

The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) [scorecard is out again](#), and as expected, it has dominated media discussions. Like many international development assessment tools, the scorecard has become the subject of the kind of political spin and banter typical of Sierra Leone's development discourse — often at the expense of objective, helpful analysis. We would like to step away from the noise and raise a few questions that we believe offer an alternative framework for understanding the MCC scorecard and critiquing it.

Before we delve in, it is worth reminding ourselves what the MCC is. A simple, literal way to describe it is this: a United States Government initiative that assists developing countries with much-needed financing (known as “compacts”) for growth and development, on the condition that they meet certain requirements. These include governing justly, investing in people, and promoting economic freedom. Hence, the scorecard ranks MCC-eligible countries, such as Sierra Leone, based on up to 22 indicators.

Countries are grouped by income levels (from low to upper-middle) and passing means scoring above the median on at least 11 of the 22 indicators. In simpler terms, you are compared with other countries in your income group. In addition, a country must pass the indicators for personal freedom, control of corruption, and government accountability. Figuring out how all this comes together can be complex, but here is the [MCC's detailed guide](#) to the scorecard for those interested.

Sierra Leone has featured consistently in the MCC scorecard, with mixed results that show relatively strong performance in social and governance indicators such as health spending, girls' education, and freedom, while persistently struggling in economic freedom, access to credit, and the overall business environment. In the past two years, the country has recorded what is described as a “half scorecard passed.” Specifically, Sierra Leone passed only two of ten indicators in the “economic freedom” category, two of six under “investing in people,” and five of six in “ruling justly.”

While it is easy to get caught up in the “pass” or “no-pass” debate, the MCC scorecard offers important insights into how development is assessed and understood. The model also raises critical questions worth exploring. For instance, in the “investing in people” section, Sierra Leone scored poorly on natural resource protection and chronic diseases, with no score for workforce development. Even though the country performs relatively well in health expenditure, its performance in child health, just 18%, remains low.

A few days ago, we [published an article on “obstetric violence,”](#) based on a Human Rights Watch report detailing harrowing accounts of women’s experiences giving birth in Sierra Leone. This raises questions: what are we missing? Why is investment in health not translating into much better outcomes for child health and maternal care, in the same way that investment in education has improved girls’ education? Is it because of how broken the health system remains? Or are other countries in our *popolipo* income group simply performing much better, despite our health spending being around 11% of the national budget?

Let us park this for a moment and focus on Sierra Leone’s best-performing section — “ruling justly.” This category has generated strong reactions from Sierra Leoneans who feel that the reality they live in is worlds apart from what the MCC scorecard presents. Five of the six indicators were passed: personal freedom, government accountability, control of corruption, rule of law, and freedom of information — with the only failure being “government effectiveness”.

The MCC scorecard is informed by a range of international datasets, including those from the World Bank, Brookings Institution, Freedom House, the Heritage Foundation, and Transparency International, among many others. The question is: to what extent does the data on “ruling justly” reflect citizens’ lived experiences and perceptions of corruption, informal payments, justice, and freedom of expression? Does the scorecard suffer from an overrepresentation of elite views — or international donor optimism rooted in reforms that have yet to translate into real impact? Or are we simply performing better than a group of equally corrupt, poor, struggling peers?

These questions lead us to a broader concern: do reward-driven assessments, such as the MCC’s, push countries to tick neoliberal boxes for international recognition and funding, rather than addressing the deep structural problems that perpetuate poverty and underdevelopment? Take Sierra Leone’s consistent seventy or more percent score on “control of corruption” over the past five years. If the scorecard were anything to go by, Sierra Leone should be one of the least corrupt countries in the world — and yet, everyone knows that’s far from reality. The reality is that we have a system that mounts a crusade against petty corruption and soft targets, while corruption in high places remains a matter of huge concern. Unexplained wealth is a crime that remains under-investigated, if not ignored by the anti-graft authorities. Declaration of assets is mandatory, but confidential. In instances where powerful individuals are found wanting, prosecution has been substituted for administrative punishments and recommendations. The Auditor-General’s report

highlights billions of Leones that government agencies cannot account for adequately. This is the reality that Sierra Leoneans are familiar with, despite the strong laws and loud institutions.

When it comes to the MCC's assessment of economic freedom, which Sierra Leone did not pass, it is important to acknowledge that a market-oriented approach to reforms and development can enhance efficiency and ease of doing business. The dominant assumption that markets, private investment, free trade, fiscal restraint and deregulation lead to development success is problematic. In many cases, especially in the developing world, it does not produce those outcomes. There is enough evidence to that effect. Anyway, point made, let's return to Sierra Leone and the MCC scorecard before we slide into an ideological debate that would require a whole piece on its own.

The MCC scorecard should not be dismissed. It remains a useful mirror of progress and failure, especially for mainstream development discourse. But we must learn to read it critically. It tells us where we stand among peers, not how far we've come from our own baseline, and that is even more important. Sierra Leone's challenge is not merely to "pass" indicators but to make the numbers mean something tangible in people's lives. Development is not about ticking boxes to impress donors; it's about ensuring that women can give birth safely and with dignity, children can grow healthily, learning outcomes improve as much as the enrollment numbers, and citizens can trust their institutions. Until then, the MCC scorecard will remain a report card for a reward devoid of a real story with tangible impact on people's lives.

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