

Model of People-Oriented City: A Comparative Analysis of Beijing and Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT: In modern urban governance, the concept of a people-oriented city has gained prominence as a paradigm shift from purely economically driven urbanization toward holistic, human-centered development. People-oriented cities aim to balance economic growth, social equity, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation. They are grounded in the principle that urban development should prioritize citizens' welfare, engagement, and quality of life over mere infrastructure expansion or GDP growth metrics. Within the framework of China's modernization plan and the broader "people-centered" philosophy of development, Beijing, the country's capital, has implemented significant people-centered urban governance reforms focused on public services, smart governance, environmental protection, and citizen well-being. These reforms reflect decades of iterative policymaking, substantial public investment, and institutional innovation. The study offers policy recommendations to improve urban governance in Sierra Leone and contributes to the expanding conversation on sustainable urbanization in the Global South, emphasizing that knowledge transfer must be contextual rather than mechanical.

Keywords: People-oriented city, urban governance, Beijing, Sierra Leone, Sustainable development, Human-centered development, comparative governance, urban planning, smart city, environmental sustainability, Global South urbanization.

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1. Introduction

One of the 21st century's most revolutionary global developments is urbanization. By 2050, the United Nations predicts that over two-thirds of the world's population, approximately 6.7 billion people, will live in cities (United Nations, 2023). This demographic transformation is unprecedented in human history and has profound implications for governance, resource allocation, environmental management, and social cohesion. Urbanization offers opportunities for innovation, economic expansion, cultural exchange, and technological advancement, but it also poses serious challenges in housing, transportation, social justice, and environmental sustainability (UN-Habitat, 2022). The pace and scale of urbanization vary significantly between the Global North and the Global South, with African and Asian cities experiencing the most rapid and often unplanned growth (World Bank, 2023).

In recent years, the idea of the “people-oriented city” has become a crucial foundation for addressing these issues. The people-oriented approach emphasizes that, rather than focusing solely on economic growth, cities should be planned and run primarily to enhance citizens' quality of life. This represents a fundamental philosophical shift from the neoliberal urbanism of the late 20th century, which prioritized market efficiency and private-sector-led development, toward a more holistic understanding of urban well-being that encompasses social equity, environmental health, cultural identity, and democratic participation (Harvey, 2008; Marcuse et al., 2009). The people-centered philosophy of development has become a key tenet of urban planning and national governance in China. Since 2015 the concept of “people-centered philosophy of development” has been elevated to a central guiding philosophy across all policy domains, including urban governance (Xi, 2022). Beijing's initiatives to enhance social welfare, digital governance, environmental quality, and public services exemplify this strategy. The Beijing Urban Master Plan (2016-2035) explicitly articulates the city's commitment to becoming a “harmonious and livable capital” that serves its residents' needs (Beijing Municipal Government, 2017).

However, in Freetown and other major urban areas, Sierra Leone is rapidly changing. The country's urbanization rate has accelerated significantly since the end of the civil war in 2002, driven by rural-to-urban migration, natural population growth, and the concentration of economic opportunities in urban centers (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019). In particular, inadequate public services, informal settlements, infrastructure deficiencies, and environmental vulnerability continue to impede urban growth. The 2017 Freetown mudslide,

which claimed more than 1,100 lives, starkly illustrated the human cost of inadequate urban planning and environmental management (Smiley et al., 2018). Analyzing Beijing's experiences can help Sierra Leone improve its urban governance, provided that lessons are adapted rather than directly transplanted. The concept of "policy transfer" (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000) suggests that while cities can learn from one another, successful implementation requires sensitivity to local institutional, cultural, and economic contexts.

This paper examines the similarities and differences between Sierra Leonean urban development strategies and Beijing's people-oriented city model. It identifies lessons that Sierra Leone might draw on to promote more sustainable and inclusive urban development. The paper contributes to the growing literature on South-South cooperation in urban governance and on the applicability of Chinese development models to African contexts (Alderden et al., 2019; Chen, 2020).

2. Theoretical Framework: The People-Oriented City

2.1 Conceptual Foundations

People-centered development theories that prioritize social justice, human well-being, and citizen participation form the foundation of the people-oriented city concept. The strategy aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11), which calls for making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). However, the people-oriented city concept extends beyond SDG 11 to encompass elements of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

The theoretical roots of the people-oriented city can be traced to multiple intellectual traditions:

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) argues that development should be measured by the expansion of human capabilities and freedoms rather than by mere economic indicators.

Henri Lefebvre's Right to the City (Lefebvre, 1968), which asserts that urban inhabitants have a collective right to shape and transform the city.

The New Urban Agenda (UN-Habitat, 2016), adopted at the Habitat III conference, which provides a comprehensive framework for sustainable urban development.

China's Scientific Outlook on Development and People-Centered Philosophy of

Development, which integrates Marxist political economy with Chinese governance traditions to emphasize holistic, balanced, and people-first development (Xi, 2022; Tong, 2021).

2.2 Defining Characteristics

A people-oriented city is characterized by:

Citizen-centered urban planning: Urban design and development decisions prioritize residents' daily lives, accessibility, and well-being rather than maximizing commercial returns.

Accessible public services: Essential services, including healthcare, education, water, sanitation, transportation, and social protection, are universally accessible and affordable.

Inclusive social policies: Urban policies actively address the needs of marginalized groups, including women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, migrants, and the urban poor.

Environmental sustainability: Urban development operates within ecological limits, promotes green infrastructure, and safeguards natural resources for current and future generations.

Participatory governance: Citizens have meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that shape their urban environment.

Smart and efficient public administration: Technology and innovation are used to improve service delivery, transparency, and administrative efficiency.

2.3 The Chinese Context

The idea that growth should benefit the people and improve their standard of living is deeply embedded in China's people-centered approach. Since the reform and opening-up era (1978), and particularly since the 2012 leadership transition, public welfare, ecological civilization, and balanced development have become increasingly central to urban policy (Xi, 2022). The Chinese model emphasizes the state's role in directing urban development while progressively incorporating market mechanisms and citizen feedback. Tong Xing (2021) argues that social governance in China has evolved from a top-down administrative model toward a more collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach while maintaining strong party leadership.

2.4 The African Context

In Africa, the people-oriented city concept intersects with the challenges of postcolonial governance, resource scarcity, and rapid demographic change. Parnell and Pieterse (2016)

argue that African urbanism requires a distinct theoretical lens that accounts for informality, hybrid governance, and the legacy of colonial spatial planning. The African Union's Agenda 2063 and the New Urban Agenda provide continental frameworks for people-centered urban development, yet implementation remains uneven across countries (African Union, 2015).

3. Beijing's People-Oriented City Model

3.1 Integrated Urban Planning

Beijing has implemented comprehensive urban planning measures to reduce excessive population concentration, improve livability, and address the “big city disease”, marked by congestion, pollution, and resource strain. The Beijing Urban Master Plan (2016-2035) marks a paradigm shift from expansion-oriented growth to quality-oriented development (Beijing Municipal Government, 2017). Urban development places strong emphasis on environmental preservation, efficient transportation, and balanced spatial layout. The plan introduces the “Coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region” to redistribute population and economic functions across a broader metropolitan region (Wu, 2019).

Major initiatives include:

Development of public transportation systems: Beijing's subway network has expanded to over 27 lines covering approximately 800 kilometers, making it one of the most extensive urban rail systems globally. Bus rapid transit (BRT) and dedicated cycling lanes complement the rail network (Beijing Municipal Commission of Transport, 2023).

Expansion of green spaces and urban parks: Beijing has increased its green coverage ratio from 33% in 2000 to over 49% by 2023, with major projects such as the Olympic Forest Park and the city's “green corridor” initiative (Beijing Municipal Bureau of Landscaping, 2023).

Redevelopment of old residential communities: The “hutong” (traditional alleyway) renovation program balances heritage preservation with modernization of housing infrastructure, upgrading plumbing, heating, and sanitation in historic neighborhoods while maintaining cultural character (Wang & Murie, 2011).

Integration of digital technologies into city management: The “City Brain” initiative uses IoT sensors, AI analytics, and real-time data to optimize traffic flow, energy consumption, and emergency response (Greenfield, 2017).

3.2 Public Service Delivery

Beijing has significantly expanded access to comprehensive public services as part of its commitment to reducing urban inequality and improving living standards. Government investment in public services aims to reduce inequality and improve residents' quality of life, with particular attention to migrant workers and peri-urban populations who have historically been excluded from urban service systems (Chan, 2019).

Key service areas include:

Education: Universal access to nine years of compulsory education has been achieved, supported by significant investment in vocational training, early childhood education, and higher education institutions. Beijing hosts more than 90 universities, including top-ranked institutions such as Tsinghua and Peking University.

Healthcare: The urban basic medical insurance system covers more than 95% of residents. Community health centers provide primary care, while specialized hospitals handle complex cases. The tiered healthcare system is designed to relieve pressure on tertiary hospitals (Yip et al., 2012).

Social security: Comprehensive social insurance covering pensions, unemployment, work injury, and maternity benefits provides a safety net for urban residents. The minimum living guarantee system supports the most vulnerable populations.

Community services: The “15-minute community service circle” concept ensures that essential services, including grocery stores, clinics, childcare, eldercare, and recreational facilities, are accessible within a 15-minute walk of any residential area (Beijing Municipal Government, 2017).

3.3 Environmental Sustainability

A key element of Beijing's people-oriented approach is environmental governance. The city's transformation from one of the world's most polluted capitals to one with significantly improved air quality is among the most dramatic urban environmental turnarounds in history. Between 2013 and 2023, Beijing's PM_{2.5} concentrations fell by about 60%, from 89.5 µg/m³ to about 30 µg/m³ (Beijing Municipal Ecology and Environment Bureau, 2023).

Among the measures are:

Air pollution control programs: The “Air Pollution Prevention and Control Action Plan” (2013) and the subsequent Blue Sky Protection Campaign targeted industrial emissions,

vehicle exhaust, coal combustion, and construction dust. More than 2,000 polluting factories were relocated or shut down (Zhang et al., 2019).

Urban greening initiatives: The “Million Trees” program, rooftop greening mandates, and urban forest corridors have increased biodiversity and mitigated the urban heat island effect.

Waste management reforms: Implemented in 2020, mandatory waste sorting requires residents to separate waste into four categories and includes significant investment in recycling infrastructure and waste-to-energy facilities.

Renewable energy promotion: Coal consumption has been dramatically reduced, replaced by natural gas, solar, and wind energy. Beijing’s solar installed capacity has grown exponentially since 2015 (National Energy Administration, 2023).

Public health and environmental conditions have improved as a result of these policies, demonstrating that economic development and environmental protection need not be mutually exclusive (World Bank, 2022).

3.4 Smart Governance

Beijing has emerged as a leading smart city by integrating advanced digital technologies into governance systems. The concept of “smart governance” in Beijing goes beyond mere technological deployment to encompass a fundamental reimagining of the relationship between government and citizens (Townsend, 2014).

Key components include:

Big data: The Beijing Municipal Big Data Center coordinates data sharing across government departments, enabling evidence-based policymaking and predictive analytics for urban management challenges.

Artificial intelligence: AI applications in traffic management, public safety, urban planning simulation, and service delivery optimization have improved efficiency and responsiveness.

Digital public services: The “Beijing Tong” platform and the “Government Service Network” enable citizens to access more than 3,000 government services online, reducing bureaucratic burdens and wait times (Beijing Municipal Bureau of Government Services, 2023).

Online government platforms: The “12345 Citizen Service Hotline” and mobile applications allow residents to report problems, file complaints, and receive responses within mandated timeframes, creating a feedback loop between citizens and the government.

These innovations improve administrative efficiency and citizen access to services while

raising important questions about data privacy, digital inclusion, and the digital divide that must be addressed (Greenfield, 2017).

3.5 Community Participation

Community-level governance mechanisms encourage residents to participate in local decision-making, neighborhood management, and public consultations. The “community building” movement has established resident committees, property management consultation mechanisms, and neighborhood councils as platforms for citizen engagement (Read, 2003).

Recent innovations include: Quick Response to Community Calls

“Quick Response to Community Calls” (吹哨报道): Empowers grassroots-level workers to escalate issues to higher authorities for resolution.

Community deliberation meetings: Regular forums where residents discuss local issues and propose solutions.

Volunteer networks: Organized community volunteers participate in environmental monitoring, elderly care, and neighborhood safety.

Digital participation platforms: Mobile apps and WeChat groups facilitate real-time communication between residents and local officials.

3.6 Cultural Preservation and Urban Identity

An often-overlooked dimension of Beijing’s people-oriented approach is the integration of cultural preservation into urban development. Protecting historic hutongs, temples, and traditional architecture alongside modern development reflects an understanding that urban livability encompasses cultural identity and historical continuity (Zhu, 2014). The 2016–2035 Master Plan designates specific heritage protection zones and limits building heights in historically sensitive areas.

4. Urban Development in Sierra Leone

4.1 Urbanization Trends

Since the end of the civil war in 2002, Sierra Leone has experienced rapid urban growth. The country’s urban population has risen from about 35% in 2000 to over 43% in 2023, with projections indicating it will exceed 50% by 2035 (World Bank, 2023). Freetown remains the nation’s largest city and economic center, housing approximately 1.2 million people, roughly

15% of the national population, in an area of limited carrying capacity.

Other urban centers including Bo, Kenema, and Makeni have also experienced significant growth, though they lack the institutional infrastructure to manage this expansion effectively. The concentration of economic activity, government services, and educational institutions in Freetown creates a powerful pull factor for rural-to-urban migration (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019).

But urban expansion has frequently outpaced planning capability, leading to:

Informal settlements: An estimated 60% of Freetown's population lives in informal settlements lacking secure tenure, adequate housing, and basic services (UN-Habitat, 2022).

Traffic congestion: Inadequate road networks, limited public transport, and poor traffic management result in severe congestion, with average commute times exceeding two hours for many residents.

Inadequate sanitation: Only approximately 20% of urban households have access to improved sanitation facilities, with open defecation and improper waste disposal remaining widespread (WHO/UNICEF, 2023).

Housing shortages: The housing deficit is estimated at over 700,000 units nationally, with the most acute shortages in urban areas where informal construction on hillsides and floodplains creates significant safety risks (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019).

4.2 Public Service Challenges

Urban residents continue to face challenges in accessing basic public services. The legacy of the civil war, which destroyed much of the country's institutional infrastructure, combined with limited fiscal capacity and governance challenges, creates persistent service delivery gaps.

Key challenges include:

Quality healthcare: Sierra Leone has one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates. Urban health facilities are overcrowded, under-equipped, and understaffed. The doctor-to-patient ratio remains critically low, at about 1: 10,000 (WHO, 2023).

Reliable water supply: Only about 30% of Freetown residents have access to piped water. The Guma Valley Dam, the city's primary water source, operates well below capacity because of sedimentation and aging infrastructure (World Bank, 2023).

Effective waste management: Freetown generates about 500 tons of solid waste daily, yet collection services reach less than 50% of the city. Open dumping and burning are common

(UN-Habitat, 2022).

Educational services: Although enrollment rates have improved, quality remains a concern. Overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and teacher shortages undermine educational outcomes.

Reliable electricity: The national electricity grid serves fewer than 30% of urban households and experiences frequent outages. Most residents rely on expensive, polluting generators or lack access to electricity (African Development Bank, 2022).

Resource constraints and institutional weaknesses impede service delivery. Municipal governments lack adequate revenue bases, technical capacity, and legal authority to fulfill their mandates effectively (Smoke, 2015).

4.3 Environmental Vulnerability

Sierra Leone's cities face significant environmental challenges that are exacerbated by climate change and unplanned urbanization. The country's tropical climate, hilly topography, and coastal location create inherent environmental risks that are amplified by poor land-use planning.

Key environmental challenges include:

Flooding: Annual flooding affects thousands of households in Freetown and other cities. Deforestation of hillsides, inadequate drainage infrastructure, and construction in floodplains exacerbate the problem (Smiley et al., 2018).

Coastal erosion: Rising sea levels and storm surges threaten coastal communities and infrastructure. Freetown's coastline is especially vulnerable.

Deforestation: Urban expansion drives forest clearing for construction materials, fuel wood, and settlement, reducing natural buffers against flooding and landslides.

Poor waste disposal: Indiscriminate dumping blocks drainage channels, contaminates water sources, and creates public health hazards.

The 2017 Freetown mudslide, triggered by heavy rainfall on deforested hillsides above the city, killed hundreds and displaced many others. The disaster underscored the urgent need for improved environmental management, urban planning, and building code enforcement (Smiley et al., 2018). It also demonstrated the deadly consequences of allowing unplanned settlement in environmentally sensitive areas.

4.4 Citizen Participation

Although municipal authorities offer opportunities for public participation, substantive public

involvement in urban planning remains limited. The Local Government Act of 2004 provides a legal framework for decentralization and local governance, but implementation has been inconsistent (Government of Sierra Leone, 2004).

Challenges to meaningful citizen participation include:

Limited awareness among citizens of their rights and opportunities to engage.

Weak institutional mechanisms for translating citizen input into policy decisions.

Resource constraints that limit local governments' capacity to conduct meaningful consultations.

Political dynamics that may prioritize elite interests over community needs.

Low literacy rates that limit access to written consultations.

Increasing community involvement could enhance responsiveness and accountability. Traditional governance structures, including chiefdoms and community-based organizations, offer culturally appropriate and widely accessible platforms for citizen engagement (Keen, 2005).

4.5 Digital Governance

Urban governance in Sierra Leone is still in the early stages of the digital revolution. However, increasing mobile connectivity opens up possibilities for public service delivery and e-governance. Mobile phone penetration has grown rapidly, reaching over 60% of the population, creating a foundation for digital governance initiatives (ITU, 2023).

Current and emerging digital initiatives include:

Mobile money platforms (such as Orange Money and Africell Money) that promote financial inclusion.

SMS-based information services for public health and education.

Limited e-government portals for tax payments and business registration.

Social media as an informal channel for citizen-government communication.

However, significant barriers remain, including limited internet access outside urban centers, low digital literacy, unreliable electricity supply, and the lack of comprehensive data protection legislation (World Bank, 2023).

4.6 Institutional and Governance Framework

Sierra Leone's urban governance operates within a multi-layered institutional framework comprising:

Central government ministries (Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Lands, Ministry of Environment).

Municipal councils (Freetown City Council, Bo City Council, Kenema City Council, (Makeni City Council).

Traditional authorities (Paramount Chiefs and Chiefdoms).

Community-based organizations and NGOs.

This multi-layered system creates both opportunities for complementary governance and challenges in coordination, jurisdictional overlap, and accountability diffusion (Smoke, 2015). The National Development Plan (2019-2023) and the Medium-Term National Development Plan (2024-2030) include urban development priorities but lack dedicated implementation mechanisms and adequate financing (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019).

5. Comparative Analysis of Beijing and Sierra Leone

5.1 Structural Comparison

Dimension	Beijing	Sierra Leone
Urban Planning	Comprehensive, long-term (20-year master plans), integrated spatial strategy	Limited planning capacity, reactive rather than proactive, under-resourced
Public Services	Extensive, integrated, universal coverage targets	Uneven access and quality, significant urban-rural disparities
Environmental Management	Strong institutional framework, dedicated agencies, enforcement capacity	Significant environmental challenges, weak enforcement, limited resources
Smart Governance	Advanced digital systems, AI integration, comprehensive data infrastructure	Emerging digital initiatives, mobile-first approach, limited infrastructure
Citizen Participation	Structured community engagement, institutionalized consultation mechanisms	Developing participation mechanisms, reliance on traditional structures
Infrastructure Development	Highly developed, continuous investment, world-class systems	Significant infrastructure gaps, underfunding, maintenance challenges
Fiscal Capacity	Substantial municipal revenue, central government transfers, land finance	Limited revenue base, donor dependency, narrow tax base
Institutional Capacity	Large professional bureaucracy, technical expertise, research institutions	Limited staffing, capacity constraints, high turnover
Housing	Large-scale public and market housing, renovation programs	Severe shortage, dominance of informal construction, limited public housing
Transportation	Extensive metro, bus, cycling infrastructure	Limited public transport, road-focused, congestion

5.2 Analysis of Differences

The comparison reveals significant differences in institutional capacity and resource availability. Beijing operates within a governance system marked by strong state capacity, substantial fiscal resources, long-term planning horizons, and the ability to mobilize large-scale investment. Sierra Leone, by contrast, operates within a context of institutional fragility, limited fiscal space, short planning horizons driven by electoral cycles, and dependence on external financing.

However, the goal of enhancing residents' welfare through urban development is shared across both contexts. Both Beijing and Sierra Leone face the fundamental challenge of ensuring that urbanization benefits all residents, not just economic elites. Both must balance economic development with environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

5.3 Analysis of Transferability

The concepts of “policy transfer” (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000) and “lesson-drawing” (Rose, 1991) provide a useful analytical lens for understanding what Sierra Leone can learn from Beijing. However, several factors limit direct transferability:

Scale and resources: Beijing's municipal budget exceeds Sierra Leone's entire national GDP, making direct replication of capital-intensive projects infeasible.

Political systems: China's policy guidance enables continuity in long-term planning and rapid implementation, which may not be replicable in Sierra Leone's multi-party democracy.

Cultural contexts: Community structures, governance traditions, and social norms differ significantly.

Development stage: Beijing addresses challenges of a mature, high-income city; Sierra Leone addresses basic service delivery and institutional building.

Nevertheless, principles and approaches rather than specific projects are transferable. The emphasis on people-centered planning, integrated service delivery, environmental protection, and citizen engagement reflects universal governance principles that can be adapted to different contexts (Alderden et al., 2019).

5.4 Shared Challenges

Despite vast differences in development levels, both contexts face certain shared challenges:

Managing rapid urbanization and population growth.

- Addressing inequality and social exclusion in urban areas.
- Responding to climate change and environmental degradation.
- Balancing economic development with livability.
- Integrating technology into governance while ensuring inclusion.
- Managing informality in urban settlements and economies.

6. Lessons from Beijing for Sierra Leone

6.1 Strengthening Long-Term Urban Planning

Adopting integrated urban planning frameworks that prioritize sustainable land use and account for population growth can benefit Sierra Leone. The Beijing model demonstrates the value of:

- Master planning with 15-20-year horizons that provide stability and direction for urban development.

- Zoning regulations that separate incompatible land uses and protect environmentally sensitive areas.

- Integrated spatial planning that coordinates housing, transportation, employment, and services.

- Regular plan review and updating to respond to changing circumstances.

For Sierra Leone, this entails developing and enforcing the Freetown Structure Plan, creating similar plans for secondary cities, and building technical capacity within planning ministries and municipal councils to implement these plans (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019; World Bank, 2023).

6.2 Investing in Public Services

The quality of life in cities can be improved by increasing investment in healthcare, education, transportation, and sanitation. Beijing's experience shows that:

- Universal service coverage should be an explicit policy goal, with progressive expansion to underserved populations.

- Community-level service points (analogous to Beijing's 15-minute life circle) can improve accessibility in resource-constrained settings.

- Public-private partnerships can supplement government capacity for service delivery.

- Preventive services (primary healthcare and environmental sanitation) yield higher returns

than curative interventions.

For Sierra Leone, prioritizing investments in water supply, primary healthcare, waste management, and basic education would deliver immediate quality-of-life improvements for urban residents (WHO, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

6.3 Promoting Environmental Governance

Urban policy should prioritize environmental conservation. Community-based conservation initiatives and stricter enforcement of environmental laws are crucial. Beijing's environmental turnaround demonstrates that:

Strong political commitment at the highest levels is essential to drive environmental reform.

Clear regulatory frameworks with enforcement mechanisms are necessary.

Community-based approaches complement top-down regulation.

Investing in green infrastructure (urban forests, wetlands, parks) provides multiple benefits.

Disaster risk reduction must be integrated into urban planning.

For Sierra Leone, this entails strengthening the Environment Protection Agency, enforcing building codes in hazard-prone areas, implementing community-based waste management, and investing in hillside reforestation around Freetown (Smiley et al., 2018; UN-Habitat, 2022).

6.4 Expanding Smart Governance

Digital technologies can enhance citizen engagement, efficiency, and transparency. Given Sierra Leone's high mobile phone usage, mobile-based government services might be particularly successful. Beijing's smart governance experience suggests:

Starting with simple, high-impact digital services (SMS-based information, mobile payment for municipal fees).

Building data infrastructure gradually, starting with basic population and land registries.

Using technology for accountability (public dashboards, complaint tracking systems).

Ensuring digital inclusion so technology does not exacerbate existing inequalities.

Sierra Leone's mobile-first approach could leapfrog some stages of digital development that more advanced economies have experienced, similar to how mobile banking bypassed traditional banking infrastructure in many African countries (ITU, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

6.5 Enhancing Community Participation

Active public participation is necessary for a city to be people-oriented. Planning, overseeing, and evaluating urban development initiatives should involve local communities. Beijing's community governance mechanisms, adapted to Sierra Leone's context, suggest:

- Establishing regular community consultation forums at the neighborhood and ward levels.

- Integrating traditional governance structures (chiefdoms, community elders) into formal planning processes.

- Creating citizen feedback mechanisms (suggestion boxes, community radio, mobile platforms).

- Supporting community-based organizations as partners in service delivery and monitoring.

- Ensuring representation of women, youth, and marginalized groups in participatory processes.

6.6 Building Institutional Capacity

A cross-cutting lesson from Beijing's experience is the importance of institutional capacity. Sierra Leone needs to invest in the following:

- Training and retaining urban planning professionals

- Strengthening municipal finance and revenue collection.

- Developing research and data collection capabilities.

- Creating inter-agency coordination mechanisms.

- Establishing monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

6.7 Leveraging International Cooperation

Beijing's development has benefited from international knowledge exchange, technology transfer, and investment. Sierra Leone can leverage these advantages:

- South-South cooperation with Chinese cities and institutions.

- China-Africa cooperation frameworks (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, Belt and Road Initiative) for infrastructure and capacity building.

- Multilateral development assistance from the World Bank, UN-Habitat, and African Development Bank.

- City-to-city partnerships and knowledge exchange programs.

7. Policy Recommendations

Based on the comparative analysis, the following policy recommendations are proposed for Sierra Leone:

Develop a national, people-oriented urban development strategy: Create a comprehensive 20-year strategy that articulates a clear vision for people-centered urbanization and sets specific targets for service delivery, environmental protection, and inclusive growth. This strategy should align with SDG 11, the New Urban Agenda, and Agenda 2063.

Strengthen local government capacity: Invest in the human, financial, and technical capacity of municipal councils. This includes training programs for urban planners, engineers, and administrators; improved revenue collection mechanisms; and clearer legal mandates for local governance.

Increase investment in public infrastructure: Prioritize investments in water supply, sanitation, healthcare facilities, schools, and transportation. Develop innovative financing mechanisms including public-private partnerships, municipal bonds, and community contribution schemes.

Promote environmental sustainability initiatives: Enforce environmental regulations, implement hillside protection programs, develop urban green spaces, improve waste management systems, and integrate climate adaptation into all urban planning decisions. Establish early warning systems for flood and landslide risks.

Expand digital governance platforms: Develop mobile-based government services, digital land registries, and citizen feedback platforms. Invest in basic digital infrastructure including internet connectivity and data centers. Ensure digital literacy programs accompany technology deployment.

Institutionalize citizen participation mechanisms: Mandate community consultation in all urban planning processes. Establish ward-level development committees with representation from women, youth, and marginalized groups. Create accessible feedback and complaint mechanisms.

Foster international cooperation and knowledge exchange with cities such as Beijing: Establish formal city-to-city partnerships, participate in China-Africa cooperation forums focused on urbanization, and seek technical assistance for specific governance challenges. Develop exchange programs for urban management professionals.

Address informal settlements through upgrading rather than eviction: Following the

principles of the New Urban Agenda, pursue in-situ upgrading of informal settlements, providing secure tenure, basic services, and incremental housing improvement rather than forced displacement (UN-Habitat, 2016).

Develop secondary cities to reduce pressure on Freetown: Invest in Bo, Kenema, and Makeni as alternative urban centers with their own economic bases, services, and opportunities, reducing the concentration pressure on the capital.

Establish an urban data and research system: Create mechanisms for regular collection, analysis, and dissemination of urban data to inform evidence-based policy-making. Partner with universities, including the University of Makeni, for urban research.

8. Conclusion

The people-oriented city model is a useful paradigm for achieving inclusive and sustainable urban development. Beijing exemplifies how technological innovation, environmental regulation, public service delivery, and strategic planning can enhance metropolitan quality of life. Beijing's transformation from a congested, polluted megacity to an increasingly livable, green, and digitally connected capital demonstrates that sustained political commitment, institutional investment, and people-centered policy design can produce dramatic urban improvements within a generation.

Despite the unique institutional and socioeconomic obstacles Sierra Leone faces, Beijing's experiences offer valuable insights. The fundamental principles of people-centered planning prioritizing citizen welfare, investing in public services, protecting the environment, leveraging technology, and engaging communities are universally applicable, even if specific implementation strategies must be adapted.

Sierra Leone should adapt relevant approaches to local circumstances rather than directly copying Beijing's model, with an emphasis on improved public service delivery, environmental sustainability, and community involvement. The adaptation must account for Sierra Leone's limited fiscal resources, multi-party democratic governance, traditional authority structures, post-conflict institutional challenges, and tropical environmental conditions.

Cities that are more resilient, inclusive, and people-centered can support the nation's long-term development objectives. The path forward requires not only government action but also active citizen engagement, private-sector partnerships, international cooperation, and a

sustained commitment to placing people at the center of urban development decisions.

The comparative analysis in this paper contributes to the broader discourse on South-South learning in urban governance. It shows that although the development gap between Beijing and Sierra Leonean cities is vast, a shared philosophical commitment to people-centered development provides common ground for learning, adaptation, and mutual inspiration. As Sierra Leone navigates its urban future, the question is not whether to learn from Beijing's experience, but how to adapt its principles creatively and in context to build cities that truly serve their people.

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