Social Protection
Budget Brief

SIERRA LEONE
AUGUST 2026

Key messages and recommendations

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1 The ongoing review of the National Social Protection Policy and Strategy provides a strategic entry-point to reposition social protection as a more coherent, inclusive and shock-responsive system.

The Government, through the National Social Protection Authority (NSPA), has initiated the review and update of the National Social Protection Policy and Strategy (2022–2026), creating an important opportunity to align the sector framework with the Social Protection Act (2025), the establishment of the NSPA and national development priorities.

Recommendation: The Government is encouraged to leverage the policy review process to define a clear, costed and implementation-ready pathway for expanding social protection coverage, improving coordination and strengthening financing. This should include embedding social protection within a broader economic inclusion framework by strengthening referral mechanisms and linkages to livelihoods, skills development, employment services, financial inclusion and productive opportunities. The revised National Social Protection Policy and Strategy should also establish measurable results indicators that track resilience, access to complementary services, and sustainable outcomes for children, women, persons with disabilities, older persons, youth and other vulnerable populations.

2 Social protection allocations remain extremely low and are decreasing.

After several years of steady growth, the social protection budget fell sharply from SLE521 million in 2025 to SLE281 million in 2026. As a result, social protection spending was halved, accounting for just 0.9 per cent of the total government budget in 2026 and only 0.1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). This remains well below the regional average of 0.8 per cent of GDP.

Recommendations

- The Government is encouraged to progress-ively increase its investment in social protection, with a particular focus on expanding coverage for children through the establishment of a child grant. Consideration could be given to leveraging resources from the Mineral Wealth Fund to help cushion children against poverty, address age-specific risks and ensure equitable access to essential services.
- The Ministry of Finance is encouraged to ring-fence budget allocations for social assistance, especially considering the recent scaling down of the Social Safety Net Programme, to safeguard continuity and protect vulnerable populations.

3 Social protection remains highly dependent on external financing, posing sustainability risks.

Between 2020 and 2026, approximatively 60 per cent of the funding for social protection was provided by international development partners, particularly the World Bank, exposing the sector to volatility and limiting long-term planning.

Recommendation: To strengthen programme sustainability, the Government is encouraged to develop and operationalize a comprehensive financing strategy for social protection that progressively increases domestic resource allocation. This approach will reduce reliance on external funding, reinforce national ownership, and ensure the long-term continuity and resilience of social protection programmes.

4 Fragmented budget structures across ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) limit the visibility and coordination of social protection spending.

Programme allocations are difficult to track in budget documents over time, as key interventions are split across multiple institutions with inconsistent classification across budget documents.

Recommendations

- The Government, led by the NSPA and the Ministry of Finance, should standardize programme classification and introduce a unified social protection budget tagging system, enabling consistent tracking of allocations across MDAs, programmes and funding sources.
- This should be accompanied by strengthened coordination mechanisms under the Social Protection Act (2025) to ensure clear institutional roles, reduce duplication, and improve efficiency in resource use.

> The NSPA is encouraged to develop and operationalize a comprehensive financing strategy for social protection that aims to progressively increase domestic resource allocation for the sector

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Introduction

This Budget Brief analyses social protection spending trends in Sierra Leone and provides recommendations for strengthening the financing of social protection. It examines the size, composition and trends of approved budget allocations to social protection between 2020 and 2026. The brief also offers insights into the primary sources of funding underpinning social protection budgets in recent years. Its main objectives are to generate evidence on government allocations and expenditures related to social protection priorities, and to support advocacy efforts through clear key messages and practical recommendations. These are intended to inform financial decision-making processes and enhance their responsiveness to the needs of vulnerable households.

Methodology

The brief draws primarily on data from the 2020–2026 Budget Speeches (Annex 8c). The Brief analyses social protection budgets in alignment with Sierra Leone's institutional arrangements focusing on direct selected social protection allocations to the National Commission of Social Action (NaCSA), the Ministry of Youth Affairs (MoYA), which includes the National Youth Commission (NaYCOM), the NSPA, the Ministry of Employment, Labour and Social Security (MoELSS), and the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW). It was not possible to disaggregate other budget lines from the budget documents that contribute to social protection, such as for Grievance Redress Mechanism under the Anti-Corruption Commission. In the absence of credible proxies to estimate the social protection share of these lines, they were excluded from the analysis. Inflation adjustments were applied using the GDP deflator reported in Budget Speech Annex 1, with 2020 as the base year to ensure consistency with other social sector budget briefs.

Social protection is defined as "a set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life-course, with particular emphasis on vulnerable groups".[1] This Budget Brief uses a broad definition of social protection, including social assistance programmes, youth active labour market programmes and community-based projects aligned with the National Social Protection Strategy (2022–2026). These cover the operational heart of a social protection system – i.e., areas of social transfers, labour and jobs, and the social service workforce.[2] Community-based projects are included in the analysis owing to their protective functions and resilience-building, though their inclusion may lead to a modest overestimation of total on-budget social protection expenditure. The analysis excludes social insurance expenditures due to data limitations and does not capture social protection interventions that may be financed through off-budget mechanisms.

1. United Nations Children's Fund, 'UNICEF's Global Social Protection Programme Framework', UNICEF, New York, 2019, <www.unicef.org/media/64601/file/Global-social-protection-programme-framework-2019.pdf>, accessed 17 August 2026. The definition was developed by SPIAC-B, an inter-agency coordination mechanism composed of representatives of international organizations and bilateral institutions to enhance global coordination and advocacy on social protection issues.
2. Ibid.

Overview of social protection in Sierra Leone

LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

Over the last 30 years, the Government has been through different phases to establish its social protection sector. Between 2002 and 2010, the Government laid its foundations for a social protection system, before establishing a basic safety net (2011–2014) through the national Social Safety Net (SSN) programme, as well as the National Social Protection Policy (2011) and the National Social Protection Strategy (2013). Shock-responsive aspects of social protection were strengthened from 2015 onwards, and the Social Protection Strategy 2022–2026 set targets for life-cycle social protection after 2020.[3] *Table 1* provides an overview of the main policies for the sector strategic framework.

Sierra Leone passed its first Social Protection Act in early 2025, for the first time formally recognizing the population's right to social protection. The Act established the NSPA, with a mandate to coordinate the sector and oversee resource allocation, which provided a strategic opportunity to advance policy advocacy for child-sensitive social protection. The Social Protection Act (2025) defines social protection as "a set of policies and programmes including contributory and non-contributory schemes designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient labour markets, diminishing people's exposure to risks and enhancing their capacity to protect themselves against hazards and interruption or loss of income" (p. 4).[4]

TABLE 1

A selection of social protection policies and strategies

Name	Type	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
National Social Protection Policy (NSPP) (incl. revisions)	Policy	< ■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
National Social Protection Strategy (2022–2026)	Strategy			■	■	■	■	■				
Medium-Term National Development Plan (MTNDP) (2019–2023 & 2024–2030)	Plan	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Persons with Disability Act (2011)	Legislation	< ■										
Disaster Risk Financing Strategy & Implementation Plan (2024–2029)	Plan					■	■	■	■	■	■	
Sierra Leone Social Protection Act	Legislation					■	■	■	■	■	■	■
ECOWAS Social Protection Framework and Operational Plan	Plan					■	■	■	■	■		
National Youth Service – Strategy & Roadmap (2017–2019)	Plan	< ■										
Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender & Children's Affairs Strategic Plan (2014–2018)	Plan	< ■										
Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Social Welfare (2024–2028)	Plan					■	■	■	■	■		

< Started before shown date

3. United Nations Children's Fund and World Bank, 'Sierra Leone – Retrospective Assessment of the Evolution of the Social Protection Sector and Programmes', UNICEF, New York, and World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2024.
4. Government of Sierra Leone, 'The Sierra Leone Social Protection Act, 2024', Government of Sierra Leone, Freetown, 2025, <www.parliament.gov.sl/uploads/bill_files/The%20Sierra%20Leone%20Social%20Protection%20Act,%202024..pdf>, accessed 17 August 2026.

The Government, through the NSPA, has initiated a review and update of the National Social Protection Policy and Strategy. This process represents a timely opportunity to align the sector framework with the Social Protection Act, the establishment of the NSPA and the Medium-Term National Development Plan, while strengthening policy coherence, institutional coordination and accountability. The review should also help embed social protection within a broader economic inclusion ecosystem by mapping existing systems, resources and gaps; linking beneficiaries to livelihoods, skills development, employment services, financial inclusion and productive opportunities; and tracking progress towards resilience, self-reliance and inclusive outcomes for children, women, persons with disabilities, older persons, youth and other vulnerable groups.

SITUATIONAL OVERVIEW

Despite progress in the sector strategic framework, social protection coverage remains very limited. Only 18 per cent of the population receive at least one benefit, while just 0.8 per cent of children are covered, largely due to the absence of statutory benefits for mothers and newborns and the lack of child-specific social benefits.[5] The coverage remains below the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) average. Both social protection **coverage** and **adequacy** are reported to be lower in Sierra Leone than in neighbouring countries, and the national strategic framework still requires strengthening to improve targeted social support.[6]

Yet poverty remains widespread in Sierra Leone, disproportionately affecting children. According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (2019), 59 per cent of the total population are considered poor.[7] As of 2018, 13 per cent of the population lived in extreme poverty, and 54.5 per cent suffered from food poverty, being unable to afford the minimum required caloric intake.[8] Monetary poverty and inequality vary across regions, with rural households consistently worse off than urban households. Sierra Leone's Gini coefficient rose from 0.33 in 2011 to 0.36 in 2018, reflecting growing inequality.[9,10] Significant regional disparities persist, with higher levels of deprivation observed across much of the south and north compared to the west and east. The incidence of multidimensional child poverty was estimated at 66 per cent as of 2017.[11] An updated child poverty analysis will be carried out based on data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2025).

These structural vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by recent macroeconomic and external shocks. Sierra Leone's post-COVID-19 recovery was derailed by spillovers from the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, which worsened inflation, currency depreciation and fiscal pressures. A loosening of fiscal policy, largely financed through central bank support, further fuelled inflation and weakened the Leone. The country faces severe climate vulnerability due to widespread poverty, low adaptive capacity and high exposure to natural hazards. Climate change is intensifying food insecurity and health risks by undermining agriculture and livelihoods based on natural resources, disproportionately affecting poor and remote communities with limited infrastructure and capacity to adapt.

5. World Bank, Indicators of Resilience and Equity. Indicator: Coverage of Social Protection and Labor Programs (% of population), 'ASPIRE, the Atlas of Social Protection', World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2026, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/per_allsp.cov_pop_tot>, accessed 17 August 2026.
6. International Monetary Fund, 'Social Spending in Sierra Leone', IMF Staff Country Report 2024(322), A002, IMF, Washington, D.C., 2024, <www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2024/322/article-A002-en.xml>, accessed 17 August 2026.
7. United Nations Children's Fund, 'Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Sierra Leone', UNICEF, Freetown, 2024, <www.unicef.org/sierraleone/media/2386/file/UNICEF Sierra Leone SitAn Executive Summary Report.pdf.pdf>, accessed 17 August 2026.
8. Statistics Sierra Leone, 'Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) Report 2018', Stats SL, Freetown, October 2019, <www.statistics.sl/images/StatisticsSL/Documents/SLIHS2018/SLIHS_2018_New/sierra_leone_integrated_household_survey2018_report.pdf>, accessed 17 August 2026
9. World Bank, 'Gini index – Sierra Leone', World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2025, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=SL>, accessed 17 August 2026..
10. World Bank, 'Poverty & Equity Brief. Sierra Leone', World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2020, <https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext_download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/SM2020/Global_POVEQ_SLE.pdf>, accessed 17 August 2026.
11. United Nations Children's Fund, 'Multidimensional Child Poverty Report', UNICEF, Freetown, 2019, <www.unicef.org/sierraleone/reports/multidimensional-child-poverty-report>, accessed 17 August 2026.

Spillovers from the ongoing Middle East conflict are further worsening these vulnerabilities by increasing the cost of living. In this context, effective social protection is essential to cushion vulnerable households against shocks and prevent further deterioration in food security and poverty outcomes.[12]

SOCIAL PROTECTION INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

In accordance with the National Social Protection Policy, social protection in Sierra Leone operates within a broad and complex institutional landscape, involving a wide range of actors at both the national and local levels. At the national level, MDAs are responsible for the design, implementation and monitoring of social protection programmes. They include the MoSW, the NaCSA, the MoYA, the NaYCOM and the MoELSS, among others. Although this analysis follows the definition of social protection as closely as possible, the inclusion of programmes in the budget analysis was conditional on data availability.

The Anti-Corruption Commission plays an essential role in monitoring cash payment processes and leading the Grievance Redress Mechanism to ensure transparency and accountability. The National Social Protection Secretariat supports the implementation of the SSN project, coordinating policy development and sector coordination, and providing technical expertise. Importantly, the Government has enhanced coordination efforts through the Social Protection Act (2025), which established the NSPA, which shall “be responsible to regulate, coordinate, facilitate, promote, monitor and evaluate social protection delivery”.[13] The Government is also revitalising the National Social Protection Technical Committee, which includes representatives from over 20 MDAs, to strengthen inter-agency coordination.

12. World Bank, ‘Program document: Sierra Leone Third Inclusive and Sustainable Growth DPF (P178322)’, World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2023, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099112123112031700/pdf/BOSIB04de3741604c0906f07193efdf93c3.pdf>, accessed 17 August 2026.
13. Government of Sierra Leone, ‘The Sierra Leone Social Protection Act, 2024’, Government of Sierra Leone, Freetown, 2025, <www.parliament.gov.sl/uploads/bill_files/The%20Sierra%20Leone%20Social%20Protection%20Act,%202024..pdf>, accessed 17 August 2026.

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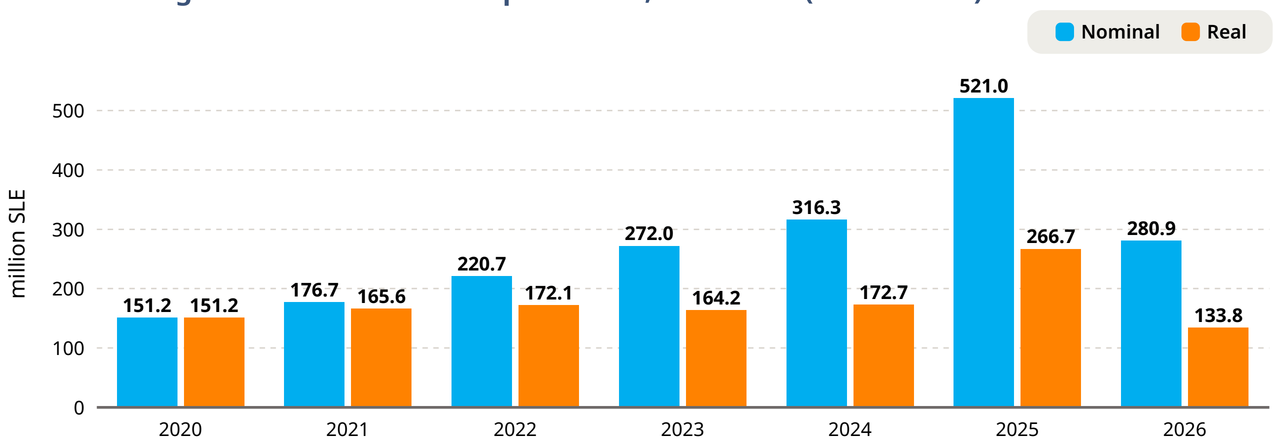
Trends in social protection spending

After several years of steady growth, the social protection budget decreased by nearly half – from SLE521 million in 2025 to SLE281 million in 2026 (*see Figure 1*). In real terms, the social protection budget has generally demonstrated a downward trend since 2021. This pattern largely reflects fluctuations in donor funding, which accounts for an average of 60 per cent of total financing for social protection in Sierra Leone.

FIGURE 1

Trends in budget allocations to social protection, 2020–2026 (SLE millions)



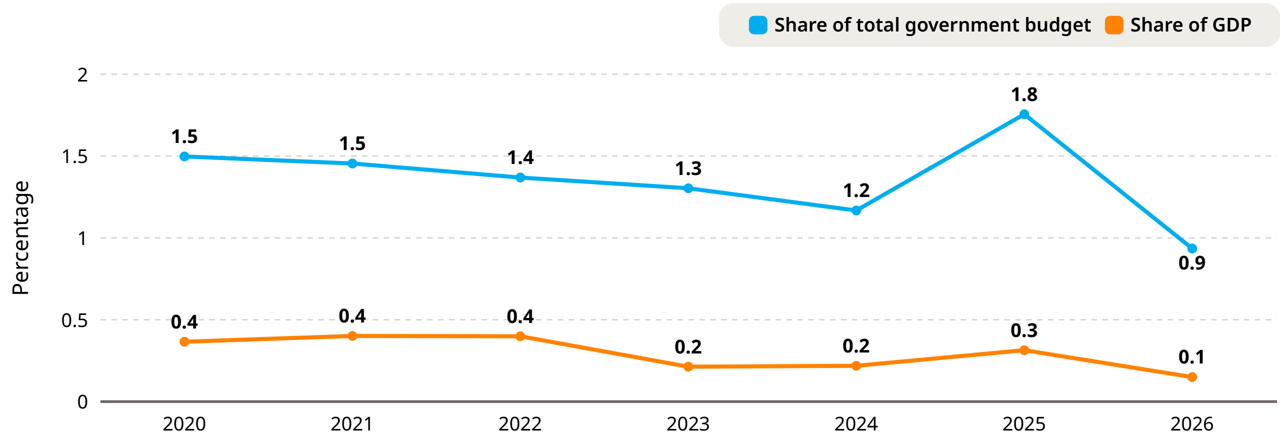
Source: Authors' own calculations based on Government of Sierra Leone Budget Speeches, 2020–2026.
Note: Budget data used for all years are approved allocations.

Social protection spending remains low as a share of both the total government budget and GDP (*see Figure 2*). With the exception of a peak in 2025, allocations to the sector have declined steadily since 2022, reaching a low of 0.9 per cent of the total government budget and 0.1 per cent of GDP in 2026. Over the period 2020–2026, social protection spending averaged 0.3 per cent of GDP, well below the regional average of 0.8 per cent.[14]

14. International Labour Organization, 'Africa Regional Social Protection Strategy, 2021–2025. Towards 40% – a social protection coverage acceleration framework to achieve the SDGs', ILO, Geneva, 2021, <www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@africa/@ro-abidjan/documents/publication/wcms_828423.pdf>, accessed 17 August 2026.

FIGURE 2

Social protection spending as a share of government budget and GDP, 2020–2026



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Government of Sierra Leone Budget Speeches, 2020–2026.
Note: Budget data used for all years are approved allocations.

Composition of social protection spending

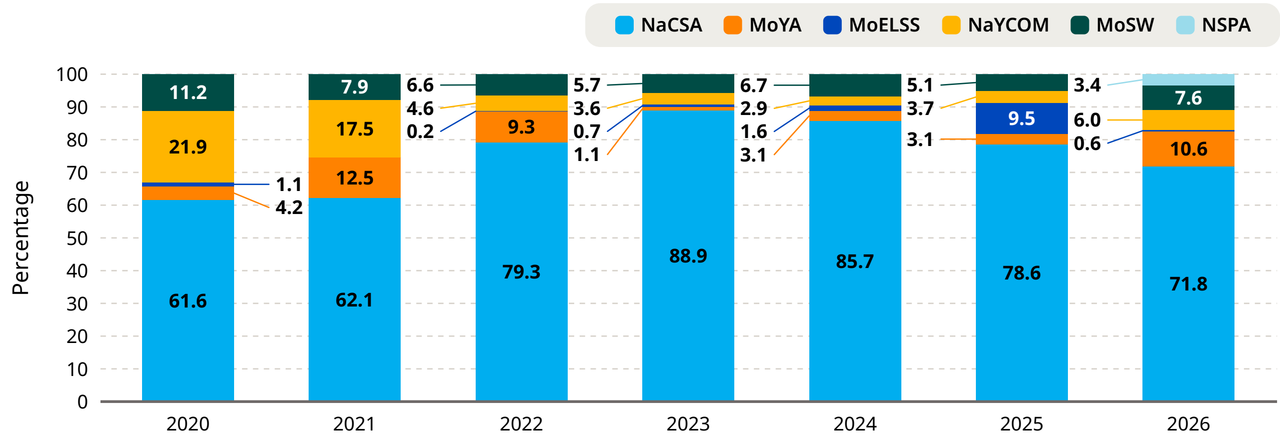
The budget allocations highlight the NaCSA's key role in social protection, as it receives the largest share of the social protection budget (*see Figure 3*). Since 2020, the NaCSA's budget has consistently accounted for more than 60 per cent of all MDAs' social protection budget. This large share is mainly due to the NaCSA's management of major donor-funded projects, such as the SSN/Ep Fet Po and the Productive Social Safety Net and Youth Employment (PSSNYE) project, funded by the World Bank, as well as the Community Driven Development Project (Gietrenk, funded by the Islamic Development Bank). On the other hand, the National Youth Service has seen its budget fall from SLE33 million (US$3.4 million) in 2020 to SLE17 million (US$710,000) in 2026. In 2026, the NSPA was allocated SLE9.5 million (US$ 396,000).

Between 2020 and 2026, the composition of social protection spending in Sierra Leone shows notable shifts between social assistance programmes, youth labour market programmes[15] and community development projects. In 2020, the budget was relatively balanced, with social assistance accounting for 29 per cent, community development projects for 40 per cent, and youth labour market programmes for 30 per cent of total budget allocations (*see Figure 4*). Over the next five years, allocations to community development projects increased steadily, peaking at 80 per cent in 2025. Projects such as the Gietrenk Community Driven Development Project were designed as community-based interventions, responding to priorities identified through local community structures, with the aim of supporting livelihoods, socioeconomic opportunities and resilience-building among vulnerable populations.

15. UNICEF's Global Social Protection Programme Framework (2019), defines active labour market policies as "Active labour market policies aim to reduce unemployment by: (i) matching jobseekers with current vacancies; (ii) upgrading and adapting jobseekers' skills; (iii) providing employment subsidies; and (iv) creating jobs either through public sector employment or the provision of subsidies for private sector work." United Nations Children's Fund, 'UNICEF's Global Social Protection Programme Framework', UNICEF, New York, 2019, <www.unicef.org/media/61011/file/global-social-protection-programme-framework-2019.pdf>, accessed 17 August 2026. Youth labour market programmes are a subset of active labour market policies specifically targeting young people.

FIGURE 3

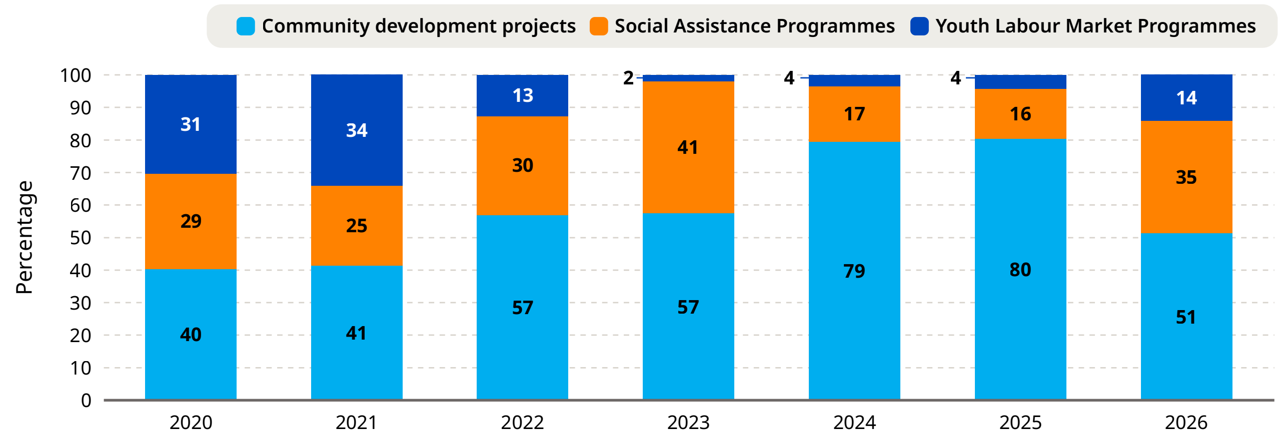
Composition of social protection budgets by MDA, 2020–2026



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Government of Sierra Leone Budget Speeches, 2020–2026.
Note: Budget data used for all years are approved allocations.

FIGURE 4

Social protection budgets by programme, 2020–2026



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Government of Sierra Leone Budget Speeches, 2020–2026.
Note: Budget data used for all years are approved allocations. Budget data in real terms (constant 2020 prices).

Social protection financing

The Government of Sierra Leone relies heavily on Official Development Assistance to finance the social protection sector. On average, between 2020 and 2026, approximately 60 per cent of the social protection budget was funded by international development partners, including the World Bank (International Development Association), UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme, Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau, the African Development Bank and the Islamic Development Bank (*see Figure 5*).

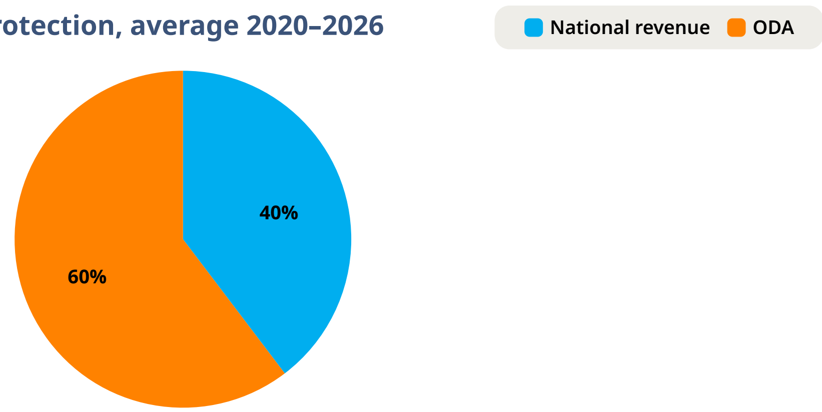
The World Bank remains a major contributor – for instance, through its financing of the current PSSNYE project, which replaced the unconditional cash transfers programme SSN/Ep Fet Po. It is implemented by the NaCSA with support from the MoYA, the NaYCOM and the National Social Protection Secretariat, in partnership with the Anti-Corruption Commission and Statistics Sierra Leone.[16] The programme runs from 2022 to 2027 with a total budget of US$40 million.[17]

The share of external financing in social protection has been declining, mirroring the broader downturn in Official Development Assistance flows to Sierra Leone. There were increases in 2021 and 2022, largely attributable to shock-responsive social protection interventions, particularly the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme (US$26.5 million under SSN/Ep Fet Po). This response was primarily financed by development partners, including the World Bank and the European Commission, alongside the reprogramming of SSN project funds, which shortened the project implementation period while expanding beneficiary coverage to reach more people affected by COVID-19. Strengthening domestic financing will be critical to enhancing national ownership and ensuring the long-term sustainability of social protection programmes.[18]

The situation described above highlights the need for the Government to develop a comprehensive social protection financing strategy that identifies feasible and sustainable financing options for priority programmes over the long term. The strategy could explore innovative financing mechanisms, including climate-linked instruments, private sector contributions and philanthropic support.

FIGURE 5

Main funding sources for social protection, average 2020–2026



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Government of Sierra Leone Budget Speeches, 2020–2026.
Note: Budget data used for all years are approved allocations. Budget data in real terms.

16. World Bank, 'Sierra Leone PSSNYE Project First Additional Financing', World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2023, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099041323203521044/pdf/P180035044c1a900f089c50025090702009.pdf>, accessed 17 August 2026.
17. World Bank, 'Appraisal Environmental and Social Review Summary', World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2022, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099840002092236776/pdf/Appraisal0Envi0ployment000P17678901.pdf?>, accessed 17 August 2026.
18. International Labour Organization, 'Sierra Leone Situation and Priorities', ILO, Geneva, 2025, <www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowCountryProfile.action?iso=SL>, accessed 17 August 2026.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Budget Brief was prepared by Ecorys under the leadership of UNICEF's Social Policy Section. It benefited from technical review and contributions from the Government of Sierra Leone, including the Ministries of Finance and Social Welfare, as well as from the UNICEF Child Protection and Social Policy teams and Global Practice for Economic and Social Policy, Center of Excellence.

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