

Introduction

The emergence and spread of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone has highlighted the need for effective disease prevention and mitigating measures as well as ordered and structured border management. To that end, it was deemed crucial to garner a better and more comprehensive understanding of mobility patterns and trends, characteristics of mobility and to identify key crossing points with Guinea and Liberia, Sierra Leone's neighbouring countries.

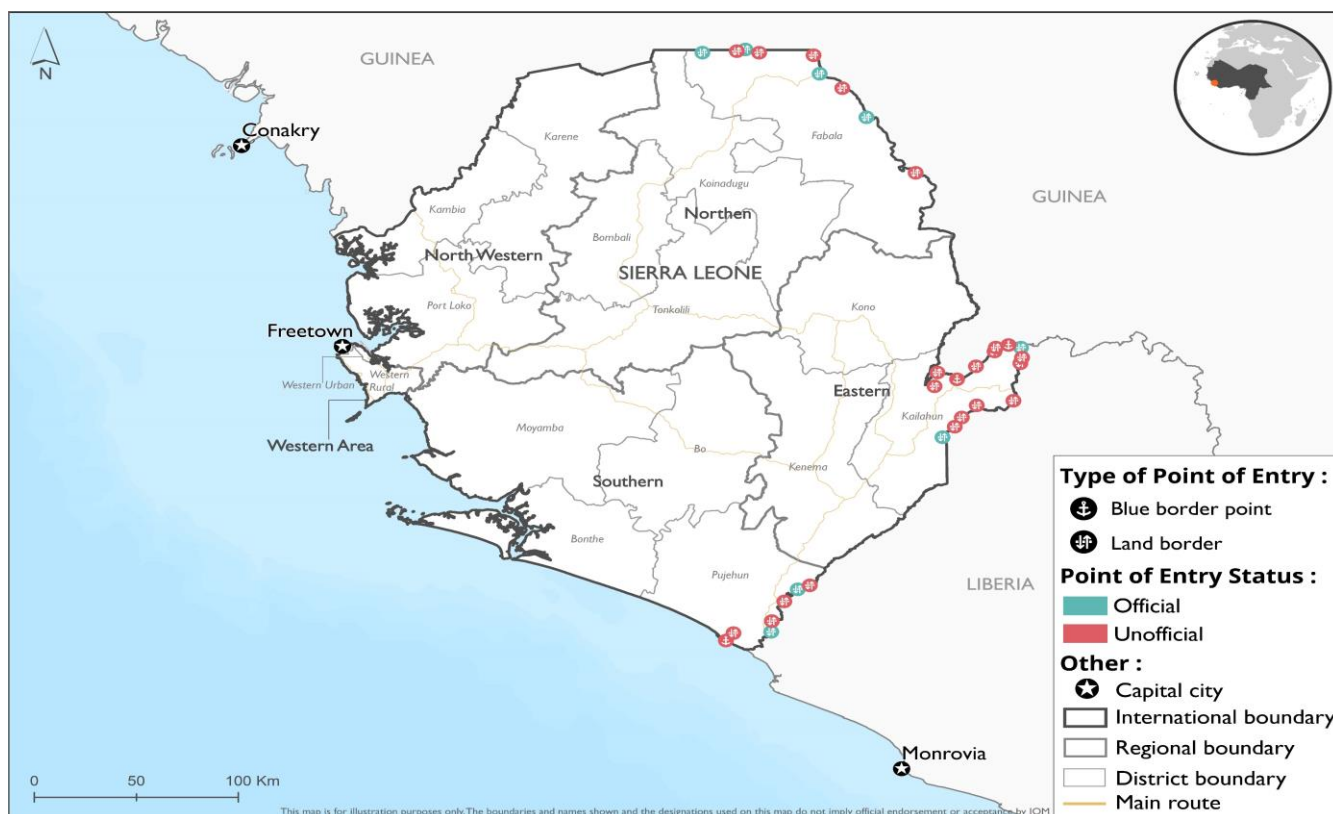
The International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) conducted a participatory mapping exercise between 12 and 22 October 2021 in Kailahun, Pujehun and Falaba Districts, chosen for their strategic location in transboundary mobility, with the aim of identifying major crossing points between Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, understanding mobility patterns and trends, and identifying key characteristics of cross-border mobility. This is particularly important given the porousness of international borders, which make it more difficult to track movements between countries. This exercise sought, by enhancing comprehension of cross-border mobility, to inform programmes and policies to strengthen infection disease preparedness, monitoring and response.

Objective

The aim of the participatory mapping exercise was to identify major crossing points, both official and unofficial, in Kailahun, Pujehun, and Falaba districts, and to identify cross-border mobility patterns and trends as well as key characteristic of mobility amongst cross-border communities between Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, in order to support the Sierra Leonean government with the institutionalization of infectious disease mitigation and prevention measures.

Methodology

The participatory mapping exercise was conducted between 12 and 22 October 2021 in Kailahun, Pujehun and Falaba Districts. The exercise was carried out in the form of focus group discussions, with participants comprising local stakeholders at the community level within the border chiefdoms comprising various occupational and professional expertise, including local chiefs, chairwomen of female market vendors, community youth leaders and district representatives, in order to guarantee a broad range of perspectives and views.



Map 1: Official and Unofficial Points of Entry Sierra Leone's Kailahun, Pujehun and Falaba Districts

Border Areas

Kailahun District

Kailahun, in southeastern Sierra Leone, shares borders with both Guinea and Liberia. The majority of deaths related to the 2014 Ebola outbreak were recorded in Kailahun, making it a priority area for disease surveillance. Four main points of entry were identified, with a volume of flow of 150 to 200 daily travellers. Substantial numbers of travellers cross Kailahun to reach Freetown, and Liberians often cross into Kailahun to travel back to Monrovia, due to poor road networks and conditions within Liberia.

Pujehun District

Pujehun is located in southern Sierra Leone and borders Liberia; it also has sea access. Eight points of entry were identified, including four unofficial PoEs, which 300 travellers cross on a daily basis.

Pujehun witnesses a high volume of Liberian and Ghanaian migrants attracted by fishing activities. In addition, Pujehun's paved road network encourages travellers to cross the Jendema PoE to reach major cities in the sub-region such as Monrovia, Accra and Freetown.

Falaba District

Falaba, in northern Sierra Leone, borders Guinea and is characterized by porous borders. The mapping exercise identifies nine PoEs, including five unofficial PoEs, crossed by 250 travellers daily on average. Cross-border movements are primarily linked to trade (selling and buying goods at markets) and family visitations as communities are spread on both sides of the border and form one entity. Further, transhumance is a common practice in Falaba district and the source of a multitude of cross-border mobility.

Factors and Patterns of Mobility

Kailahun, Pujehun and Falaba, which are covered by thick rainforest and untapped arable land, are locations attractive for agricultural activities. In Kailahun, agriculture activities include the production of farm rice, and cash crops such as cocoa and coffee, while in Pujehun district, rice farming is most widely practiced. Falaba district mostly witnesses swamp rice farming and vegetable production. Agriculture is the underlying reason accounting for some of the cross border mobility between Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, whereby inhabitants settling around these border districts cross over to a neighbouring country on a seasonal basis for farming.

Beyond agriculture, another significant cross border activity in these border districts is trade. Travellers from Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia travel frequently across borders, moving to large cities such as Freetown, Monrovia and Conakry to trade goods ranging from food stuff to apparel, as well as market days (Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday) during which travellers cross over into counterpart border communities for trading.

In Pujehun district, fishing is also a widely practiced activity and factor for mobility, for both the inhabitants of these communities and for migrants from Liberia and Ghana who settle in the communities to practice fishing.

Furthermore, in Falaba district (and distinctively, unlike the other two border districts), another widely practiced cross-border community activity is transhumance (seasonal nomadic herding practice whereby herders move seasonally with their cattle in search of grazing land and water points).

Finally, another commonplace reason for travel in all three districts is family visitation and the observance of certain traditional and cultural rites, attendance for which members of cross-border communities travel to neighbouring. This mobility pattern is informed by the long historic and homogeneous ties among inhabitants of cross-border communities in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia.

Mobility Patterns and Trends

Mobility patterns and trends across major points of entry, both official and unofficial, in the three districts appear to be predictable and regular in nature. This means that high flows (high volume of travellers) are consistently noted on market days, reflecting the significance of trade as a major factor of cross-border mobility between Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. Characteristic of these movements on those marketing days as noted is that, mostly travellers tend to use one official crossing route in the morning to access the market locations for business transaction, however, on their return many of these travellers would tend to use the unofficial exit point in order to evade questioning from PoE personnel especially on issues relating to items crossing across with.

These organized patterns and trends of mobility for cross border trade has a long history and is a commonplace within and across these border regions. One of the main reason is that, major urban towns of these three countries are situated far away from the border communities. Inhabitants find it much convenient to travel to nearby communities around the border locations to conduct trade. In addition, these border communities are deprived of easily accessible road networks, making the transport of large quantities of agricultural products and other goods to and from these communities challenging. Therefore, the presence of nearby markets gives traders the advantage of time saving and reduced costs.

Remarkably important amongst movement patterns is the volume of women travellers, which represent the majority of travellers: female travellers constitute approximately 75 per cent of flows crossing PoEs, while men represent 25 per cent of the travellers. Female travellers across these locations are mostly involved in trade, while the men travel mostly to conduct agriculture activities. As trade is the main factor for migration, this could explain the significance of the share of female travellers amongst cross-border mobility.

It is important to note that, because of the geographical conditions of these cross border districts and limited access of vehicles to many of the communities, mobility of travellers is often done through motorcycle, canoe and, largely, on foot.