

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

March 2021 No 253



**Special edition: Responding to
the coronavirus pandemic**

Responding to the coronavirus pandemic in Sierra Leone's prisons: lessons from a civil society perspective¹

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Background

Sierra Leone is a poverty-riven West African country with around 8 million inhabitants. Independence from Britain was achieved in 1961. In political theory and policy discourse it is often labeled a 'fragile' state, a reflection of the weakness of state institutions, the exorbitant poverty, and the instability and struggle the country has faced to move beyond the destruction of an eleven-year civil war (1991-2002). The Ebola outbreak of 2014-16 did not help. Sierra Leone's health care system has long struggled; it suffers chronic underfunding, a severe lack of skilled health professionals (~ 1.4 doctors, nurses and midwives per 10.000 population) particularly in rural areas, and a heavy disease burden (largely communicable diseases).²

The correctional system includes twenty-one correctional centres (CCs) incarcerating around 5000 people, around one third of these pretrial or remand. The incarceration rate is 60 people per 100,000 population. The largest CC is in Freetown, the capital. When built capacity was 324. Today it typically houses over 3000 prisoners. So far it is the only CC to have had cases of coronavirus. The CCs are centrally administered by the Sierra Leone Correctional Service³ through a national HQ which falls under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Correctional Service represents one part of a justice sector operating under severe infrastructural constraints, where the division between the executive

and the judiciary is often difficult to pinpoint, sentencing practices are haphazard, and trials subject to a perverse combination of political interference and judicial indifference.

Prison Watch, who are the subject of this interview, are a grassroots non-governmental organisation with national coverage working against torture and other human rights violations and for justice sector reform and human justice. With support from DIGNITY and other agencies they have developed and maintained a regular presence in correctional centres, police stations, and juvenile justice facilities for almost twenty-five years monitoring these institutions, holding the state accountable, and generating new knowledge.⁴

Sierra Leone's first case of coronavirus was announced on 31st March 2020. At the time of writing (29 Nov 2020) there have been 2410 confirmed cases and 74 deaths.⁵ The health care system's capacity to systematically detect, screen and test for coronavirus is low, most likely resulting in a large underestimation of actual cases.⁶ Furthermore, mal-functioning sanitation systems and limited access to clean running water across the country challenge effective hygiene practices and proper hand washing and thereby the prevention of new cases.

With this as a troubling backdrop this interview illuminates the efforts of Prison Watch — Sierra Leone to limit the impact of the pandemic in the country's correctional centres. The interview on which this write-up is based took place virtually in October 2020.

1. We thank Jamie Bennett for the invitation to contribute to this special issue and we acknowledge the investment of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the DIGNITY - Prison Watch development partnership. This write-up is a condensed and cautiously edited version of a transcribed 100-minute virtual video interview.
2. Robinson, C. (2019) "Primary health care and family medicine in Sierra Leone." *African journal of primary health care & family medicine* vol. 11,1 e1-e3.
3. <https://slcs.sl/>
4. For examples of published research featuring or by members of PWSL see Jefferson, A.M. (2017) "Exacerbating deprivation: trajectories of confinement in Sierra Leone". In *Parole and Beyond International Experiences of Life After Prison* edited by R. Armstrong and I. Durnescu. Palgrave; Jefferson, A.M. and Jalloh, A. (2017) Health provision and health professional roles under compromised circumstances: Lessons from Sierra Leone's prisons, *Criminology & Criminal Justice*; Jefferson, A.M. and Gaborit, L.S. (2015) *Prisons and Human Rights: Comparing Institutional Encounters*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; and the forthcoming report in DIGNITY's publication series, *The role of the police and security services during election violence in Sierra Leone*.
5. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/sierra-leone>
6. <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/sierra-leone>

AMJ: What is Prison Watch's vision and mandate in non-pandemic times?

AJ: Prison Watch — Sierra Leone (PWSL) is an indigenous human rights organisation, that was established specifically to monitor places of detention across the country. We monitor all 21 correctional facilities (formerly called prisons), as well as selected police cells, and court detention facilities.

AMJ: Could you elaborate on the relationship that PWSL has with the Correctional Services?

AJ: Since our establishment PWSL have had a very fine relationship with the Sierra Leone Correctional Services (SLCS), right from the top hierarchy to the frontline prison officers who we have a very good rapport with. When we go to monitor we have easy access to prison facilities across the country. We have monitors who represent us at every functional prison in the country. However, there have been moments when we have spoken out on particular issues, within prisons or against the system, when SLCS have become apprehensive, but then over time we have been able to sort out those troubles. Overall we have a very good relationship with the prison administration.

AMJ: How did you achieve that relationship?

AJ: Well, it was something that was hard to come by. We realised that it's not just about promoting the rights of the inmates in places of detention; there are also the officers who work within prisons. So we created activities and started talking about issues that were also of interest to prison officers. It was not easy at the start. There have been certain times where we have had exchanges of letters and where access to the detention facilities and the prisons was stopped across the country. But gradually, we started gaining ground, and that was how we have come this far.

AMJ: I remember your Director referred to the relationship as one between 'uneasy bedfellows' on one occasion. Is that still the case?

AJ: Yes, that's still the case. There are moments, even recently when we started talking about the prison riot report, some officers are not happy with that report, but that is the situation. We keep negotiating for access and then they are always able to grant us access.

AMJ: Did the work change because of the pandemic?

AJ: Yes, sure it did change. When coronavirus struck, the first thing that happened was that new restrictions came up, and access to some prisons was restricted. New procedures emerged, so now when you go to prisons, you have to mask up, you need to maintain social distance. Before we can be outside with the inmates, we can even share their food, we can have a taste of what they eat, we can go into their cells, and even lie down on their mattress, or if they sleep on the floor we can sit on the floor with them. But when this thing happened, when Ebola came up, when coronavirus came up, those things had to change. And that is how the outbreak changed our work.

AMJ: Let me jump to Sierra Leone's experience with infectious diseases and talk a little about your experience with Ebola. Can you sum up what happened in 2014 and how you responded to that?

AJ: One thing we remain very proud about as an organisation is that our intervention in the Ebola outbreak actually yielded very positive results: it prevented Ebola entering into our prisons. When Ebola broke out in 2014, we made some training interventions about infection, prevention and control. In other cases, we provided prevention

materials and food support. Ebola was harder than coronavirus, because with coronavirus we can still move around, but with Ebola it was really tough for people to move.

AMJ: To what extent is it true that the experience you had with Ebola in some way prepared you for dealing with coronavirus?

AJ: It is very true, in fact. When Ebola started it was difficult for us to develop an intervention plan; it took us time to plan. But as soon as coronavirus started, we were able to develop an intervention plan immediately. At the end of Ebola, the correctional management and PWSL had a meeting where we were able to identify a lot of lessons learned. So, when coronavirus came, we could refer quickly to those lessons and step up our intervention. It just started hitting the prisons and would have spread immediately, if we had not intervened. Before Ebola we had very little

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knowledge about infectious diseases, but when coronavirus came we had knowledge. Before it reached Sierra Leone, there was actually a lot of coronavirus education on the radio, on the television. We had sufficient information and started engaging in case it gets here. So, by the time it was here, we were up and running.

One of the lessons learned from Ebola was about the issue of the rights of the inmates. We spoke about this with respect to prisoners' access to the outside world. When Ebola came, the whole prison system was shut down, and the same happened when coronavirus came. What we did quickly to engage the prison administration was say: 'Look, we have had a lot of lessons that we have learned from this, why don't you create what we call a 'blind visit', because if you shut down the prisons and stop people from coming to the prisons you stop loved ones from visiting their family members.' It is going to create a lot of tension, because the inmates largely rely on what comes from the outside world for their sustenance and survival. So we are very quick to advocate for blind visits. Blind visits mean family members coming to the prison gate, engaging the welfare officer, bringing items for their loved ones to salvage the situation in prisons. They don't see their loved ones, but at least they hear from them. They bring items: 'Your husband brought this, your wife brought this, your brother brought this, your mother brought this'. And so those things have been there to serve as a source of strength for the inmates in prisons.

JC: For some family members, it was very difficult in the beginning, because they felt responsible for their loved ones when they visit. Most of them got back to us and said 'this was very good for us, and it was good for our children, our loved ones who are behind bars, and this blind visit, we know it was for our own good, and our family members...'

AMJ: Ahmed, can you clarify one thing? When you were talking earlier about the preparation, you started by saying something like, 'correctional services are never very well prepared', then you used the phrase 'our preparation'. Who did you mean by that? 'Our' as in Prison Watch or 'our' as in Prison Watch and the Correctional Services?

AJ: Sometimes, when we work as a team, we refer to Prison Watch and Correctional Services as a unit. We

operate as a group because our shared goal is to prevent coronavirus from entering the prisons.

MLDO: What did the government and correctional services do as their first response to coronavirus?

AJ: One good thing that government did was that as soon as they became aware of the outbreak hitting other countries they started preparing. So, as soon as it hit Sierra Leone things were moving forward. During that process in the period of preparation, they were able to develop some guidelines, some directives. That is even why they succeeded to ensure that whosoever is working on coronavirus should work with the national response center, and that is good for unity. When we got the support from DIGNITY, we wrote to them, and they said 'Oh, this is good, we have not intervened in the prisons.'

What we realized was that government was not focusing specifically on places of detention. Their immediate focus was the general public. But when we spoke with NACOVERC (The National Coronavirus Emergency Response Center) they said 'Yes, if coronavirus gets into prisons in the country it's going to be more dangerous and serious for us'. So, we were able to coordinate and act together.

MLDO: What protective measures were put in place?

AJ: Apart from the restricted visits, there were supplies of hand washing buckets in every prison. We ensured that they were at the gates, at the gate lodge, at the reception etc. Another change was that they used the facemask. Facemasks were provided for the inmates based on the number of inmates across the country. Every inmate had two, at least two. Since these are cloth masks, you can use one today and then wash it at the end of the day. And social distancing in specific locations was announced, for instance, because of the nature of the outbreak inmates are restricted to their blocks and their cells. Only a few inmates were allowed outside and only under strict supervision by specific officers.

What Prison Watch kept doing was to monitor, because our engagement with them, as part of our lessons learned, was that civil society must always be available to monitor them.

Another aspect was to ensure that whoever comes to prisons goes through a screening process, whether you are a new inmate, or you are visiting prisons for the

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first time. The first step is to wash your hands at the gate, next step is they do temperature testing, and then for inmates who are coming to stay, they have a form where they ask you some questions about your health situation, x, y, z, and they also ensure that you have a facemask. All of those stages and procedures are part of the screening process at the prisons. And then every prison has what we call an isolation center, so upon admission, if you have any signs, they begin to monitor you right from there. So when one develops the full symptoms, they conduct the test and if confirmed then you are immediately transported to the treatment center.

JC: The prisoners initially were not comfortable with the restrictions because they want to move here and there. But later, when we had the trainings in the correctional centres, all of the block heads went back to them, they saw the stickers, they saw the posters provided, and they came to understand that they had to adhere to some of the restraints put by the officers. Initially it was not easy for them to understand, but after the trainings they knew it was for their own good. At the end of the training, facemasks were distributed to them, and hand washing exercise was done for all the block captains and the block heads, to teach their fellow prisoners when they get back to their blocks.

AJ: If I could add to that Marie, whenever you make changes for prisoners, it's going to be difficult for them to accept. Remember, they are held in one place all day all night, and you tell them 'no more visits, you are not allowed to move from your cells, you are just restricted to your blocks, accept it'. It is difficult for them to accommodate. That is why, when we are able to secure support from DIGNITY to carry out those trainings, get those protective materials, and the public education materials to distribute, we are able to help them understand that we are doing all of this to protect them. Because if we stop coronavirus from entering the prisons, the better for the inmates, the better for the society. So, the fact that we were able to convince them to understand was a huge success on our side.

MLDO: And what was the reaction of the staff and managers?

AJ: In fact, they continued calling Prison Watch, our support has been immense. In fact, they go so far as to say: 'Had it not been...'. A lot of them did not know how to lead a fight in a crisis. So, educating

them, about the steps and the strategies to employ in a crisis was something they appreciated a lot. And they have continued to talk about it.

MLDO: What exactly did Prison Watch do to help the correctional services stop the virus spreading?

AJ: The SLCS have always called on us, any time they need us, with respect to these things. So, during the outbreak we were able to secure support for the following: First, we provided training for correctional officers and police officers. The first set of trainings targeted frontline officers. Then, we targeted senior correctional management because we also wanted leaders in the fight. If you are an officer in charge of the

center, you must be equipped enough in the fight, and they came back to their respective duty stations ready to provide leadership. Next, we continued providing what we called 'preventative materials'. We provided face masks, hand sanitizer, soap. For the children we provided food, rice, milk, other supplements. The idea was since movement was restricted food was going to be a problem. Another role we played was to provide public and mass education. Lots of people did not accept that coronavirus was really

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real. So, you had to keep talking to them about it, letting them know that coronavirus is here, real, and living with us. A lot of people have what we describe as 'denial syndrome'. People had a lot of different ideas about what this coronavirus is all about. Prison Watch spoke out solidly, as a credible civil society organization.

MLDO: And that denial is in the prison and in the community in general?

AJ: Yes! Even some of the officers would not even acknowledge it was here, until the first case was confirmed in the prison. It created a huge problem.

MLDO: Was anything going on about releasing prisoners to reduce overcrowding?

AJ: Yes, that is another change that took place based on civil society engagement with the judiciary and other state actors. Our prisons are hugely overcrowded, so one thing we could do was to look for the best way to facilitate early release of those inmates whose release dates were coming closer. That was facilitated by the judiciary. Another issue is the closure of the courts. When the courts were closed, no new inmates were coming in, that was also another change.

So, over a period, the number of prisoners in those places did not increase.

MLDO: Do you have more to say on the reaction of correctional services to your interventions?

AJ: PWSL has continued to be the point of call regarding this situation. Whenever an issue arises, the moment they cannot handle it they always call on Prison Watch, and that is one thing we are honestly grappling with right now. The expectation in terms of resource mobilisation to support the SLCS is really very huge on us. They expect so much more than we can offer. And so, you realize sometimes that you are overstretched.

AMJ: Would you agree that your reputation has in some form been enhanced by the fact that you've been able to respond as you have to the crisis?

AJ: Yes, sure

AMJ: But there are also some negative effects in that you cannot meet everybody's expectations?

AJ: We cannot, we cannot. It is difficult to deny. In fact, Andrew, honestly, the last set of facemasks which we provided to the prisons last week, we had to talk to staff members to give us some small small money from their salaries to get some masks together. They need us there. We went to the prison, and some of the prisoners do not have masks and they told us clearly at the gate, if we go to court without a mask, they will not allow us to enter. Immediately, John went to the nearby pharmacy to buy medical masks so that those few could use it for that day. We came back to the office and had an emergency meeting, we called Mambu (PWSL's Director) and discussed with him, then we put some meager resources together. Sometimes, we cannot just do everything, we are overwhelmed with the expectations coming from them... Also, there are days when we come into the office and there are people on the step waiting for us but we keep talking to them. Since they are our clients, we cannot just drive them away, we will continue talking to them so that they can understand.

AMJ: Is there any chance that prison life might get better as a result of the pandemic?

AJ: We continue to hope for a situation where prison life will get better. But as a result of the pandemic? That is difficult to say. You know, you have

been to the prisons, you know our system is not automated, everything continues to be held on paper. So, because of documents being burned during the riot, some inmates continue to be held in prison indefinitely, with no knowledge of when they are actually supposed to be released. So we continue to push them (the authorities) to go to the courts that the inmates are coming from, to search for those records, otherwise some of those inmates will continue to live in prison until God knows when.

AMJ: What is the chief lesson you have learned from coronavirus so far?

AJ: One key thing we have learned from Ebola and coronavirus is that we always need what we call prompt response. Prompt response to outbreaks in prisons would salvage such situations if they happen. There should be standby resources for prompt response. Because if you wait for the pandemic to come to begin to mobilise resources, when are you going to bring all those resources together? So, we think there should be a unit, a kind of engagement, that could have available resources located somewhere for prompt response.

AMJ: Could you say something about the specific effect coronavirus has had on the human rights situation in Sierra Leone?

AJ: One key thing that we observed in our work around the correctional center is the right to access the outside world. Inmates continue to lose access to the outside world. Even when they are allowed the blind visits there are people in the community who are hesitant to come. So losing access to the outside is one key thing that continues to affect the inmates. That has been compounded by the fact that for some period the court system was shut down. Those who were supposed to attend court did not see the courtroom, so we consider that a very serious human rights concern.

AMJ: How have the police been responding to enforcing the new restrictions? Have a lot of new people been thrown in prison or in police cells for not wearing masks or not respecting the lockdown?

AJ: For the police we actually observed that at the height of the outbreak, they were able to cut down on the number of suspects that were in detention, except for a few police stations, that is the largest police stations.

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AMJ: So, do you think that could actually be a potential positive? If police have got into the habit of giving people bail more easily or not harassing people as much or not arresting so many suspects, that could potentially have a positive effect in the long term?

AJ: In fact, that was one thing we engaged the police hierarchy on. Remember, on a half yearly basis we have an engagement with the police hierarchy on our findings on monitoring police stations. We recently told them 'during coronavirus, during this outbreak, the majority of your police stations have been very prudent in admitting suspects. Why is it that this does not continue under normal circumstances?' And then they gave some excuses, but they promised that since they have started they will continue. So we told them we will follow up and hold them to their word. We have drawn attention to this with our monitors across the country and we will keep an eye on the number of suspects passing through police stations.

AMJ: Are there any things you have learned from the pandemic which will affect the way Prison Watch operates in the future?

AJ: One thing I am very proud of is, during this whole crisis, Prison Watch as an organization has been able to touch the lives of many people under difficult circumstances. For example, we were able to push on the presidency, for the release of over 100 inmates on presidential amnesty. That was one thing the government was not about to do, after the prison riots. Government says 'no, this prison riot has caused a lot of problems in this country, government is spending a

huge amount of money to rehabilitate that institution, and so we are not going to release them.' But you know what? We were able to push government to ensure that, through our advocacy — we went to the television, we went to the radio, we organize advocacy sessions with stake holders in the criminal justice system — prisoners were amnestied. Some of our friends have said to us, 'how did you guys do it?' Even those inmates that are released on early release, because of the outbreak, it's because we pushed for it, and that I am very proud of.

AMJ: Dambie what about you? Your proudest moment of the last six months?

DS: One thing I am proud of is the food supply we got for the children (in the juvenile justice facilities run by the Ministry of Sports and Social Welfare). Because at that time, no food was there for them and no visits for the children, so parents don't come with anything. So, we are very much proud to provide them with food supplies.

AMJ: Finally, do you have any advice for anyone doing what you do? In other countries, for example, what could civil society organisations do to prevent human rights violations in prison? What could they learn from your experience?

AJ: One advice can be that working in the prisons can be a risky environment and you must be mindful of the security setting and implications. One other advice we can give to everybody working in prisons is that it is about being focused, being passionate and being forward looking in the things you do.