

SIERRA LEONE VISION 2025 PROJECT - A BRIGHT FUTURE?

BY PROFESSOR M. D. MALAMAH-THOMAS

The government of Sierra Leone launched the vision 2025 project on the 15th of March 2001. In the executive summary of the government's report on the project, dated August 2003, it is stated that, "as part of a new beginning, Sierra Leone embarked on the vision 2025 Project to prepare a national vision for long-term development". The vision 2025 process gave stakeholders a unique collective opportunity to think about correcting past mistakes and building a better future. A team of six national experts managed the technical aspects of the project with support from a multi-disciplinary working group and an independent team of national and international consultants. Supervision and policy direction were provided by a steering committee whose members were drawn from key government ministries. Country-wide consultations and retrospective studies were key instruments for obtaining people's views, opinions, and indeed their national sensitivities. This article will briefly examine some aspects of the government's report on the vision 2025 project for Sierra Leone.

The 92-page report, including a forward by his Excellency the President, a preface by the minister of development and economic planning, and a 9-page executive summary, is well-written in clear and unambiguous language. The executive summary is an excellent synopsis of the five chapters of the report. Chapter one gives an overview of vision 2025. A situation analysis of the nation covering the immediate past is presented in chapter two. Chapters three, four, and five critically analyse alternative scenarios for the future, vision and strategies, and implementation of vision 2025, respectively.

The situation analysis in chapter two adequately recognises those aspects which I consider have slowed down, stagnated, and in some cases reversed national development. The report gives the example of prolonged deterioration in economic performance resulting in massive contraction of the economy at 4.6% annually in the 1990s. Also, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita declined from US\$ 380 in 1980 to about US\$ 142 in 2000. Chapter two also contains overall strengths and weaknesses of the nation. It was a positive and essential step taken by the vision 2025 Project to identify our strengths and weaknesses. This then formed the basis for further deliberations of the Project.

The report states in chapter three that visioning is an effort to design the future. The vision 2025 Project made effort to explore the future by developing four alternative scenarios. The first scenario, "Sweet-Salone", relies on good governance, sound economic policies and a favourable regional environment to produce strong economic growth. In the second scenario, "Betteh-Nor-Dae", Sierra Leone benefits from reasonable governance, but is less fortunate in the regional environment, and less resolute in economic growth. Scenario three is "Tight-Gentry" and less governance prevails, especially in the early years, but a fortunate environment and firm national management allows Sierra Leone to become competitive and benefit

from satisfactory growth. The fourth scenario is the “Dombolo” scenario and the country suffers from bad governance, personal greed and internal and external conflict, drifting from crisis to crisis, mostly of its own making.

Much as it was useful to develop these scenarios, one wonders why the “Dombolo” scenario was necessary. I believe we should all subscribe to the psychology of positive thinking for national development. Details of the “Dombolo” scenario portray a growing unrest in the country and young men return to fighting. Under no circumstances, be it scenario or predictions, should we envisage a return to a rebel war or a near rebel war situation. Although the report categorically states that scenarios are not predictions of the future, the reader does get the impression that scenarios in the report are indeed predictions. For example, in chapter four it is stated that scenario one, “Sweet-Salone”, “provided an image of the future that all Sierra Leoneans would like the country to realise, i.e the national vision”. In fact, the two most important chapters, chapters four and five, are based on scenario one.

Chapter four is a key chapter which addresses strategies to obtain scenario one, “Sweet-Salone”. The shared national vision is expressed as, “united people, progressive nation and attractive country”. How to attain six strategic issues (goals) are discussed in detail in the chapter and in six annexes. The actions necessary to achieve each of the six strategic issues are quite impressive and are well expressed in the annexes. However, more emphasis should have been placed on research and development in agriculture and in science and technology. I agree with Jomoh Omo-Fadaka’s assertion, in his article *Development the Third Way*¹, that agriculture should be the basis of everything and that the decay of the rural structure was the cause of poverty in non-industrialised countries. I believe this decay results in urban migration which in turn weakens the vibrant heart-beat of the village. I would advocate that future governments, within the framework of vision 2025, should consider a robust, viable, and sustainable programme of subsidy for farmers. Also, under strategic goal number 4, the judicial and legal services not only need strengthening, but they need in addition reform and revision of some archaic laws, keeping in perspective local traditional laws and the land tenure system.

Academia and industry in Sierra Leone need to develop a culture of research and development. Future governments and private sector should be committed to funding research. Land grant colleges contributed immensely to technological advancement in the united States, mostly through agricultural research. The success of research efforts in the land grant colleges encouraged private enterprise to support research in science and technology. Donald Heyneman in his article *Mis-aid to Third World: Disease Repercussions caused by Ecological Ignorance*², pointed out that assured, responsible, long term funding was essential for research and is best handled under university or large foundation auspices. Vision 2025 should consider and build on these thoughts on research in agriculture and in science and technology.

Chapter five is perhaps the most important chapter because it deals with implementation of Vision 2025. It is pointed out in this chapter that building a better future is not a task for the government alone. Everyone must be actively committed to making it a reality, and this includes the private sector, civil society and development partners. A high level group for implementation, the National Vision Council (NVC), will be set up and will be made up of well respected Sierra

Leoneans and a well respected, non-partisan, dignified Sierra Leonean would chair the council. I hope that in the review and evaluation process, provision will be made for parameters and yardsticks for impact assessment as an ongoing exercise.

My greatest concern with regards to implementation is the enormous gap between the traditional life style of the rural population and the Life style envisaged in Vision 2025 for “Sweet-Salone”. What would it take in terms of resources and time to change the perception of a single farmer in the village? How far back is rural Sierra Leone from “catching up” with the global status quo?

It would be a disaster if the Vision 2025 Report becomes a long time companion of other reports and files in shelves in government offices. The report needs immediate and widespread circulation. Copies should be sent to schools, colleges, universities, industry, the business community, NGOs, civil society organisations, religious bodies, grassroot organisations and associations of Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora. Perhaps an abridged version could be more widely distributed to certain groups mentioned above. Recordings of the English and Krio versions of the National Vision 2025 song should be played regularly over radio and T.V. The song should be translated into other local languages. Periodic discussion programmes over the radio and T.V on Vision 2025 should be organised. Seminars and workshops for all levels of the populace would be in place. The National Vision Council must ensure that these activities are sustained over several years as we wait for vision 2025 to come to fruition and scenario one, “Sweet Salone”, is realised. In short, a concerted effort, not only to sensitise the populace, but to take it further, to deliberately indoctrinate the people at the national level.

Future generations will use the “Sweet Salone” scenario when it would have been a reality, to recall pleasant memories of life in Sierra Leone. Vision 2025 should be to Sierra Leone what Prometheus in Greek mythology was to mankind. If even implementation of Vision 2025 is only 60 to 70% successful, the future certainly looks bright and sweet .

¹Alternatives. 1975. Vol. 1: 23-53.

²Canadian Journal of Public Health.1971. Vol.62: 303-313.