



Sierra Leone: Autism

Asylos, May 2023

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Dear reader,

This report was researched, written and edited by Asylos, an international network of volunteers providing free-of-charge research for lawyers helping asylum seekers with their claim. Everyone engaged in Asylos believes that asylum matters and so do fair decisions, based on the best available knowledge. We believe that your work as a lawyer dealing with such cases is so important that it is a good thing to assist you for free - and we do that in our spare time.

Please note that Asylos' volunteer researchers are not legally certified experts in the matters we research and cannot be classified as expert witnesses. We compile primary and secondary information to address certain country-specific questions, but we do not provide assessment or analysis of the data. **Accordingly, this report is intended as background reference material for the asylum seeker and his/her counsel, to assist in their preparation of the case. It should not be submitted directly to asylum adjudicators.**

Further, the COI presented is illustrative, but not exhaustive of the information available in the public domain, nor is it determinative of any individual human rights or asylum claim. While we strive to be as comprehensive as possible, no amount of research can ever provide an exhaustive picture of the situation. It is therefore important to note that the absence of information should not be taken as evidence that an issue does not exist.

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Many thanks,

Your Asylos Team

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Research request

The following research questions were received by Asylos:

1. How are autistic adults* treated in Sierra Leone, within society and by the authorities?
2. Do autistic adults face vulnerability to exploitation in Sierra Leone?
3. What is the availability of support for autistic adults in Sierra Leone (e.g. supported accommodation, access to a support worker with autism experience, access to work schemes for autistic adults)?

*The initial query sought information relating to adults with autism. Information found on adults with autism in Sierra Leone was limited among the sources consulted and within the constraints of this research. This limitation has been noted throughout the report where relevant. Some information relating to children with autism in Sierra Leone was found and included where it may have broad relevance to the issues addressed.

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Research Timeframe

The earliest source dates from December 2017 and the most recent source dates from April 2024. An extended timeframe has been used for this research because of limited recent information and to allow for inclusion of more dated sources where they are of relevance.

Sources consulted

1. International Organisations

- UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD)

2. (Inter)governmental sources

- US Department of State

3. (I)NGOS and think tanks

- Amnesty International
- Autism Voice
Autism voice is UK charity focusing on the health and well-being of people with autism
- Sahid Autism Foundation
A community-based organisation founded by a Sierra Leonean mother of an autistic child
- Sierra Leone Autistic Society
A national NGO supporting people with disabilities, focusing on Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Stepping Forward UK
Stepping Forward UK's stated goal is to act in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; its international work is focused on Sierra Leone

4. Media

- Africa Young Voices (AYV) News
A Sierra Leonean media entity (television channel, radio, newspaper and online articles) with a target audience of young people
- The Calabash Newspaper
A newspaper established in Freetown in 2017
- The Owl Newspaper
A newspaper established in Freetown in 2011
- Swit Salone News
Swit Salone News is an online news publication covering culture and current events related to Sierra Leone

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5. Academic Sources

- The Journal of Special Education

The Journal of Special Education is a peer-reviewed academic journal that publishes research articles and scholarly reviews on special education for individuals with mild to severe disabilities

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Findings

The findings in this report are presented in reverse chronological order.

1. Treatment of adults with autism in Sierra Leone

a. Treatment within society

In a news article covering a “first-of-a-kind gathering” in Freetown, Sierra Leone, to promote autism inclusion and awareness, the treatment of individuals with autism was described in the following way:

- “As there’s limited autism awareness, society often regards those with the disorders as mentally ill or cursed. Persons with special needs are subject to discrimination, stigma and sometimes extreme cruelty. That’s why this inaugural walk was necessary. It’s the first time families could share their stories and challenges and push back against the stigma by creating awareness.”

Source: Swit Salone News: [“Sierra Leone Autism Awareness walk highlights stigma and offers hope for acceptance”](#), 25 April 2024, last accessed: 14 May 2024

In a news article the founder of the Macpherson Foundation described the treatment of children with autism in Sierra Leone.

- “‘At Macpherson Foundation, we focus on building communication, social, behavioral, vocational, and academic skills and work together with families to prepare for the transition to adulthood,’ Emmanuel Sahr MacPherson stated. He lamented that in Sierra Leone, families with children who exhibit symptoms of autism spectrum disorder, are often labeled as witches or wizards, and victimized, abandoned, ridiculed, poisoned, drowned, or totally isolated from other children of the same family.”

Source: The Owl Newspaper: [“Macpherson Foundation Launches Operations in Moyamba”](#), 9 January 2023, last accessed: 8 August 2023

An academic article from 2021 suggested that community members are unaware of developmental disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder.

- “Currently, there is not a way to screen or diagnose developmental disabilities, such

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as autism spectrum disorder, and the screeners we use in the United States are not culturally appropriate and may produce invalid results (Bauer et al., in press). As such, community members are unaware of these disabilities.”

Source: The Journal of Special Education - Morin, K. L., Tomaszewski, B. R., Bauer, K., Blasko, A. M., Enriquez, G. B., Tasik, E. J., & Mehta, K.: “[Perspectives on Disabilities in Sierra Leone](#)”, 29 December 2021, p. 154, last accessed: 24 July 2023

News articles quote comments by spokespeople of NGOs and an intergovernmental organisation on attitudes to children with disabilities and autistic people.

- “One Family People, a non-governmental organization, which is committed to helping vulnerable children, especially children living with disability, in partnership with the Special Need Education Unit of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), the Ministry of Social Welfare, amongst others, has on Wednesday 16th June, 2021 joined the world to commemorate this year’s Day of the African Child with the theme, ‘Accelerating the Implementation of the Radical Inclusion Policy,’ which is centered around the slogan, ‘We Ring the Bell Campaign 2021.’

The event was held at the Peace Museum, Special Court Sierra Leone (SCSL), on Jomo Kenyatta Road in Freetown and attracted representatives from special need schools, Sierra Leone Union on Disability Issues (SLUDI), Sierra Leone Autistic Society, National Commission for Children (NCC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Hope International, etc. [...]

In her statement, Tanzila Watta Sankoh, the Team lead of the Sustainable and Local Economic Development Cluster at UNDP mentioned that, Article 23 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates State authorities to recognize that a child with mental or physical disability is entitled to a full and decent life.

However, she informed that children with disabilities are among the most marginalized and excluded people in society.

‘In Sierra Leone, children with disability encounter daily discrimination in the form of undesirable attitudes, inadequate policies and legislations, which largely prevent them from realizing their rights to healthcare, education and even survival,’ she lamented.

She disclosed that the UNDP together with the Ministry of Social Welfare are assessing the Disability Act of 2011 and also working on supporting over 100 PWDs nationwide with livelihood skills and start up kits.”

Source: The Calabash Newspaper: “[With Ring the Bell Campaign 2021... One Family People Commemorates Day of the African Child](#)”, 21 June 2021, last accessed: 8 August 2023

- “She explained that Autism Voice Sierra Leone intends to end the widespread stigma attached to this condition in the country. [...]

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Speaking to journalists recently, Madam Kandeh said that her organization's mission is to educate the general public about the condition, give and advocate for support and protection of the individuals within this bracket, and help enhance people and families affected by the condition to live a happy and better life.

She went on to say that autistic people need to have dignity in the society. She urged all and sundry to treat autistic people with utmost respect and to stop describing them in derogatory terms."

Source: AYV News: "Demand for Better Treatment of Autistic Patients", 10 January 2020, last accessed: 7 August 2023

- "During a sensitization meeting organized by the charitable organization, Autism Voice – Sierra Leone held in Kroo Bay community, participants promised to love and respect people living with this condition. [...]

In her sensitization message, the co-founder Autism Voice – Sierra Leone, Mariama Korrrca Kandeh said: 'I am here to beg you to please stop calling autistic people "fool fool" or "aflahun". They are not fools, neither are they witches or have evil spirits.'

Source: AYV News: "[Giant Step to Care for ASD Patients](#)", 10 January 2020, last accessed: 6 August 2023

In their 2019 annual report, Autism Voice reported on a Conference attended by professionals where 98% of 40 participants who responded to evaluation forms reported it was their first time learning about autism.

- "We provide outstanding autism education programmes through conferences, seminars and workshops. On 11th April 2019, we held our first Autism Conference on the theme: Enhancing Acceptance and Recognition of Autistic People in Sierra Leone. This was followed by three subthemes: Autism: myths and stereotypes in communities, Disability and human rights and Inclusion of persons with invisible disabilities. The rationale behind the conference was to create a platform for families and practitioners to meet commitments and address new and emerging challenges of the autistic community. [...] A total of 88 people attended the conference including teachers, doctors, health care and social workers, traditional and religious leaders, police and prison officers and journalists. A total of 40 participants responded to evaluation forms. Out of this 98% reported it was their first time learning about autism."

Source: Autism Voice Sierra Leone: "[Autism Voice Sierra Leone Annual Report – Amplifying the Voices of Autistic People, December 2018 – December 2019 \[via Facebook\]](#)", 19 December 2019, pp. 4-5, last accessed: 7 August 2023

In 2017 Stepping Forward UK, The British Council and Disability Africa organised a conference

on Pan-African Experiences of Autism, and a report of the conference includes comments from many participants. Dr Muideen O. Bakare, a Consultant Psychiatrist in a Child & Adolescent Unit in Nigeria spoke about the situation in Africa for people with autism spectrum disorders and Mary Penn-Timity, mother of an autistic daughter and co-founder of the Sierra Leone Autistic Society, spoke about her daughter's experience in Sierra Leone.

- “4.6 Current Situation of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in Africa, Dr Muideen O. Bakare, M.B.B.S, FMCPsych, MNIM
Chief Consultant Psychiatrist & Head, Training and Research
Child & Adolescent Unit, Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital, Enugu, Enugu State, Nigeria

[...]

Negative Cultural Beliefs and Practices

Research findings suggest that etiology of ASD is still being explained by supernatural causes (Bakare et al, 2009b). In Africa, witchcraft, demonic afflictions, evil spirits possession are common acceptable modes of explaining etiology of ASD and other childhood neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD). Individuals with ASD and their families are often faced with discrimination and rejection, negative and derogatory comments, further promoting stigma and social exclusion.

To avoid stigma, parents tend to hide away affected children from the society by locking them up in the house. This may lead to late presentation and diagnosis of ASD among African children.

[...]

Inadequate Trained Healthcare Personnel in Africa

Primary health care workers In Africa do not routinely undergo training in identification of neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD) such as ASD. The relatively few physicians equipped with some knowledge about NDD are those with specialization in medical fields such as Psychiatry, Paediatrics and Neurology. Inadequate trained personnel contribute to late diagnosis and interventions for African children with ASD.

[...]

Low Educational and Vocational Attainment among Adults with ASD and Community Development

It is a likely trend that children with ASD that had little or no education opportunity are not going to fit into specific vocational ventures as adults, negatively affecting their contribution to general community development. Community perception of stigma also reduces the community inclusion and this reduce opportunity for Adults with ASD to contribute positively to their society.”

Source: Stepping Forward UK: [“Pan-African Experiences of Autism: Transforming Rights into Reality, Report of Conference held at: The British Council, Freetown, Sierra Leone, December 2017”](#), December 2017, pp. 15, 17, 18, 20, last accessed: 8 August 2023

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- “Parent/Carer Perspective III by Mary Penn-Timity
[...] These are things that have been said about and to my autistic daughter:
 - Jes is a witch
 - Jes is a devil child
 - Jes is bad luck and so deserves to die
 - Jes should be left in the bush, to be returned back to the devil she came from
 - Pregnant women should not be around Jes or they would have a devil child like her
 - Other children should not play with Jes
 - Jes is a mad person
 - Jes should be feared, not loved*All because Jes has autism.”*

Source: Stepping Forward UK: [“Pan-African Experiences of Autism: Transforming Rights into Reality, Report of Conference held at: The British Council, Freetown, Sierra Leone, December 2017”](#), December 2017, p. 36, last accessed: 8 August 2023

The Sierra Leone Autistic Society also includes the stories of two individual children with autism on its website.

- “MIATTA’S STORY
Miatta is a 9 year old girl with autism;
 - due to no diagnostic services her mum did not know what the issue was (ie. What condition Miatta had)
 - some traditional healers told mum that Miatta was a witch and some said Miatta is a ‘debul pikin (devil’s child)
 - Miatta’s mum was told to buy some items and that a ceremony will be performed to ‘return’ her daughter back to the ‘debul’
 - Mum said Miatta was on the verge of been ‘returned’ when she got in contact with Sierra Leone Autistic Society (SLAS) via SLAS’ community sensitisation team.
 - Today Miatta is in SLAS’s supported school (Browne-Penn Special School) and doing very well; and mum is a strong member of the parent support group.
- “FATMATA’S STORY
Fatmata is the mother of an eleven year old son with autism;
 - Fatmata had been evicted many times from her rented properties due to neighbours pressuring landlords to evict her and her son Bundu.
 - Bundu has severe autism and the nature of how it manifests causes him to scream loudly, and when this happens in the middle of the night (as Bundu struggled with sleep), neighbours assumed he was either a witch or possessed by the devil.

- Fatmata was suffering with depression and told Sierra Leone Autistic Society (SLAS) sensitisation team she was thinking of ‘ending it all’; Bundu is now in school and mum received advice through support group which has helped with his sleep issues, etc.
- Sensitisation was carried out within Fatmata’s community and for the first time in a long while Fatmata and Bundu have a supportive community to live in.”

Source: Sierra Leone Autistic Society (SLAS): “[Stories and Testimonies, Miatta & Bundu’s Story](#)”, Undated, last accessed: 8 August 2023

Stepping Forward UK’s webpage on Sierra Leone gives a broader context on the situation for people with disabilities in the country.

- “Sierra Leone remains one of the poorest countries in the world and in 2016 had the lowest life expectancy globally. Almost one in five children don’t reach their fifth birthday. Within this resource-poor context, those with disabilities, including neurological conditions and intellectual disabilities, often face devastating social exclusion, with profound educational and livelihood consequences, contributing significantly to ill-health and poverty.”

Source: Stepping Forward UK: “[Sierra Leone](#)”, undated, last accessed: 6 August 2023

b. Treatment by authorities

In a speech on World Autism Awareness Day, the Director of Social Welfare in Sierra Leone’s Ministry of Social Welfare commended the Sierra Leone Autistic Society NGO and committed the Ministry’s support.

- “Francis Kabia pointed out that the Ministry is very committed to see that they render their support to organizations working in the interest of people living with disability, furthering that although they have disabilities, they should not be discriminated against but rather should be seen as useful children in society. He urged other institutions and NGOs to come onboard and spread the awareness level of Autism in Sierra Leone saying supporting children and people with Autism is very expensive, so collective collaboration is a huge boost in tackling the issue of Autism in the country.”

Source: Africa Young Voices (AYV) News: “[Sierra Leone commemorates World Autism Awareness Day](#)”, 9 May 2023, last accessed: 24 July 2023

- “Giving the keynote address, [...] Francis Kabia expressed appreciation to the Sierra Leone Autism Society for their tremendous work towards supporting children with autism in the country. He said that even though the Ministry has been working towards the development of persons with disabilities in the country, they are still not satisfied [...] he pledged the Ministry’s commitment towards supporting the initiatives of the Sierra Leone Autism Society in order to give persons with disabilities better lives in society.”

Source: The Calabash newspaper: “[Sierra Leone Autism Society Commemorates World Autism Awareness Day](#)”, 3 May 2023, last accessed: 24 July 2023

The US Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices includes reporting on the situation for persons with disabilities in Sierra Leone.

- “Persons with disabilities could access education, health services, and transportation on an equal basis with others. The law mandates access to these services, and prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment and provision of state services, including judicial services. The government-funded National Commission for Persons with Disabilities-Sierra Leone (CPWD-SL) is charged with protecting the rights and promoting the welfare of persons with disabilities. The CPWD-SL stated the government did not effectively enforce the law or implement programs to make buildings, information, and communications accessible. In view of the high rate of general unemployment, work opportunities for persons with disabilities were even more limited, and begging was commonplace. [...]

The CPWD-SL reported considerable discrimination against persons with mental disabilities. Most persons with mental disabilities received no treatment or public services. At the Sierra Leone Psychiatric Hospital in Kissy, the only inpatient psychiatric institution that served persons with mental disabilities, authorities reported only one consulting psychiatrist was available, patients were not provided sufficient food or sanitation facilities, and restraints were primitive and dehumanizing.

The Ministry of Health and Sanitation is responsible for providing free primary health-care services to persons with polio and diabetic retinopathy as well as to blind or deaf persons. The ministry did not provide these services consistently, and organizations reported many persons with disabilities had limited access to medical and rehabilitative care. The Ministry of Social Welfare has a mandate to provide policy oversight for problems affecting persons with disabilities but had limited capacity to do so.”

Source: US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor: “[2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone](#)”, 20 March 2023, p. 22, last accessed: 24 July 2023

The UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD) produced a programme proposal on Advancing Disability Inclusion in Sierra Leone in 2022, which highlighted some of the current issues.

- “[...] Even though the country passed a Persons with Disabilities Act (PWDA) in 2011, implementation has been hampered by lack of knowledge among duty bearers and weak capacity of OPDs for advocacy. [...] Best available data from 2015 show 93,000 persons with disabilities (1.3% of the total population), but this is thought to be grossly underestimated. The gender breakdown is 56% male and 46% female. The greatest daily challenges facing this group include poverty and homelessness for many. [...] A clear geographical disparity in the distribution of resources was identified, as most persons with disabilities live in the provinces while resources available to them are concentrated in the capital of Freetown. Improving nationwide monitoring of disability inclusion-related SDG [sustainable development goals], that includes feedback mechanism for OPDs to provide input, will help to highlight these disparities to that resources can be channeled more equitably. Although the original PWDA foresees establishment of a Disability Fund, it is still not yet operational and there is no agreement on how it should function, where it should be based, and what should be the source of funds. [...]”

Source: UNPRPD: [“R4 programme Proposal Sierra Leone Nov 22 – Advancing Disability Inclusion in Sierra Leone”](#), pp. 1-3, last accessed: 8 August 2023

In a speech at an event for the 2022 World Autism Awareness Day the Minister of Social Welfare of Sierra Leone acknowledged a lack of awareness in the country and urged everyone to work to address this along with NGOs.

- “Giving the keynote address, the Honorable Minister of Social Welfare, Baidu Dassama Kamara, acknowledged her delight to see such programs being organized to advocate for children who are suffering from Autism. [...] She furthered that in Sierra Leone, autism is the forgotten reality unlike other countries that provide special care and teachers for children with autistic behavior. She went on to say that the awareness level in Sierra Leone is so low that people are not well informed about Autism, and so it is the responsibility of everyone to bring it to life, talk about the reality of Autism, ensure a safe environment for people living with Autism. [...] She concluded by saying that it is not just about gathering for events and giving big speeches, but rather she urged everyone to put their words into action and work with other organizations to help make life comfortable for children living with autism. She thanked Orange-SL on behalf of the government for creating a helpline 504, and urged every Sierra Leonean to report cases that relate to Autism.”

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Source: The Owl newspaper: "[As They Celebrate 2022 World Autism Awareness... ORANGE-SL Launches Autism Helpline](#)", 11 April 2022, last accessed: 24 July 2023

In a June 2020 news article, President Bio was quoted as acknowledging the need for heavy government investment in healthcare treatment for a number of conditions, including autism.

- "At the commissioning ceremony of the renovated Sierra Leone Psychiatric Teaching Hospital (SLPTH) Complex at Kissy in Freetown on Thursday 4 June 2020 President Bio registered that mental health intervention is within his Government's overarching human capital development priority. [...] '[...] events and beyond have induced conditions from post-traumatic stress disorder and grief, to anxiety, depression, psychosis, acute stress, and harmful substance abuse. Combine this with autism, epilepsy, bipolar and psychotic disorders, intellectual and cognitive disabilities, and more, and we recognise that as a nation we must act now. We must invest heavily in mental healthcare. [...] We know that persons with mental health needs and their families, in cases, are subjected to severe discrimination, stigma, harassment, and victimisation. Their constitutional rights and their security are not guaranteed. Because of cultural insensitivities, children are often not educated and abandoned to a life of vagrancy, abuse, and early death.'"

Source: The Calabash Newspaper: "[Govt. Registers Commitment to Invest More in Mental Health Issues](#)", 8 June 2020, last accessed: 8 August 2023

At the December 2017 Pan-African Experiences of Autism Conference a parent gave her perspective on seeking support for her autistic child.

- "4.5 Parent/Carer Perspective I: Dr Virginia George, Sierra Leone
[...] Our country has a special needs school but unfortunately, we did not benefit from the services of this institution as the school had a lot of constraints and was hardly functioning.
I was fortunate to benefit from training for medical officers, selected from all districts in Sierra Leone, since our government has integrated CAMH care into Primary Health Care. This training helped me to understand my daughter's condition and to better manage it.
May I take this opportunity to use this forum to appeal to our government to improve on existing policies and put in place effective implementation mechanisms to actualise a more tangible and practical manifestation of social support for patients with autism."

Source: Stepping Forward UK: "[Pan-African Experiences of Autism: Transforming Rights into Reality, Report of Conference held at: The British Council,](#)

2. Vulnerability of adults with autism to exploitation in Sierra Leone

Little information regarding vulnerability of autistic adults to exploitation could be found among the [sources consulted](#), and within the scope of this research. One anecdotal account was provided by the brother of a man with autism at the Pan-African Experiences of Autism Conference in December 2017.

- "Parent/Carer Perspective II: Osman Mansaray
My younger brother Dauda was born in 1989 and has autism and learning disabilities. He is now 28. Our parents died, and my brother lives with me. I take care of him. People constantly provoke and beat my brother when he is out in public. During the Ebola time he was given some practical tasks to help at a local health centre, but despite him working for many months he was only paid for one month. After the Ebola crisis he was invited to stay on at the health centre where he is to this day. After several years of going there each day they have not once paid Dauda. When I intervened and said that they need to stop abusing him and pay him some money, my brother was very upset with me that he cannot go there anymore to help. So, we had to let him go back as he was unhappy. I am frustrated that people take advantage of my brother and don't help him to get a job where he can get paid and he can be accepted. Proper help is needed in this area. I am responsible for all his food, clothing and other necessities."

Source: Stepping Forward UK: "[Pan-African Experiences of Autism: Transforming Rights into Reality, Report of Conference held at: The British Council, Freetown, Sierra Leone, December 2017](#)", December 2017, p. 22, last accessed: 8 August 2023

3. Availability of support for adults with autism in Sierra Leone

Little information could be found regarding support for autistic adults in Sierra Leone within the scope of this research. There are reports of support being made available by some NGOs, but much of the support described within the [sources consulted](#) appears to be directed towards children. The following excerpts refer to non-governmental organisations working in the field of intellectual disabilities, and autism.

- "In a groundbreaking initiative aimed at providing support and raising awareness for individuals with autism in Sierra Leone, the Autism Consortium, a coalition comprising four local autism organizations, is spearheading a series of events and

fundraising activities. The consortium, comprising Junior’s Place of Hope, Life of an Autistic Mum, Puzzle Pieces and Sierra Leone Autistic Society, launched their efforts on Saturday, April 20th, 2024, with a walk and various fundraising initiatives aimed at empowering those affected by the disability.

The primary focus of the consortium is to raise awareness about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) while also generating funds to support individuals with autism, their families, caregivers, educators, and schools.

Their multifaceted approach includes projects like the Kids Club and Skills Training Center with the aim to assist children and young people with autism to acquire essential skills for integration into society.”

Source: The Calabash Newspaper: “[Autism Consortium Launches Fundraising Initiatives to Empower Persons with the Disability](#)”, 24 April 2024, last accessed: 14 May 2024

- “In a statement he delivered, Emmanuel Sahr MacPherson, intimated that the Macpherson Foundation was founded in 2020 with the aim of creating equal educational opportunities for underprivileged children and helping children with mental and intellectual disabilities attain their full potentials. He furthered how the Foundation seeks to help underprivileged children who are finding it difficult to access basic things (books, transportation, uniform, food) that could aid them to be successful in school.

He added that as their motto depicts, ‘No Child Is Left Behind’, the Macpherson Foundation is keen on creating a vision of hope for the future for the most vulnerable of population underscoring that they are working together to provide for children who have suffered abuse, domestic violence, neglect, and abandonment, because of the way they were born.

‘People don’t pay much attention to mental and intellectual disabilities and we are determined to change that narrative,’ he stated with passion revealing how the Foundation supports children (ages 1 to 12) with intellectual disabilities, traumatic or acquired brain injuries, or other developmental challenges.”

Source: The Owl Newspaper: “[Macpherson Foundation Launches Operations in Moyamba](#)”, 9 January 2023, last accessed: 8 August 2023

- “Orange Foundation on the 6th of April, 2022 partnered with the Sierra Leone Autism Society (SLAS) and other organizations to launch a helpline for people living with Autism. The launch and Film Screening of a movie titled ‘The reason I jump’ took place at the company’s headquarters on Hill Station in Freetown.

This helpline, 504 , it was stated will enable people to call and report cases of people living with the disorder for them to get the necessary help that they need as most times the victims are associated with demons.

Autism is a developmental disorder of variable severity that is characterized by

difficulty in social interaction and communication and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behavior.

Director of Digital Transformation, Madam Finnah Tucker, applauded all those who see these kids as an integral part of the society disclosing how they are doing their best to make the victims or sufferers feel happy and welcomed.”

Source: The Calabash Newspaper: “[Orange Foundation & SLAS Partner to Launch 504 as Helpline for People Living with Autism](#)”, 11 April 2022, last accessed: 8 August 2023

- “As part of their continuous support to vulnerable people in the country, especially those living with disabilities, the Orange Foundation Sierra Leone has on Monday 19th April, 2021, donated assorted food items worth 85 Million of Leones to the Sierra Leone Autistic Society for onward support to children living with Autism in their school.”

Source: The Calabash Newspaper: “[Orange Foundation Donates Le85 M Worth of Food Items to Sierra Leone Autistic Society](#)”, 21 April 2021, last accessed: 8 August 2023

- “As part of their support in raising awareness on children living with Autism, Orange Foundation-Sierra Leone has on Wednesday 31st March, 2021 sealed partnership with the Sierra Leone Autistic Society. The event took place at Orange Headquarters at Hill Station in Freetown. [...] Mary Penntimity noted that her organization has been providing support for autistic children, young people and their families in Sierra Leone since inception, adding that they started with few children but now runs play schemes, have youth groups and support groups, furthering that their activities are providing vital community support and reducing the profound and dangerous isolation of autistic children furthering that they have also succeeded in establishing a school for these children. The Director of Orange Foundation, Jestina Betts, said that when she took over as Director of the Foundation she had the passion to do something especially with regards addressing issues relating to children in the country saying that children living with Autism need more attention, furthering that growing up she came across children living with Autism and that she has always wanted to help raising the awareness on Autism.”

Source: The Calabash Newspaper: “[Orange Foundation Partners with Sierra Leone Autistic Society](#)”, 1 April 2021, last accessed: 8 August 2023

- “Autism Voice Sierra Leone is a parent driven Non-Governmental Organisation, began in 2013, by a group of parents with children with autism who came together to learn more about autism and share their experiences. Today Autism Voice Sierra

Leone is working hard to extend its reach across the Western area of Sierra Leone to strengthen the network of those who are impacted by or who work on the field of neurodevelopmental disability. [...]

Activities

Information and Advise services – We provide free information and advice about autism perspective in Africa, to anyone who needs it. [...]

Community engagement – Our community outreach work aims to break down barrier associated with autism, stigma and discrimination of autistic people and their families. Our outreach work involves community awareness, visits to religious/traditional gatherings, schools and other institutions and organizations in Sierra Leone to sensitize them about autism in our community. [...]

Research and Advocacy – [...] We understand that what needs to change is not the families we support but the system and society they are trapped within. We intend to change this by advocating for a change to the legal and welfare system, lobbying for policies protecting autistic people in Sierra Leone.

Support Groups – Parents/carers of children with autism meeting up regularly for support. [...]

Conference – We provide outstanding autism education programmes through conferences, seminars and workshops. On 11th April 2019, we held our first Autism Conference [...]

Workshop – AVSL held two workshops for teachers on Understanding Autism between January and April. [...] Together a total of 45 teachers participated in these training courses.

Emotional Support – Our emotional support service offers advice about the services available to autistic people and their families [...]

Welfare Programme – Our welfare programme works to provide necessities for the autistic community we serve. Thanks to our friends and supporters in the United Kingdom who donate clothes, school items and financial donations which are distributed to autistic people and their families. [...]"

Source: Autism Voice Sierra Leone: "[Autism Voice Sierra Leone Annual Report – Amplifying the Voices of Autistic People, December 2018 – December 2019 \[via Facebook\]](#)", 19 December 2019, pp. 2-6, last accessed: 7 August 2023

At the December 2017 Pan-African Experiences of Autism Conference parent and co-founder of Sierra Leone Autistic Society, Maty Penn-Timothy, contrasted her experience of support provided in the UK with her experience of moving to Sierra Leone with her autistic daughter. Two NGOs – the Autism Council and Sierra Leone Autistic Society (which also set up the Browne-Penn Special School) described their work in Sierra Leone.

- "Parent/Carer Perspective III by Mary Penn-Timothy [...]

Support provided for Jestina and the family as a whole – the UK experience

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- A child development centre where she was observed and diagnosed by multi-disciplinary team
- home visits to provide early intervention in-house support for progress in many areas
- intensive support within 'specialist' school
- special school education;
 - (i) with lots of opportunities for learning new skills (e.g. swimming), self-help skills (e.g. to dress/feed herself), community visits, speech and language support, hearing, vision and dentistry check-ups
 - (ii) individual education plan to target Jes' needs; with adapted curriculum
 - (iii) safe environment
- parent support groups/outings and respite for family
- school bus service to ease transportation worries – was very challenging to transport Jes
- psychiatry services – for medication etc.
- therapeutic services - e.g. arts/play therapy, sensory room activities (both at school, home and external centres)
- dietary support – tested for allergies/intolerances and nutrition advice provided
- general practitioner – who regularly monitored Jes' medical needs; especially as she is non-verbal (so regular check-ups) and needed referral from time to time to different specialists.
- social worker who looked at Jestina's holistic needs and also advocated for support/services that were key.

The Sierra Leone Experience

- nowhere to turn to for help; we went to a Ministry to ask for sign posting to autism services, and were asked 'what is autism?'
- no database of autism services/referral pathways
- several doctors told us they don't know about autism and so couldn't help our child
- a medical personnel told us that she could never progress/improve so we should just keep her at home with 24 hours nursing care
- a medical personnel prescribed a discontinued drug for Jes; thankfully her mum's pharmacology background meant she was able to make a life saving decision
- we were told there was no school that could meet her needs.
- we were told by many many people both professionals and non-professionals to take her to 'the medicine man'
- heard neighbours saying that we sacrificed our child to go abroad and make money
- when Jestina went into crisis; several times neighbours ran away stating that 'debul don ol am'

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- we were thrown out of several restaurants/taxis etc. when she went into crisis; fear that she was a ‘debul pikin’
- initially Jes could only interact with her siblings as other children feared her
- in a church we attended, we were told to take her for one month fasting and prayer; but that we should leave her there for that duration also.
- very expensive nappies in Sierra Leone
- stigma – plus plus!!!!

What Has Worked In Sierra Leone?

- lots of opportunities for one-to-one input; especially in Browne-Penn School (as it’s not as costly as it could be in the UK and other countries which has been very positive for Jes)
- the fight to get Jes out of nappies is gradually being won; she now mainly wears nappies for bedtime only; this is because of what we call ‘the pinning technique’.
- in Sierra Leone they ‘pin’ on children to do certain things; but be careful, because ‘pinning’ should be realistic and achievable without going into ‘abusive’ mode
- sensitisation
- lots of love from immediate and extended families”

Source: Stepping Forward UK: [“Pan-African Experiences of Autism: Transforming Rights into Reality, Report of Conference held at: The British Council, Freetown, Sierra Leone, December 2017”](#), December 2017, pp. 37-38, last accessed: 8 August 2023

- **“4.9 The Work of the Autism Council of Sierra Leone, John Koroma Background**

Sierra Leone Autism Council, founded in April 2016, is a programme of Stop It-Sierra Leone that works with a network of partners in autism awareness and advocacy and providing a variety of programmes and services that help to develop social and physical solutions. Our programmes are designed to share with participating organizations that work for autism. These organizations work to transition autism from the backyards to the door steps of communities onto the corridors of power. Our partners mostly learn and share about:

1. A history of autism in Sierra Leone from various sources,
2. Benefits of Partnership for autistic persons
3. Networking for social action for autistic persons.

Through collaborative relationship with local and international organizations and businesses, etc, we have placed ASD issues in the spotlight and this has helped to provide a renaissance about the condition in both private and public sectors.

Those who are not ready for autism action are still being pursued and encouraged especially the Government of Sierra Leone, to place priority of ASD on the national

development agenda and to address it on a national scale with local and international partners on board.

Organisational Network

We hold several meetings each week with various partners and organizations that work alongside autism affairs or have interest in autistic issues and discuss a variety of issues that help autistic people develop social and physical skills.

There are hundreds of local families in Sierra Leone going through similar experiences in raising an autistic child [...]

Autism Educational Assistance

To facilitate the work of people dealing with autism, we have initiated Autism Educational Assistance through fundraising programmes to support children with special needs gain education at Browne-Penn, the first established Special Education School for autistic children in Sierra Leone. [...]

● **4.10 The Sierra Leone Autistic Society & The Browne-Penn School, Freetown: Alice Browne and Mary Penn-Timothy**

The mission of the organization is to enhance the well-being of people living with ASD, their parents and care givers, through advocacy, empowerment, research, training and bio psychosocial (health, psychological and social), as well as educational support.

Functions of SLAS/Staff

- Research
- Assessment and diagnostics
- Educational support: Browne-Penn Special Education School (BPSS)
- Nationwide Sensitization
- Trainings
- Doctors
- Therapists
- Pharmacologist
- Special needs instructors
- Mental Health Nurses
- Social Workers
- Research Assistants
- Support workers

Browne-Penn Special Education School: Every Child Matters

Browne-Penn Special Education School (BPSS) is set up for children with developmental disabilities whose needs cannot be met within mainstream schools.”

Source: Stepping Forward UK: [“Pan-African Experiences of Autism: Transforming Rights into Reality, Report of Conference held at: The British Council, Freetown, Sierra Leone, December 2017”](#), December 2017, pp. 25-27, last accessed: 8 August 2023

The Sierra Leone Autistic Society’s website describes how it was established and its founders’

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experience and passion for ‘the mental well being of the child and adolescent population as well as education’.

- “OUR STORY

- **How Sierra Leone Autistic Society Began**

- Sierra Leone Autistic Society (SLAS) started in 2014 as a Community Based Organisation (CBO) with its main aim of sensitisation. A family from the UK came to Sierra Leone with their daughter who was diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), after visiting every secondary school in the capital city of Freetown, as well as the ministry of education, they realised that there was no school that could meet their child’s needs, and no effective service for people with ASD and other developmental disabilities in the whole country. It was quickly realised that the work needed to expand, and as such, SLAS became a national Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in 2017.

- SLAS is founded by two women (Mary Penn-Timity and Alice Browne); Mary is a dual citizen of Sierra Leone/UK. [...]

- They are both very passionate about the mental well being of the child and adolescent population as well as education. Because of their beliefs and passion, they opened up the first inclusive school for children with developmental disabilities. Browne- Penn Special Education school (BPSS) located in Wellington, Freetown Sierra Leone. They believe that ‘Every child matters’ and together, they believe they can make a difference in Sierra Leone with their vast knowledge and expertise they have in Mental Health especially working with children with special needs and disabilities. Together, both Mary and Alice have experience of working with children with developmental disabilities (particularly those with autism), their families and care givers in various settings.”

- Source: Sierra Leone Autistic Society: “[Who We Are](#)”, undated, last accessed: 8 August 2023

The website for the Sahid Autism Foundation appears to be currently inaccessible, but its Facebook page states that it works with children who have autism or special needs in Sierra Leone.

- “SAHID AUTISM FOUNDATION.

- Is a humanitarian organization that deals with child with Autism or children with special needs base in Sierra Leone, West Africa.”

- Source: Sahid Autism Foundation (Facebook Page): “[Sahid Autism Foundation](#)”, undated, last accessed: 8 August 2023

Stepping Forward UK’s website lists a number of initiatives it is working on in Sierra Leone.

- “We are working with partners on a number of initiatives in Sierra Leone: [...]

- Employment training opportunities for people with disabilities, including work placements;
- Capacity-development for the Sierra Leone Autistic Society and the Browne-Penn Special School and the supply of play resources.
- Support to the Hosetta Abdullah Special Needs School in Freetown, including the purchase of a mini-bus in 2017 to enable the children to attend school and the stipend of a volunteer teaching assistant.
- Sponsoring of a student undertaking a Masters Degree in Special Needs Education, University of Makeni.

In December 2017 we organised the first autism conference in Sierra Leone with The British Council and Disability Africa.”

Source: Stepping Forward UK: “[Sierra Leone](#)”, undated, last accessed: 6 August 2023

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