concluding Observations). The Committee conducted a follow up mission from 8 to 11 November 2023, whose press release recorded continuing gaps and recommended expediting the amendment of the Child Rights Act in line with the Charter (ACERWC, 2023). This report continues that dialogue.
- **Method.** The analysis combined (1) a clause by clause review of the State Report, treated as the anchor text; (2) review of prior ACERWC instruments, including the 2017 Concluding Observations, the 2023 mission press release, the 24 October 2024 Urgent Appeal and the 19 May 2025 joint letter; (3) cross checking of figures against independent sources (SL-DHS 2019, MICS, UNICEF, UNFPA, US Department of State TIP Reports 2023 to 2025); (4) legal and policy analysis of the main child protection laws; (5) benchmarking against the 2026 complementary report of the Child Protection Alliance, The Gambia, and the Cabo Verde report of WACSOF-FOSCAO; and (6) a written validation consultation. WACSOF circulated a written questionnaire of 26 questions that tested ten assumptions of the draft. We collected many responses and the majority decided to remain anonymous. A few Sierra Leonean organisations decided to be cited and / or named.
- **Limits.** Because of limited financial resources, this report does not include new household surveys or focus groups. The field input comes from many organisations questionnaire responses. Among these, three organisations accepted to be cited, 2 accepted to be named, so, the report cannot be taken as representative of every district. Where an organisation could not confirm a finding, or gave an opinion or community knowledge instead of documented case data, the text says so. Several questions received partial answers or none, because they fell outside the mandate of the organisation. No information identifying individual children or families is reproduced. WACSOF recommends that future submissions funding to be available to include all regions/districts to reflect the whole country.
- **Citation practice.** Figures drawn from the State Report are marked "(GoSL SPR 2026, para. X)". All other figures are cited to their independent source. Where the State Report and an independent source differ, both are presented so the Committee can weigh them directly. Each thematic section presents what the State Report documents, civil society findings, field validation and numbered recommendations.
- **Participating organisations.** Among the responses received, the following organisations accepted to be cited and named. The first two agreed to be named. The third asked to decide on attribution after reviewing the consolidated summary, so its input is cited anonymously in this version.

ORGANISATION	AREA OF WORK AND COVERAGE	ATTRIBUTION AND ENDORSEMENT
PEN Sierra Leone	Literary and freedom of expression activities. Promotes reading, writing and the right to write. Works with hundreds of school children each year, across Sierra Leone. Respondent: Project Manager.	Named source. Will decide on co-signing after seeing the final draft.
Early Childhood Development Network Sierra Leone	Non-governmental network for children's holistic development as a national priority. Freetown. About 50 child cases per year. Respondent: head teacher of a preschool and network member.	Named source. Willing to co-sign.
A participating organisation	Research and governance organisation covering all 16 districts, with work on education, health and development.	Anonymous in this version, at its choice to decide later. Willing to co-sign later.

4. SITUATION OF CHILDREN IN SIERRA LEONE AT A GLANCE

One reference table for the dialogue.

4.1 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Sierra Leone's population is estimated at 8.5 million people, of whom about one third, roughly 2.8 million, are children under 18 (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 6). This youthful population places substantial and continuing demands on education, health and child protection systems, in a post-conflict and post-Ebola development trajectory.

4.2 KEY CHILD RIGHTS INDICATORS

INDICATOR	VALUE	SOURCE
FGM prevalence, women 15 to 49	Approximately 83%	SL-DHS 2019
Child marriage before 18 (women 20 to 24)	30% (51% in 1994). About 800,000 living child brides	UNICEF / DHS 2019
Women 18 to 49 affected by both child marriage and FGM	33.7%	UNICEF, cited in SierraLII 2024
Under five mortality rate	104.7 per 1,000 live births (2021), from 154.5 (2011)	UN IGME
Children out of school (6 to 18)	About 524,000 (22% of age group), 2018 data	GoSL SPR 2026, para. 154
Unapproved, fee charging schools	50% (Western Area), 65% (Northern districts)	GoSL SPR 2026, para. 38
Children in street situations	About 20,000	2020 Head Count Survey, GoSL SPR 2026
Children with disabilities in regular school	44,792 (2023/24)	GoSL SPR 2026, para. 152
Child labour rate	35.1% (2023), from 45.9% (2011)	UNESCO-UIS, cited in GoSL SPR 2026
Trafficking ranking	Tier 2	US Dept. of State, 2025 TIP Report
Recurrent budget for children's social sectors	2% of recurrent (goods and services) budget	GoSL SPR 2026, para. 9

4.3 SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Recovery from the 1991 to 2002 conflict, the 2014 to 2016 Ebola epidemic and subsequent economic shocks continues to shape household capacity to invest in children. The State Report acknowledges that unapproved fee charging schools, extreme poverty and socio-cultural barriers constrain the realisation of rights even where legal entitlements exist (GoSL SPR 2026, Foreword; para. 38).

4.4 MAIN CHILD PROTECTION CONCERNS IDENTIFIED

- High prevalence of FGM and child marriage, partly addressed by recent legislation, with the explicit FGM prohibition absent from the Child Rights Act 2025.
- A juvenile justice and diversion system that is legally reformed and operationally nascent, built on a 2019 pilot not yet at national scale.
- Gaps in birth registration beyond the 90 day free window, linked by the State Report to barriers in education and passport access (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 29).
- Limited labour inspection capacity for child labour, noted in US State Department TIP reporting for three consecutive years (2023 to 2025).
- HIV vertical transmission of 15.79 percent in 2022 and an estimated 60,000 HIV exposed children not yet identified (GoSL SPR 2026, citing MTNDP 2024 to 2030).

5. GENERAL MEASURES OF IMPLEMENTATION (ARTICLES 1, 43 AND 45)

Good laws are the first mile. Funded, coordinated services are the last.

5.1 WHAT THE STATE REPORT DOCUMENTS

- **Legislation.** The Child Rights Act 2025 (passed 3 July 2025) replaces the 2007 Act, consolidates child protection law, codifies juvenile justice reform and establishes juvenile courts and non-custodial alternatives (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 1). The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024 has been in force since 14 December 2024 (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. 1, 22, 132). The Anti Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act 2022 and the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Acts of 2019 and 2024 increase penalties and broaden definitions of offences against children.
- **Institutions.** The Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MoGCA) leads child protection policy with the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), a distinct entity since 2019. The National Commission for Children (NCC), established under Section 122 of the Child Rights Act 2025, has a central monitoring and advisory role, including a complaints mechanism (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. 6 to 7).
- **Budget.** Social sector spending on children is 30 percent of the payroll budget, 2 percent of the recurrent (goods and services) budget and 16 percent of the capital budget. Education receives 22 percent of the national budget under FQSE (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. 9 to 10, 147).

5.2 CIVIL SOCIETY FINDINGS

- **Gaps acknowledged by the State.** The State Report itself names legislative gaps: discriminatory clauses under Section 27 of the Constitution on adoption, marriage and divorce; no provision to regularise the status of trafficking victims; and no time limit on pre-trial detention of children (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 1). The Committee raised closely related concerns in 2017 and during its 2023 mission.
- **Age of criminal responsibility.** Section 47 of the Child Rights Act 2025 sets the age at 14, while the Sexual Offences Act (as amended in 2019) removed the minimum age for sexual offences. The State Report indicates that a review has been initiated and does not report it complete (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 2).
- **Budget structure.** The 2 percent recurrent allocation funds the day to day costs of Family Support Units, One Stop Centres, Interim Care Centres and district caseworkers. This profile is consistent with the operational strain documented in US State Department TIP reporting, and WACSOF-FOSCAO invites the Committee to treat it as a root cause rather than a peripheral statistic.
- **National Commission for Children.** The Committee's long standing recommendation to allocate sufficient financial and human resources to the national children's commission is repeated as a live concern in the State Report itself (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 7).
- **Field validation.** Two organisations confirm that frontline child protection services are constrained by the lack of recurrent funding, and a third partly confirms it, noting the wider context of limited fiscal space (Part 2, A4). WACSOF treats these views as corroboration of the State Report's own budget figures, not as new budget data.

FROM THE FIELD A PARTICIPATING ORGANISATION (ATTRIBUTION PENDING), Part 2, A4

Child protection and social protection systems operate within a context of constrained public financing and limited fiscal space, according to the UNICEF Sierra Leone 2026 budget brief.

RECOMMENDATIONS: GENERAL MEASURES (CHARTER ARTS. 1, 43, 45)

- R1** Publish implementing regulations and a costed operational plan, with a fixed timeline, for the Child Rights Act 2025 and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024.
- R2** Complete and publish, on a fixed timeline, the review of the Sexual Offences Act needed to resolve its inconsistency with the Section 47 age of criminal responsibility.
- R3** Complete the constitutional review process to remove the Section 27 non-discrimination carve-outs affecting adoption, marriage and divorce, as the Committee has previously recommended.

- R4** Guarantee the National Commission for Children an earmarked, protected annual budget line sufficient to operate its complaints mechanism and monitoring function, and report on it in the next periodic report.
- R5** Increase the recurrent (goods and services) allocation to child protection and social welfare services, with the Ministry of Finance, MoGCA and MoSW jointly accountable, and publish an annual child budget statement showing allocation and execution by ministry and district, with a stated target for each budget cycle.

6. DEFINITION OF THE CHILD AND GENERAL PRINCIPLES (ARTICLES 2 TO 5)

Everyone under eighteen is a child under the Charter and in national law.

- **What the State Report documents.** Section 3(1) of the Child Rights Act 2025 defines a child as a person below 18, verified by birth certificate or other civil documentation (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 21). The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024 repealed Section 2(2) of the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2009, which permitted marriage below 18 with parental consent, harmonising the marriage age at 18 across statutory and customary law from 14 December 2024 (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 22).
- **Civil society view.** This harmonisation answers a specific concern of the Committee about the contradiction between the Child Rights Act and the customary marriage law, and WACSOF-FOSCAO credits the State Party for resolving it in law. Whether it leads to fewer customary unions involving minors in practice is addressed in Section 11. About 800,000 living child brides pre-date the 2024 Act, and enforcement in rural and traditional authority contexts is still being established (see Section 11.2).

RECOMMENDATIONS: DEFINITION OF THE CHILD (CHARTER ART. 2)

- R6** Report in the next periodic cycle on measures taken to apply the harmonised minimum marriage age of 18 in customary and rural contexts, including awareness work with traditional authorities.

7. CIVIL RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS (ARTICLES 6 TO 10)

A name and a nationality are the first rights a child holds.

- **What the State Report documents.** Birth registration within 90 days is free under the National Civil Registration Act 2016, with a USD 3 fee after that. Coverage rose from 78 percent (2020) to 85 percent (2022) per UNICEF data cited in the State Report. The Report also cites a lower 52.1 percent completeness rate for 2022 from NCRA vital statistics, and both series dip in 2020 to 2021, likely because of COVID-19 (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. 26, 149).
- **Civil society findings.** Two materially different completeness figures for the same year (85 percent and 52.1 percent) appear in the State Report without reconciliation. A single reconciled figure would make progress easier to track, given that unregistered children face barriers to school enrolment and passport acquisition (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 29).
- **Field validation.** Two organisations confirm that practical coverage is lower than the 85 percent figure, while a third cannot confirm it and observes that community sensitisation is encouraging many women to attend hospitals (Part 2, A7). Two organisations estimate that about 70 and 75 percent of children in the communities they serve hold a birth certificate, based on professional judgement (Q15). Such estimates sit between the two State Report figures. The thematic submission in Section 19 cites a further figure of 90.4 percent for children under five in 2019, which reinforces the call for one reconciled series.

FROM THE FIELD EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT NETWORK SIERRA LEONE, Q15, Freetown
About 75 percent of children hold a birth certificate (estimate).

RECOMMENDATIONS: CIVIL RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS (CHARTER ARTS. 6 TO 10)

- R7** Reconcile and publish a single authoritative national birth registration completeness rate, disaggregated by district, sex, and urban or rural residence, and by registration channel.
- R8** Extend the free registration window beyond 90 days, or eliminate the USD 3 late registration fee for children under five, given its effect on the poorest households.
- R9** Accelerate the digitisation of birth registers nationally, not only in pilot districts, to improve verification for education and identity document access.

8. FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND ALTERNATIVE CARE (ARTICLES 18 TO 25)

Family strengthening is the best child protection system a State can buy.

- **What the State Report documents.** The MoGCA Assessment Report (2022) records 2,161 children in family based, residential and informal alternative care, with the largest numbers in Western Urban (589) and Western Rural (487) (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 152). A census of children in residential care and a review of the National Policy on Alternative Care (2013) were planned for 2024 and are described as pending, owing to limited human and financial resources in MoGCA (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. 82 to 85).
- **Civil society findings.** A national census described as forthcoming across at least two reporting cycles is a data gap. Without it, neither the State nor the Committee can verify compliance with the "last resort" principle of Article 25, or assess whether informal "men pikin" fostering arrangements, which the Report flags as under monitored, expose children to unregulated risk.

RECOMMENDATIONS: FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND ALTERNATIVE CARE (CHARTER ARTS. 18 TO 25)

- R10** Complete the national census of children in residential and alternative care within twelve months, with data by district, placement type and route into care.
- R11** Finalise and resource the review of the National Policy on Alternative Care (2013), including binding minimum standards and a licensing regime for Interim Care Centres.
- R12** Develop and pilot registration and monitoring guidance for informal kinship and community fostering ("men pikin"), proportionate to risk.

9. BASIC HEALTH AND WELFARE (ARTICLE 14)

Surviving is not thriving: the next gains are in HIV, nutrition and neonatal care.

- **What the State Report documents.** Under five mortality fell from 154.5 to 104.7 per 1,000 live births between 2011 and 2021, and neonatal mortality from 38.5 to 30.9 (UN IGME, cited in GoSL SPR 2026, para. 51). The Free Health Care Initiative provides cost free maternal, newborn and under five care.
- **HIV.** Vertical transmission stood at 15.79 percent in 2022, with nearly 1,000 infant and child deaths under 14 that year and an estimated 60,000 HIV exposed children unidentified, owing to weak integration of HIV and RMNCAH services, breakdown of early infant diagnostic equipment and stockouts of commodities (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 55, citing MTNDP 2024 to 2030).
- **Nutrition.** The State Report reproduces figures of 500,000 stunted children under five and 30,000 children at immediate risk of death from severe acute malnutrition (GoSL SPR 2026, Basic Health and Welfare section).

RECOMMENDATIONS: BASIC HEALTH AND WELFARE (CHARTER ART. 14)

- R13** Prioritise restoration and maintenance of early infant HIV diagnostic equipment and commodity supply chains to close the 60,000 child identification gap.
- R14** Scale the Special Care Baby Unit rollout under the National Health Sector Strategic Plan 2021 to 2025 with a published, time bound facility level completion target.
- R15** Report annually on absolute numbers, not only rates, of severely malnourished children reached by treatment programmes.

10. EDUCATION, LEISURE AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES (ARTICLE 11)

Free schooling is truly free only when every school is approved and within reach.

- **What the State Report documents.** The Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Programme has driven a 69 percent rise in basic education enrolment since 2018, with 51 percent of new enrollees being girls, and the primary examination pass rate rose from 74.1 percent (2020) to 77 percent (2021) (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. 34, 39). These gains are credible and commendable.
- **Access and quality.** Free education applies to the 40 percent of schools that are government approved. The remaining 60 percent, including 50 percent in the Western Area and 65 percent in the Northern districts, are unapproved, fee charging and "often employ fewer qualified teachers" per the State Report (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 38). An estimated 524,000 children (22 percent of the 6 to 18 cohort) were out of school, and 58.7 percent of teachers hold the minimum required qualifications.
- **Safety in schools.** The State Report cites its 2021 Out-of-School Study identifying sexual violence as a key barrier for girls (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 37), and 2,005 reported cases of bullying, violence, sexual abuse and harassment in schools in the 2023 census.
- **Field validation.** One organisation confirms that free education does not reach the majority of children, and two partly confirm it (Part 2, A6). One of them notes that the 65 percent figure should be cross checked, and explains that data from the National Partnership for Social Accountability (NPSA) point to a similar proportion of community-run and peripheral schools lacking formal management capacity and compliance training. It adds that community-established schools without formal approval are most numerous in remote districts of the Northern Province, such as Falaba and Karene, and in the Eastern Province, and that alternative school fees are the leading reason why vulnerable children leave the free education programme. WACSOF keeps the State Report figures as the cited source and recommends that the Ministry publish approval status by district.

FROM THE FIELD A PARTICIPATING ORGANISATION (ATTRIBUTION PENDING), Part 2, A6

Alternative school fees, often described as community teacher contributions or report card fees, are named in the NPSA State of Education Report as the leading reason why vulnerable children drop out of the free education programme.

RECOMMENDATIONS: EDUCATION, LEISURE AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES (CHARTER ART. 11)

- R16** Publish a time bound national plan and financing pathway to bring unapproved schools into approved, fee free status, prioritising the Northern districts, the Eastern Province and the Western Area, and publish school approval status and any alternative fees charged by district.
- R17** Scale teacher qualification upgrading to close the gap between the current 58.7 percent minimum qualification rate and national targets, with published annual progress.
- R18** Match the 2,005 reported 2023 cases of school based violence and harassment with published, disaggregated investigation and resolution outcomes in the next reporting cycle.
- R19** Guarantee re-enrolment and retention support, not only non-expulsion, for pregnant girls and adolescent mothers, addressing the stigma the Committee flagged in its 2016 dialogue.

11. HARMFUL SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICES (ARTICLE 21)

Protecting girls from compounded risk needs a clear law and a funded plan.

11.1 FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

- **Prevalence.** FGM affects about 83 percent of women aged 15 to 49 (SL-DHS 2019), among the highest rates recorded worldwide. A 2025 data update by the FGM/C Research Initiative (Orchid Project) notes that the practice continues across the country.
- **What the State Report documents.** The Child Rights Bill 2024 as tabled "explicitly prohibits and criminalizes" FGM. The clause was removed through a motion in Parliament, and the Act as passed on 3 July 2025 does not expressly prohibit child FGM (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. 130, 134). In its place the Report describes a Memorandum of Understanding with traditional leaders and practitioners (Soweis) and a draft National Strategy for the Reduction of FGM/Cutting under review.
- **Regional context.** On 8 July 2025, five days after the Act was passed, the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice found in Case No. ECW/CCJ/APP/16/23 that Sierra Leone had breached its obligations by not taking legislative measures to criminalise FGM. It ordered the State to enact and implement legislation criminalising FGM and to adopt measures for its eradication (ECOWAS Court, 8 July 2025).
- **Civil society findings.** The ACERWC asked in writing on 24 October 2024 and 19 May 2025 for an "explicit and enforceable prohibition". A non-binding Memorandum and a draft strategy are valuable complements, and WACSOF-FOSCAO respectfully notes that they do not yet meet that standard. Reliance on general provisions of the Sexual Offences Act and the Child Rights Act addresses FGM only indirectly, whereas the Maputo Protocol (Article 5) calls for prohibition through legislation backed by sanctions.
- **Field validation of the legal gap.** Two organisations confirm that the removal of the clause is a step back that leaves FGM regulated only indirectly (Part 2, A1). The third did not answer this question.
- **Field views on prevalence.** Views differ. One organisation confirms the 83 percent figure and that the practice continues at scale (A2). A second confirms that prevalence is high according to SL-DHS 2019, but cannot confirm from its own work that the practice continues at scale despite the Memorandum, and refers to the Orchid Project data update. A third cannot confirm the percentage, has not carried out any survey and considers the figure too high, based on its observation that mostly teenage and adolescent primary school girls are initiated in Waterloo and in the places where it works. WACSOF-FOSCAO keeps SL-DHS 2019 as the latest nationally representative source, notes that it is seven years old, and recommends updated national data so that trends can be tracked.

FROM THE FIELD PEN SIERRA LEONE, Part 2, A2, Waterloo

I cannot confirm the percentage. We have not done any survey on that. However, I think that number is too high.

- **Prosecutions.** One organisation reports having heard of an attempted prosecution and an ongoing trial linked to a reported forced initiation of an adult woman into the Bondo Society in the east end of Freetown. According to this organisation, the High Court opened the criminal trial on 16 July 2026 on charges under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 and the Public Order Act 1965. The other two organisations had no information (Q11). WACSOF-FOSCAO could not verify this case in public sources, and presents it as information reported by a participating organisation. If confirmed, it shows that FGM related acts are currently addressed through general criminal law offences.

FROM THE FIELD A PARTICIPATING ORGANISATION (ATTRIBUTION PENDING), Q11, Freetown

Heard of an attempted prosecution and ongoing trial. The charges are framed as assault occasioning actual bodily harm, wounding with intent, conspiracy to commit a felony and false imprisonment.

- **Formulation of the lead recommendation.** Views differ. One organisation supports an explicit prohibition for children under 18 as a first step, because at 18 a person may understand its implications (Part 4). A second does not take a position on the formulation but states that the lead recommendation should be pursued, and names a ban on FGM as the issue most likely to produce change (Q23). A third could not take a position without consulting its management. WACSOF-FOSCAO therefore proposes a

prohibition that protects at least all children under 18, and invites the State to consider all ages in line with the Maputo Protocol and the ECOWAS Court judgment.

- **Risk and sensitivity.** One organisation cautions that discussing and banning the practice openly could create serious risk to families and institutions, because some people see it as a livelihood and as respect for their culture (Q25). WACSOF-FOSCAO treats this as decisive for the wording of this report. The recommendations therefore combine a clear legal standard with respectful engagement of traditional leaders and support for alternative livelihoods.

FROM THE FIELD A PARTICIPATING ORGANISATION (ATTRIBUTION PENDING), Q25

Banning it and talking about it openly could create a serious risk to families and institutions, as some people see it as a form of livelihood and as respect for their culture.

11.2 CHILD MARRIAGE

- **What the law provides.** The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, in force since 14 December 2024, criminalises marriage of persons under 18, with penalties of up to 15 years' imprisonment or a fine of about USD 4,000, or both. It was welcomed by Amnesty International's West and Central Africa Director as a "historic law" (cited in independent legal commentary, SierraLII, 2024). WACSOF-FOSCAO credits it as a substantial achievement.
- **Data.** Child marriage before 18 affected 30 percent of women aged 20 to 24 in 2019 (51 percent in 1994), rising to 42 percent in rural areas, with about 800,000 living child brides, of whom an estimated 400,000 married before 15. Prevalence is higher in the Northern (38 percent), Eastern (34 percent) and Southern (34 percent) regions. Independent analysis cautions that law alone cannot end child marriage without sustained community engagement. The State Report cites a 33 percent decline in teenage pregnancy (2019 to 2022), and a genuine downward trend is not disputed.
- **Enforcement and awareness.** Field views differ, which is itself informative. One organisation reports that people accused of child marriage are being brought before the courts in Waterloo, based on community knowledge and social media and not on documented cases (A3). A second notes community sensitisation on the Act led by the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, while rumours persist that the practice continues in some areas. A third confirms that it has not seen visible enforcement at community level. A media report of 27 June 2026 describes four men appearing before the High Court in Freetown on a charge of forcibly marrying a 17 year old girl, reported as the first trial since the ban (Rainbow Radio, 27 June 2026). WACSOF-FOSCAO has not verified the case independently. None of the three organisations had recorded or referred child marriage cases themselves (Q12).

11.3 THE FGM AND CHILD MARRIAGE OVERLAP

UNICEF data show that among women aged 18 to 49, 33.7 percent experienced both child marriage and FGM, 56.8 percent FGM alone, and 8.3 percent neither. The two practices compound risk for the same population of girls, so responses are most effective when designed together.

RECOMMENDATIONS: HARMFUL SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICES (CHARTER ART. 21)

- R20** As a key priority, amend the Child Rights Act or enact a standalone FGM Prohibition Act to reinstate an explicit, unambiguous criminal prohibition of FGM. It should protect at least all children under 18, and the State is invited to extend it to all persons in line with the Maputo Protocol and the ECOWAS Court of Justice judgment of 8 July 2025 (Case No. ECW/CCJ/APP/16/23). Penalties should be proportionate to those in the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, consistent with the Charter and the Committee's communications of 24 October 2024 and 19 May 2025.
- R21** Accompany the prohibition with respectful engagement of traditional leaders, Soweis and Bondo societies, and with support for alternative livelihoods for practitioners, so that implementation protects girls without placing families and institutions at risk.
- R22** Finalise, cost and publicly launch the National Strategy for the Reduction of FGM/Cutting on a fixed timeline, with annual public reporting.
- R23** Ensure that the next national survey round reports updated FGM prevalence by age group and district, including age at initiation, so that trends since SL-DHS 2019 can be tracked.

- R24** Design FGM and child marriage prevention programming around their documented 33.7 percent co-occurrence rather than treating them separately.
- R25** Develop a costed, time bound plan to extend protection, education and economic alternatives to the estimated 800,000 women and girls already affected by child marriage.
- R26** Report to the Committee in the next cycle the number of prosecutions and convictions under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, and of prosecutions for FGM related acts under general criminal law, by district.

12. SPECIAL PROTECTION MEASURES

Protection works best where it is fastest and closest to the child.

12.1 VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION, TRAFFICKING AND CHILD LABOUR (ARTICLES 15, 16, 27 AND 29)

- **What the State Report documents.** Family Support Unit data record 10,822 sexual violence cases (10,626 involving girls) and 4,141 physical abuse cases against children between 2019 and 2022. Recorded child victim cases declined from 5,343 (2019) to 3,949 (2022), 229 cases of violence were prosecuted and 109 were resolved through out of court settlement (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. on cases reported to authorities).
- **Civil society findings.** A declining count of recorded cases alongside a low prosecution ratio is consistent with under-reporting and case attrition as well as with real reductions in violence. The State Report offers no interpretation, and a breakdown of case attrition would help all partners.
- **Field validation.** All three organisations (that accepted to be named and cited) confirm that the fall in recorded cases reflects under-reporting and case attrition more than a real reduction in violence (A5). Asked what stops cases from reaching prosecution (Q14), they name negotiation and compromise at family level, poverty, family withdrawal, the cost of transport to court, out of court settlement and the influence of community elders.

FROM THE FIELD PEN SIERRA LEONE, Q14

Negotiations at family levels. Poverty.

- **Trafficking and child labour.** The US Department of State 2025 TIP Report keeps Sierra Leone on Tier 2, crediting increased convictions and a revised National Action Plan. It also records fewer trafficking investigations, no cooperation with foreign counterparts on investigations, no dedicated child labour inspectors and no training of labour inspectors on child labour, findings repeated in 2023, 2024 and 2025. Anti-trafficking prevention funding fell from about NLe 600 million (about USD 26,430) to NLe 55,000 (about USD 2,420) in one year, before the Victims of Human Trafficking Trust Fund was launched with NLe 500,000 (about USD 23,810) in 2024. The child labour rate was 35.1 percent in 2023, down from 45.9 percent in 2011 (UNESCO-UIS, cited in GoSL SPR 2026).
- **Field validation.** All three organisations (that accepted to be named and cited) confirm that hazardous child labour persists and that labour inspection specifically targeting child labour is effectively absent (A10). One reports having encountered hazardous child labour in Western Urban (Q18). None of the organisations reported trafficking cases in its own casework (Q19), and none could say how services outside Freetown perform.

RECOMMENDATIONS: PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE (CHARTER ARTS. 15, 16, 27, 29)

- R27** Publish annual case attrition data explaining the gap between reported child violence cases and prosecutions (229 over four years), including withdrawals, out of court settlements and transport costs to court.
- R28** Restore and stabilise anti-trafficking prevention funding to at least pre-2023 levels.
- R29** Establish dedicated child labour inspectors within the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, and train labour inspectors on identifying child labour and trafficking.
- R30** Strengthen cross-border cooperation on trafficking investigations, in line with the 2025 TIP Report finding.

12.2 CHILDREN IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS (ARTICLES 13, 22 TO 26, 28 AND 30)

- **What the State Report documents.** 44,792 children with disabilities were enrolled in regular schools in 2023/24, and 93,129 live with their families. About 20,000 children are in street situations (2020 Head Count Survey), and 364 asylum seeking, refugee or migrant children are reported, none in detention.
- **Civil society findings.** Children with disabilities have a 67 percent chance of being in school versus 73 percent for other children. About 10 percent of schools have ramps, and school inaccessibility affects

nearly 30 percent of persons aged 3 to 24 with disabilities and 33 percent of girls with disabilities (GoSL SPR 2026, citing SLIHS 2018 and MICS). The street situations figure is five years old.

- **Field validation.** Two organisations confirm that children with disabilities face physical and attitudinal barriers that enrolment figures do not capture, and a third partly confirms it, noting that some provision exists in the larger districts (A9). The barriers named are stigmatisation, lack of facilities, school infrastructure, sanitation and the absence of ramps in most schools (Q17). None of the organisations held a more recent estimate of children in street situations (Q21).

FROM THE FIELD EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT NETWORK SIERRA LEONE, Q17, Freetown
Ramps are absent in most schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CHILDREN IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS (CHARTER ARTS. 13, 22 TO 26, 28, 30)

- R31** Commission an updated national count of children in street situations.
- R32** Set and publish a costed, time bound target for school ramps, accessible sanitation and infrastructure, given the current 10 percent baseline for ramps.
- R33** Prioritise girls with disabilities in inclusive education programming, given their 33 percent school inaccessibility rate, and tackle stigma through awareness work with families and schools.
- R34** Match the continued non-detention of asylum seeking, refugee and migrant children with active case management and durable solutions planning.

12.3 CHILD JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION (ARTICLE 17)

- **What the State Report documents.** Part V (Sections 31 to 59) of the Child Rights Act 2025 codifies diversion, and the Cabinet approved a national Diversion and Alternatives to Detention Policy in July 2025, building on a 2019 pilot (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. 135 to 138). Legal Aid Board representation reached 1,136 children in the first six months of 2022, compared with 1,788 juveniles across 2015 to 2020.
- **Civil society findings.** This is a positive development. The State Report frames the next steps as still to come: implementing regulations, a 12 to 18 month phased national roll out budget, standardised multi-agency training and a national diversion monitoring framework (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 138).
- **Field validation.** Two organisations confirm that the policy has not yet reached operational implementation in most districts and that children continue to be held in pre-trial detention without a statutory time limit (A8). Two organisations state that they have not supported any child in pre-trial detention in the past two years (Q16), so this finding rests on the State Report and on their general assessment, not on their casework.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CHILD JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION (CHARTER ART. 17)

- R35** Issue implementing regulations and standard operating procedures for the Diversion and Alternatives to Detention Policy within the 12 to 18 month window the State Report proposes, and report the completion date to the Committee.
- R36** Establish the national diversion monitoring framework (numbers diverted, stage of diversion, recidivism at 6 and 12 months, detention time avoided) with a public reporting cadence.
- R37** Expand specialised juvenile court sittings and regional remand and rehabilitation facilities separate from adult prisons, starting with districts without coverage.
- R38** Set a maximum statutory pre-trial detention period for children, closing the gap identified in the State Report.

13. EMERGING AND CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

New risks reach children first, and the answers should reach them first.

13.1 ONLINE CHILD PROTECTION AND DIGITAL SAFETY (ARTICLES 16 AND 27)

The Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021 provides a general legal basis for prosecuting cyber-enabled offences and was noted as positive in the Committee's 2023 mission press release. The State Report contains no dedicated assessment of online sexual exploitation, grooming, cyberbullying or digital safety education. Civil society in neighbouring The Gambia has flagged rising online risks in its own 2026 submission to the Committee (Child Protection Alliance, 2026).

Two organisations had received no reports of online risks to children (Q20). A third had not received direct reports either, but notes that the issue has been raised publicly by the Children's Forum Network, UNDP and Government leadership, and that perpetrators are reported to use Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok to extort money from children. It observes that the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021 and the Child Rights Act are designed for formal criminal prosecution and not for a victim-centred crisis response, and suggests that organisations such as Defence for Children and AdvocAid may be better placed to provide case evidence.

FROM THE FIELD A PARTICIPATING ORGANISATION (ATTRIBUTION PENDING), Q20

Perpetrators normally use Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok to extort money from children. The statutes are designed for formal criminal prosecution rather than victim-centred crisis response.

13.2 CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL VULNERABILITY (ARTICLES 5 AND 24)

Sierra Leone is exposed to coastal flooding, landslides, including the August 2017 Freetown mudslide that killed hundreds including many children, and erratic rainfall affecting food security. The State Report does not treat climate risk to children as a distinct area. Climate shocks increase school disruption, child labour and early marriage as coping strategies in similar West African contexts. The thematic submission in Section 19 documents the impact of floods and water insecurity on young children.

13.3 MIGRATION AND CROSS-BORDER CHILD PROTECTION

Sierra Leone hosts an estimated 54,300 international migrants (2019), 97 percent of them West African nationals, and with IOM has supported the return of over 3,000 returnees since 2017 (GoSL SPR 2026, paras. 120 to 121). It is not a party to the Hague Convention on Inter-Country Adoption but applies comparable safeguards case by case (GoSL SPR 2026, para. 95). The 2025 TIP Report finding on limited cooperation with foreign counterparts is directly relevant to children moving across borders.

RECOMMENDATIONS: EMERGING AND CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES (CHARTER ARTS. 5, 16, 24, 27)

- R39** Develop and resource a national online child protection framework, with a child-friendly reporting mechanism, a victim-centred crisis response for children subjected to online extortion or exploitation, and digital literacy, and include a dedicated online child protection assessment in the next periodic report.
- R40** Integrate child-sensitive indicators into disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation planning, including school continuity plans for flood and landslide prone districts.
- R41** Restore active cross-border cooperation on trafficking investigations, particularly with Guinea and Liberia.

13.4 ISSUES RAISED BY PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS (ARTICLES 11, 12, 14, 15 AND 28)

The questionnaire asked which child rights issue was missing from the draft. The organisations raised four issues that this report presents as emerging areas for the Committee's attention, and for which data collection should come first.

- **Kush and substance use.** Two organisations name the use of kush and other harmful drugs among children and adolescents as a missing issue (Q22). The Charter protects children from the use of narcotic and psychotropic drugs in Article 28.
- **Mental health.** One organisation describes children's mental health as very important and missing from the draft (Q22; Charter Article 14).

- **Children affected by mining.** One organisation names children in mining affected communities (Q22; Charter Article 15). Mining areas are also among the districts the thematic submission in Section 19 identifies as underserved.
- **The right to essential reading.** One organisation raises access to essential reading, especially in primary schools, and proposes compulsory library reading hours on primary school timetables as the reform most likely to produce real change (Q22, Q23; Charter Articles 11 and 12).

FROM THE FIELD PEN SIERRA LEONE, Q22 and Q23

The right to essential readings, especially at primary schools. Compulsory library reading hours on primary school timetables.

RECOMMENDATIONS: ISSUES RAISED BY PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS (CHARTER ARTS. 11, 12, 14, 15, 28)

- R42** Commission and publish a national assessment of substance use, including kush, among children and adolescents, and expand child-appropriate prevention, treatment and mental health services, with reporting to the Committee in the next cycle.
- R43** Assess the situation of children in mining affected communities, including schooling, health and exposure to hazardous work, and report the findings and the response plan in the next periodic report.
- R44** Introduce protected reading and library time in primary school timetables, supported by essential reading materials for every primary school.

14. SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR THE CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Eleven questions that can turn shared concern into shared action.

- a. What steps and timeline are foreseen to reinstate an explicit statutory prohibition of FGM, and what is the status of the National Strategy for the Reduction of FGM/Cutting?
- b. When will implementing regulations and a costed operational plan for the Child Rights Act 2025 and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024 be published?
- c. What share of the recurrent budget will be allocated to child protection and social welfare, and what budget line is guaranteed for the National Commission for Children?
- d. How many prosecutions and convictions have been recorded under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, by district?
- e. What is the plan to bring unapproved fee charging schools into the free education system, starting with the Northern districts and Western Area?
- f. What explains the gap between reported cases of violence against children and prosecutions, and how will case attrition be monitored?
- g. What measures are planned to appoint dedicated child labour inspectors and restore anti-trafficking prevention funding?
- h. What is the timeline for the national census of children in alternative care and for the review of the National Policy on Alternative Care?
- i. When will implementing regulations, budget and a monitoring framework for the Diversion and Alternatives to Detention Policy be in place?
- j. How will online child protection, climate resilience and cross-border cooperation be integrated into national child protection planning?
- k. What measures are planned to understand and address substance use (kush), mental health needs and the situation of children in mining communities?

15. COMPILED RECOMMENDATIONS

One section to carry into the dialogue.

The following consolidates all **39** numbered recommendations of this report, grouped by thematic section. Numbering is continuous and matches the text. The recommendations of the thematic submission on early childhood rights (Section 19) are presented separately in that section.

GENERAL MEASURES (CHARTER ARTS. 1, 43, 45)

- R1** Publish implementing regulations and a costed operational plan, with a fixed timeline, for the Child Rights Act 2025 and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024.
- R2** Complete and publish, on a fixed timeline, the review of the Sexual Offences Act needed to resolve its inconsistency with the Section 47 age of criminal responsibility.
- R3** Complete the constitutional review process to remove the Section 27 non-discrimination carve-outs affecting adoption, marriage and divorce, as the Committee has previously recommended.
- R4** Guarantee the National Commission for Children an earmarked, protected annual budget line sufficient to operate its complaints mechanism and monitoring function, and report on it in the next periodic report.
- R5** Increase the recurrent (goods and services) allocation to child protection and social welfare services, with the Ministry of Finance, MoGCA and MoSW jointly accountable, and publish an annual child budget statement showing allocation and execution by ministry and district, with a stated target for each budget cycle.

DEFINITION OF THE CHILD (CHARTER ART. 2)

- R6** Report in the next periodic cycle on measures taken to apply the harmonised minimum marriage age of 18 in customary and rural contexts, including awareness work with traditional authorities.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS (CHARTER ARTS. 6 TO 10)

- R7** Reconcile and publish a single authoritative national birth registration completeness rate, disaggregated by district, sex, and urban or rural residence, and by registration channel.
- R8** Extend the free registration window beyond 90 days, or eliminate the USD 3 late registration fee for children under five, given its effect on the poorest households.
- R9** Accelerate the digitisation of birth registers nationally, not only in pilot districts, to improve verification for education and identity document access.

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND ALTERNATIVE CARE (CHARTER ARTS. 18 TO 25)

- R10** Complete the national census of children in residential and alternative care within twelve months, with data by district, placement type and route into care.
- R11** Finalise and resource the review of the National Policy on Alternative Care (2013), including binding minimum standards and a licensing regime for Interim Care Centres.
- R12** Develop and pilot registration and monitoring guidance for informal kinship and community fostering ("men pikin"), proportionate to risk.

BASIC HEALTH AND WELFARE (CHARTER ART. 14)

- R13** Prioritise restoration and maintenance of early infant HIV diagnostic equipment and commodity supply chains to close the 60,000 child identification gap.
- R14** Scale the Special Care Baby Unit rollout under the National Health Sector Strategic Plan 2021 to 2025 with a published, time bound facility level completion target.
- R15** Report annually on absolute numbers, not only rates, of severely malnourished children reached by treatment programmes.

EDUCATION, LEISURE AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES (CHARTER ART. 11)

- R16** Publish a time bound national plan and financing pathway to bring unapproved schools into approved, fee free status, prioritising the Northern districts, the Eastern Province and the Western Area, and publish school approval status and any alternative fees charged by district.
- R17** Scale teacher qualification upgrading to close the gap between the current 58.7 percent minimum qualification rate and national targets, with published annual progress.
- R18** Match the 2,005 reported 2023 cases of school based violence and harassment with published, disaggregated investigation and resolution outcomes in the next reporting cycle.
- R19** Guarantee re-enrolment and retention support, not only non-expulsion, for pregnant girls and adolescent mothers, addressing the stigma the Committee flagged in its 2016 dialogue.

HARMFUL SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICES (CHARTER ART. 21)

- R20** As a key priority, amend the Child Rights Act or enact a standalone FGM Prohibition Act to reinstate an explicit, unambiguous criminal prohibition of FGM. It should protect at least all children under 18, and the State is invited to extend it to all persons in line with the Maputo Protocol and the ECOWAS Court of Justice judgment of 8 July 2025 (Case No. ECW/CCJ/APP/16/23). Penalties should be proportionate to those in the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, consistent with the Charter and the Committee's communications of 24 October 2024 and 19 May 2025.
- R21** Accompany the prohibition with respectful engagement of traditional leaders, Soweis and Bondo societies, and with support for alternative livelihoods for practitioners, so that implementation protects girls without placing families and institutions at risk.
- R22** Finalise, cost and publicly launch the National Strategy for the Reduction of FGM/Cutting on a fixed timeline, with annual public reporting.
- R23** Ensure that the next national survey round reports updated FGM prevalence by age group and district, including age at initiation, so that trends since SL-DHS 2019 can be tracked.
- R24** Design FGM and child marriage prevention programming around their documented 33.7 percent co-occurrence rather than treating them separately.
- R25** Develop a costed, time bound plan to extend protection, education and economic alternatives to the estimated 800,000 women and girls already affected by child marriage.
- R26** Report to the Committee in the next cycle the number of prosecutions and convictions under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, and of prosecutions for FGM related acts under general criminal law, by district.

PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE (CHARTER ARTS. 15, 16, 27, 29)

- R27** Publish annual case attrition data explaining the gap between reported child violence cases and prosecutions (229 over four years), including withdrawals, out of court settlements and transport costs to court.
- R28** Restore and stabilise anti-trafficking prevention funding to at least pre-2023 levels.
- R29** Establish dedicated child labour inspectors within the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, and train labour inspectors on identifying child labour and trafficking.
- R30** Strengthen cross-border cooperation on trafficking investigations, in line with the 2025 TIP Report finding.

CHILDREN IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS (CHARTER ARTS. 13, 22 TO 26, 28, 30)

- R31** Commission an updated national count of children in street situations.
- R32** Set and publish a costed, time bound target for school ramps, accessible sanitation and infrastructure, given the current 10 percent baseline for ramps.
- R33** Prioritise girls with disabilities in inclusive education programming, given their 33 percent school inaccessibility rate, and tackle stigma through awareness work with families and schools.
- R34** Match the continued non-detention of asylum seeking, refugee and migrant children with active case management and durable solutions planning.

CHILD JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION (CHARTER ART. 17)

- R35** Issue implementing regulations and standard operating procedures for the Diversion and Alternatives to Detention Policy within the 12 to 18 month window the State Report proposes, and report the completion date to the Committee.
- R36** Establish the national diversion monitoring framework (numbers diverted, stage of diversion, recidivism at 6 and 12 months, detention time avoided) with a public reporting cadence.
- R37** Expand specialised juvenile court sittings and regional remand and rehabilitation facilities separate from adult prisons, starting with districts without coverage.
- R38** Set a maximum statutory pre-trial detention period for children, closing the gap identified in the State Report.

EMERGING AND CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES (CHARTER ARTS. 5, 16, 24, 27)

- R39** Develop and resource a national online child protection framework, with a child-friendly reporting mechanism, a victim-centred crisis response for children subjected to online extortion or exploitation, and digital literacy, and include a dedicated online child protection assessment in the next periodic report.
- R40** Integrate child-sensitive indicators into disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation planning, including school continuity plans for flood and landslide prone districts.
- R41** Restore active cross-border cooperation on trafficking investigations, particularly with Guinea and Liberia.

ISSUES RAISED BY PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS (CHARTER ARTS. 11, 12, 14, 15, 28)

- R42** Commission and publish a national assessment of substance use, including kush, among children and adolescents, and expand child-appropriate prevention, treatment and mental health services, with reporting to the Committee in the next cycle.
- R43** Assess the situation of children in mining affected communities, including schooling, health and exposure to hazardous work, and report the findings and the response plan in the next periodic report.
- R44** Introduce protected reading and library time in primary school timetables, supported by essential reading materials for every primary school.

16. ANNEX A. FIELD CONSULTATION AT A GLANCE

Three organisations (accepted to be named and cited), one shared concern for children.

The table summarises the written responses received on 14 October 2026. A blank entry means that the organisation did not answer the question, or that it fell outside its mandate. Opinions and community knowledge are reported as such, and the third organisation is shown anonymously, as it asked to decide on attribution later.

THEME (QUESTION)	PEN SIERRA LEONE	EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT NETWORK	PARTICIPATING ORGANISATION (ATTRIBUTION PENDING)
FGM clause is a step back (A1)	No answer	Confirm	Confirm
FGM prevalence of 83% and continuing at scale (A2)	Cannot confirm the percentage, considers it too high, no survey. Initiation of school age girls observed in Waterloo	Confirm	Partly confirm. Prevalence per SL-DHS 2019. Cannot confirm continuation in its communities
Child marriage law not yet enforced visibly (A3)	Disagree. Court action reported in Waterloo, from community knowledge	Confirm	Partly confirm. Sensitisation reported. Rumours of continued practice
Frontline services lack recurrent funding (A4)	Confirm	Confirm	Partly confirm. Constrained fiscal space
Fall in recorded violence reflects attrition (A5)	Confirm	Confirm	Confirm
Free education does not reach most children (A6)	Partly confirm. Needs cross check	Confirm	Partly confirm. 65% relates to school management capacity. Alternative fees drive dropout
Birth registration lower than 85% (A7)	Cannot confirm. Many women sensitised to attend hospitals	Confirm	Confirm
Diversion Policy not yet operational (A8)	No answer	Confirm	Confirm
Disability barriers not captured by figures (A9)	Confirm	Partly confirm. Some provision in big districts	Confirm
Hazardous child labour and absent inspection (A10)	Confirm	Confirm. Western Urban named	Confirm
FGM prosecutions since July 2025 (Q11)	Cannot confirm	None	Heard of an attempted prosecution and trial in Freetown (not verified)
Why cases stop before prosecution (Q14)	Negotiations at family level. Poverty	Elders in the community	Family compromise and withdrawal. Transport cost. Out of court settlement
Estimated share of children with birth certificate (Q15)	A good number of school children	About 75%	About 70%, professional judgement
Pre-trial detention support (Q16)	No	No answer	No
Disability barriers (Q17)	Stigmatisation. Lack of facilities	Absence of ramps in most schools	Infrastructure, sanitation, ramps
Online risks (Q20)	No answer	No reports	No direct reports. Extortion via social media reported publicly
Missing issue (Q22)	Right to essential reading in primary schools	Kush and substance abuse	Mental health. Kush. Children affected by mining
Priority ranking (Part 4)	Not ranked	1 FGM and child marriage scale. 2 Under-resourcing. 3 Child labour. 4 Disabilities	1 FGM clause. 2 Under-resourcing
Lead recommendation formulation	No position without consulting management	Under 18 as a first step	No position, states it should be pursued
Risk raised (Q25)	No answer	No	Open discussion of a ban may put families and institutions at risk
Attribution and co-signature	Named. Decide on co-signing after final draft	Named. Willing to co-sign	Decide attribution later. Willing to co-sign

17. ANNEX B. INSTITUTIONAL PRESENTATION OF WACSOFFOSCAO

The voice of West African civil society, in dialogue with its institutions.

- **Who we are.** The West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOFF), known in French as the Forum de la Societe Civile de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (FOSCAO), is an umbrella network of civil society organisations from the fifteen countries of West Africa. It is the official interface between West African civil society and the ECOWAS Commission.
- **Why it exists.** The Forum was created from the need for institutionalised dialogue between sub-regional civil society organisations and ECOWAS, after consultations that led to an ad hoc committee of ECOWAS and civil society members.
- **Mission.** WACSOFF serves as a receptacle for civil society organisations that feed into ECOWAS processes, and empowers them to use the public space at national and regional levels to contribute to an integrated, stable and developed West Africa.
- **How it is organised.** The Forum brings together its members at the General Assembly (Peoples' Forum), for example the 6th, 7th and 8th General Assemblies in 2016, 2022 and 2024, and works through national platforms in each West African State, including WACSOFF Sierra Leone.
- **Role in this report.** WACSOFF-FOSCAO coordinated the preparation of this complementary report with WACSOFF Sierra Leone, with support from The Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN) and technical support from NovaHub Consulting.
- **Contact.** www.wacsof-foscao.org / Media@Wacsof-Foscao.Org

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Note on sourcing. Statistics attributed to "GoSL SPR 2026" are drawn from the State Party Report and are reproduced for cross-referencing only. WACSOF-FOSCAO does not claim independent verification of figures that originate solely in that document, and has flagged internal inconsistencies where found. Every other figure is cited to an independent source.

19. SUBMISSION - EARLY CHILDHOOD RIGHTS IN SIERRA LEONE

Submission to the ACERWC in response to the 1st Periodic Report of the Republic of Sierra Leone, September 2026.

Submitted by: Sierra Leone Early Childhood Development Network (ECD), BRAC Sierra Leone, Institute for Governance Reform, Child Fund, UNICEF Sierra Leone, Institute for Development, Africa Early Childhood Network and Oxford Human Rights Hub.

IMPLEMENTATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD RIGHTS IN SIERRA LEONE

BACKGROUND

The Government of Sierra Leone has made progress towards fulfilling its mandate of upholding the rights of children since it ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) on 13 May 2002. However, information specifically concerning young children remains limited, notwithstanding their entitlement to all rights enshrined in the Charter. Article 5 guarantees every child the inherent right to life, survival, protection and development, obligating State Parties to maximise these outcomes through law and policy.

This establishes the basis for holistic early childhood development (ECD) integrating physical, cognitive, social, emotional and spiritual development for balanced growth.

In view of this obligation to fulfil early childhood rights, this thematic report, jointly prepared by civil society organisations, aims:

1. To share further information on the key challenges faced by young children in accessing quality, inclusive, holistic early childhood development (ECD) services in Sierra Leone, including the impact of climate shocks, flooding and food insecurity on ECD outcomes; and
2. To suggest concrete recommendations towards ensuring the right of all children to quality, inclusive, holistic early childhood development services.

This report is structured as per selected clusters maintained by the Committee that are relevant to the issues presented. The previous Concluding Observations of the Committee, the Committee's General Comments, the State's 1st Report and Sierra Leone's own legal and policy framework are revisited, referenced and acknowledged throughout.

A. GENERAL MEASURES OF IMPLEMENTATION

Key Issue 1: Disaggregated data collection mechanisms

In paragraph 11 of its previous Concluding Observations, the Committee encouraged the State to strengthen disaggregated data collection mechanisms in each sector and to collaborate with partners and stakeholders to improve the quality and coverage of child-related data. The Committee's 2023 follow-up mission again identified this as an area requiring continued attention alongside legislative reform.

In paragraphs 14 and 15 of its 1st Periodic Report, the Sierra Leone government reported that it "...supports the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2025) and the Demographic Health Survey continues to develop data systems...", that there are plans to carry out a census of children in residential care and that it had strengthened efforts to "compile data on children with disabilities".

We commend the Government of Sierra Leone for the reforms undertaken to transform its statistical and civil registration architecture, most notably the National Civil Registration Act, 2016, which established the National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) under the Ministry of Internal Affairs and made registration of births and deaths compulsory. Completeness of birth registration for children under five was recorded at 90.4% nationally as of 2019, a considerable improvement on the 48% recorded in 2005. However, this national average masks persistent rural-urban disparities, with rural completeness rates historically lagging well behind urban areas, and the country's wider civil registration system continuing to capture only a minority of deaths annually, undermining the completeness of the vital statistics base needed to plan ECD services.

It remains for the government to prioritise monitoring of the availability of, and access to, quality services critical for young children's survival and development, including through systematic data disaggregated by key variables relating to children's and families' backgrounds and circumstances.

Disaggregated data collection mechanisms are crucial for understanding the scale and distribution of the challenges facing Sierra Leone's youngest citizens and for targeting interventions accordingly. Statistics Sierra Leone (Stats SL), the NCRA, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS) collaborate with development partners and civil society organisations on household surveys (including the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey and SMART nutrition surveys) and the Annual School Census. However, persistent gaps in disaggregation by disability, district and household wealth undermine targeted interventions for young children. Key impacts include:

- 1. Inefficient resource allocation:** Resources are not consistently allocated where they are most needed, exacerbating inequality. This undermines young children's essential health, nutrition and ECD services, compounding malnutrition which affects roughly a quarter of children under five nationally and mortality. Sierra Leone's under-five mortality rate stood at 104.7 per 1,000 live births, among the highest in the world, with malaria, pneumonia, diarrhoea and underlying malnutrition among the leading causes.
- 2. Limited accountability:** Insufficient detailed, disaggregated data makes it hard to track progress, identify gaps and hold stakeholders accountable. Gaps in early childhood vaccination, birth registration and pre-primary enrolment go under-tracked at district level, stalling realisation of under-5s' rights as enshrined in the Charter.
- 3. Increased vulnerability:** Marginalised groups of children including children with disabilities, children in remote riverine and mining communities, and children in informal urban settlements such as Kroo Bay and Susan's Bay in Freetown are frequently overlooked in national data systems, increasing their vulnerability to discrimination in access to quality ECD services.
- 4. Inadequate targeting:** In some circumstances, absence of proper data means that interventions do not reach the most affected areas or vulnerable populations, such as street children, children of adolescent mothers, or children in chronically flood-affected communities. This reduces the effectiveness of interventions and undermines these children's rights.

In view of the Committee's General Comment No. 5 on Article 1 of the ACRWC on State Party Obligations and Systems Strengthening for Child Protection: States must collect and analyse disaggregated data (by age, sex, disability and location) to track implementation, identify discrimination and develop evidence-based policies.

The Committee may therefore consider raising the following questions to the Government:

- What are the specific measures the State has taken to collect disaggregated data on children in early childhood, encompassing measurable indicators on children's development, services and rights (ages 0-8), and how are these data shared with district-level planners and civil society partners?
- What specific measures has the State taken to promote sustainable management of disaggregated data throughout the country?

We therefore recommend that the Committee urges the Government to:

- 1.** Prioritise disaggregated data on early childhood (0-8 years) rights by empowering Statistics Sierra Leone and the NCRA to conduct coordinated ECD data collection and analysis; strengthen the annual School Census and MICS/SMART survey cycles; disaggregate by sex, age, district, disability and household wealth; collaborate with NGOs/CSOs for data collection and management resources; and protect children's data in line with global standards.

B. EDUCATION, LEISURE AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Key Issue 2: Early Childhood Development and Pre-primary Education

In paragraph 26 of its previous Concluding Observations, the Committee recommended that the State Party enhance school accessibility in rural and remote areas to boost enrolment, provide free learning materials and school feeding, promote girls' education in high-disparity districts, and elevate education quality through teacher training, reduced pupil-teacher ratios and improved facilities (recommendations that extend directly to the pre-primary sub-sector).

In paragraphs 32, 33 and 34 of Sierra Leone's 1st periodic report, it reported that it has implemented the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Programme which aims to improve access to free education. The programme also provides free basic school materials, a feeding programme, a national bus system and it has boosted girls' school attendance as well as the number of trained and qualified teachers.

Since the launch of the FQSE policy in 2018, the Government of Sierra Leone has, for the first time, formally extended free access from pre-primary through senior secondary education, and has developed, validated and begun disseminating a National Policy on Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD).

This legal commitment was reinforced by the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act, 2023, which structures formal education around three years of pre-school, six years of primary, three years of junior secondary and three years of senior secondary education, guarantees access to pre-primary education for all children including poor, orphaned and disabled children and obliges Government to support one year of free, compulsory pre-school education once a child reaches age five.

Additionally on the positive side, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, with UNICEF and the Global Partnership for Education, completed construction of 30 new early childhood development centres across Bombali, Pujehun and Kambia districts, extending access to an estimated 2,100 children, with a further 35 centres planned for Bombali, Karene, Kambia, Kenema and Moyamba.

However, pre-primary education nonetheless continues to face significant challenges. A major concern is that, notwithstanding the legal guarantee, delivery in practice continues to rely heavily on community-run and private pre-primary providers, where parents commonly contribute to materials, uniforms and operating costs, mirroring patterns seen elsewhere in the region where pre-primary access nominally exists in law but remains only partially free in practice.

Only 51.4% of children under five in Sierra Leone are developmentally on track according to the Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI), and enrolment of children aged 3-5 in early childhood education programmes ranged narrowly between 12% and 14% over nearly two decades, with stark geographic disparities: 27% of urban children were enrolled against just 3% of rural children.

Financing constraints compound these gaps. While education has consistently received over 20% of the national budget since 2021, a notable commitment by regional standards, debt-service obligations consume roughly a quarter of the national budget, and budget execution for education remains a persistent challenge. Importantly, the proportion specifically allocated to, and disbursed for, pre-primary education is not consistently disaggregated in publicly available budget documents, which itself illustrates the data gap identified in Section A above.

Pre-primary teacher and workforce constraints mirror those in the wider basic education system: limited access to specialised pre-primary training, high turnover, inadequate supervisory support and low remuneration compromise education quality and child development outcomes. Civil society continues to monitor the National ECD Policy and the Partnership Compact between Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education and its development partners, which commit to developing pre-primary teacher guides, play-based teaching and learning materials, and a dedicated pre-primary teaching cadre and career path commitments.

The Committee's General Comment No. 9 on Article 11 of the ACRWC on the Right to Education is interpreted to include early childhood development and pre-primary education as integral to the right to education from birth.

The Committee may therefore consider raising the following questions to the Government:

- What percentage of the total education budget has been specifically allocated and disbursed to pre-primary education in each fiscal year since the enactment of the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act, 2023?
- What measures has it taken to ensure that Free Quality School Education is realised in practice at pre-primary level, given continuing parental contributions to materials, uniforms and operating costs at community-run and private pre-primary centres?
- Are there effective laws, licensing procedures and monitoring mechanisms regulating private and community pre-primary providers, and how many such providers have been licensed, registered and monitored to date under the 2023 Act?

We therefore recommend that the Committee urges the Government to:

1. Secure children's right to pre-primary education by publishing a disaggregated, dedicated budget line for pre-primary education and progressively increasing allocations, particularly for disadvantaged districts and children with disabilities.
2. Accelerate full nationwide implementation of the one-year free, compulsory pre-primary guarantee under the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act, 2023, prioritising underserved rural, riverine and mining communities alongside informal urban settlements.
3. Effectively regulate the private and community pre-primary sector, ensuring all providers are licensed, registered, charge reasonable fees and are regularly monitored for compliance with education law and the National ECD Standards; and complete establishment of a dedicated, qualified pre-primary teaching cadre and career path.

C. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ECD

Key Issue 3: Climate Change as an Emerging Threat to Young Children's Rights

Sierra Leone is among the countries most vulnerable to climate change, facing more frequent floods, environmental shocks and unpredictable weather patterns. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has classified the country as one of the most fragile contexts where children are vulnerable to multidimensional environmental risks.

Severe flooding and extreme weather in Sierra Leone disrupt early childhood development by destroying clean water sources and increasing waterborne diseases such as cholera and respiratory illnesses that harm young children. It is particularly alarming given that only 13.6% of the population have access to basic sanitation services, with disparities between urban and rural places, and 38% have no access to basic water services. Health services are also interrupted which presents additional risks to critical stages of growth and development.

Children in Sierra Leone are the most affected by climate change-related shocks, particularly those in poor and underserved communities. These climatic shocks also affect children's access to adequate nutrition because agricultural production is being impacted by erratic rainfall and floods. Crop failures from unpredictable rainfall worsen food shortages, leading to high rates of child malnutrition and stunting. Similarly, learning is adversely affected because environmental disasters damage learning infrastructure. This further reduces access to early childhood care and pre-primary education facilities.

In its first report, the State has not reported on how climate change-related shocks affect the rights of young children in the country. We commend the State's policy and legislative efforts towards addressing the great burden that climate change places on the nation, but note with concern that it has not met the standards set out in Paragraph XII of the Resolution No. 18/2022 of the ACERWC Working Group on Children's Rights and Climate Change to Integrate A Child Rights-Based Approach into Climate Change Action to ensure that it takes into consideration the effects of climate change.

These climate impacts are undermining children's access to essential services, putting their health, education and future in jeopardy.

Therefore, the Committee may consider asking the State the following questions:

- What efforts, if any, is the State making to collect disaggregated data on how climate change is affecting young children?
- What measures is the government taking to address the effects of climate change-related shocks on young children?

We therefore recommend that the Committee urges the Government to:

1. **Build Resilient Infrastructure:** Upgrade local water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) systems to withstand floods and extreme weather.
2. **Expand Nutrition Programs:** Implement targeted school and community feeding programs to combat climate-driven malnutrition and stunting.
3. **Strengthen Community Health:** Increase mobile health clinics to treat waterborne diseases quickly in climate-vulnerable districts.
4. Fund community-led resilient projects, such as the Sierra Leone Coastal Resilience Project, to protect local families and early learning spaces.