



**SEND
SIERRA LEONE**
Working to promote good governance and
equality of men and women in Sierra Leone



POSITION PAPER
Restore Karene's Lifeline

Urgent Government Action on the Makeni–Kamakwie Road, Mathehun Bridge and Alternative Crossings

A practical, evidence-based call to protect mobility, food systems, healthcare access, education, trade and accountable development in Karene District.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Prepared by SEND Sierra Leone and NMJD

For Government, Parliament, local authorities, development partners, civil society and the people of Sierra Leone

Executive Policy Brief

The Three Decisions Government Should Take Now

1. SECURE ACCESS • 2. START AND FUND MATHEHUN BRIDGE • 3. COMPLETE THE CORRIDOR

Karene's principal connection to Makeni is a development lifeline for approximately 290,313 people living across 5,829 square kilometres.[1] The collapse of Mathehun Bridge, incomplete or deteriorated road sections, fragile bypasses and unreliable crossings constrain emergency referral, food marketing, education, public administration, tourism and investment. Government has already announced important bridge and road commitments. The immediate requirement is to convert them into one financed, dated and publicly monitored delivery plan.

- Maintain and drain the Kalangba–Gbindembu alternative route; establish safe interim crossing arrangements; publish traffic restrictions; and activate a 24-hour emergency-referral protocol involving SLRA, NDMA, the Ministry of Health, the District Health Management Team, police and ambulance services.
- Publish the approved design, procurement status, contractor, supervising engineer, financing source, contract value, amount released, mobilisation date, milestone schedule, safeguards and completion date. Begin independently verifiable works.
- Bring the Makeni–Kamakwie road, Mathehun Bridge, approaches, culverts, drainage, bypasses, ferries and feeder-road interfaces under a single public dashboard, with monthly physical and financial reporting and quarterly district reviews.

Within 30 days, Government should disclose for every corridor package: approved contract value and variations; amount allocated, released, certified and paid; physical progress; contractor and supervising engineer; procurement status; safeguards and compensation status; outstanding financing requirement; cause of delay; corrective action; mobilisation date; and revised completion date.

Corridor Status and Decision Matrix

Asset	Evidence-based status	Government commitment	Immediate decision
Mathehun Bridge	Collapsed 10 July 2024; temporary access introduced.[7]	Construction announced for after the 2026 rainy season.[4]	Publish funded mobilisation and completion schedule.
Makeni–Kamakwie road	Full all-weather corridor performance has not been achieved; certified completion requires disclosure.	A 92 km upgrade and Scarcies crossing improvement appear in the tourism strategy.[3]	Publish package status, financing gap and completion plan.
Kalangba–Gbindembu route	Alternative for light vehicles; present wet-season condition requires verification.[7]	Interim access route.	Grade, drain, sign and maintain to a published standard.

Asset	Evidence-based status	Government commitment	Immediate decision
Strategic ferries	Four services reportedly grounded or unreliable; official inventory not verified.	Selected ferry crossings are being replaced with bridges.[4]	Publish inventory; certify, repair, replace or close unsafe services.
Other Karene bridges	Complementary investments affect the wider network	Tomparie, Kabba, Yebele, Batnhoro and Mabantha works announced.[4]	Report current status and integrate sequencing with corridor access.

Citizens should be able to see four verifiable results within 90 days: a safe and maintained interim route; an operational emergency-referral protocol; funded contractor mobilisation at Mathehun Bridge; and a public dashboard showing physical and financial progress across the whole corridor.

SEND and NMJD request a time-bound inter-agency meeting chaired by the Office of the Chief Minister or another authority designated by the President. The meeting should conclude with named focal persons, dated actions and a jointly communicated follow-up date—not only a general undertaking to review the matter.

Full Position Paper

Executive Summary

The Makeni–Kamakwie corridor is not simply a road project. It is the principal development artery linking Karene District’s dispersed rural population to Makeni and onward markets, referral services, education, public administration and investment. Its continued failure compounded by the collapse of Mathehun Bridge, weak wet-season bypasses and unreliable river crossings turns distance into deprivation and public investment into stranded assets.

The scale of exposure is substantial. Statistics Sierra Leone counted 290,313 people in Karene in 2021 across 5,829 square kilometres, a population density of only 49.8 persons per square kilometre.[1] In a large, sparsely populated and predominantly rural district, reliable trunk and feeder connections are indispensable: they are how citizens reach services and how government, councils and non-governmental organisations reach citizens.

The action case is already embedded in national policy. Sierra Leone’s Medium-Term National Development Plan 2024–2030 places infrastructure, food security, human capital and public-sector delivery at the centre of national transformation.[2] The Government’s tourism strategy identifies the upgrading of the 92-kilometre Makeni–Kamakwie road and improvement of the Scarcies crossing as necessary to open the Outamba–Kilimi Tourism Development Area.[3] In April 2026, the Government publicly stated that construction of the Mathehun Bridge would begin after the rainy season, while reporting progress on the Tomparie Bridge and plans for other strategic bridges in Karene.[4] SEND and NMJD welcome these commitments. The urgent issues now are credible implementation, interim access, and transparent reporting.

Population at risk	District area	Corridor in policy	Bridge failure
290,313 (2021 census)	5,829 km ² 49.8 persons/km²	92 km upgrade identified for Outamba–Kilimi access	Collapsed 10 July 2024; reconstruction announced

We therefore ask Government to establish an immediate safe-access regime; publish a time-bound, financed delivery plan for Mathehun Bridge and the unfinished road sections; restore or replace critical ferry services; maintain the Kalangba–Gbindembu alternative route and feeder-road interfaces; and institute monthly public reporting led by the Sierra Leone Roads Authority (SLRA) with the Ministry of Finance, the responsible works ministry and Karene District Council.

Decision Requested

Within 30 days, Government should convene a joint technical and financing task team, confirm the engineering and procurement status of every corridor component, publish an interim traffic and emergency-access plan, and issue a dated implementation dashboard. Within 90 days, the task team should demonstrate funded mobilisation, functioning interim crossings, and independently verifiable progress. The dashboard should disclose contract values and variations; allocations and releases; certified payments; physical progress; outstanding financing; reasons for delay; corrective action; and revised completion dates.

1. Purpose and Scope

This position paper calls for urgent, coordinated, and accountable Government action on the infrastructure failures affecting the Makeni–Kamakwie corridor, especially Mathehun Bridge, unfinished or deteriorated road sections, bypasses and river crossings. It is addressed principally to the Office of the President; Office of the Chief Minister; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Works and Public Assets; SLRA; Ministry of Transport and Aviation; Sierra Leone Road

Safety Authority; Ministry of Health; National Disaster Management Agency; Karene District Council; Parliament; and other relevant institutions.

The paper combines a desk review of official statistics and policy documents with publicly reported infrastructure developments and concerns communicated by road users and district stakeholders. Where precise engineering progress, contractual balances, ferry status or traffic data are not publicly available, SEND asks Government to publish and verify them. The paper does not substitute advocacy estimates for official engineering certification.

2. Karene District: Why Connectivity Is Development Infrastructure

Karene is one of Sierra Leone's newest districts and forms part of the North West Region. Kamakwie is its administrative centre. The district's geography and settlement pattern make transport infrastructure unusually consequential. The 2021 census recorded 147,124 males and 143,189 females, for a total of 290,313 people.[1] Its comparatively low population density means communities and public facilities are distributed over long distances. A failed trunk route therefore does not create a local inconvenience; it magnifies rural isolation across a district.

2.1 Agriculture, food security and rural incomes

Agriculture is central to Karene's economy and to the Government's Feed Salone ambition. The 2024 Sierra Leone Annual Agricultural Survey estimated an average agricultural holding area of 1.2 hectares and an average planted area of 0.8 hectares in Karene.[5] These small production scales make farmers particularly sensitive to transport cost, spoilage, delayed collection and weak bargaining power. When vehicles cannot travel reliably, farm-gate prices can fall even as consumer prices rise: farmers receive less, while households pay more.

Road restoration must therefore be treated as food-system infrastructure. It can improve access to inputs and extension, enable aggregation, reduce post-harvest loss, support processors and traders, and connect rural production to Makeni and national markets. Conversely, agricultural programmes that distribute seed, equipment, finance or training without dependable market access cannot reach their full economic return.

2.2 Health, protection and emergency referral

Transport delay is a health-system risk. Women in labour, severely ill children, accident victims and patients requiring higher-level care cannot wait for dry-season access or uncertain crossings. A road failure changes the effective coverage of ambulances and referral facilities even when buildings, staff and medicines are available. Long detours also increase household costs and can discourage timely care-seeking. Interim access must therefore include a formal emergency-referral protocol—not merely an informal bypass.

2.3 Education and human capital

Reliable access affects teacher deployment, supervision, examination logistics, school supplies and student attendance. The 2019 Annual School Census recorded difficult-access schools in Karene and high class sizes at several levels; while the data pre-date the present crisis, they demonstrate the district's longstanding access constraints.[6] Roads do not replace teachers or classrooms, but failed roads make it harder and more expensive to sustain both.

2.4 Trade, tourism and private investment

The Government's own tourism strategy provides a powerful economic rationale: it identifies a 92-kilometre Makeni–Kamakwie upgrade, including improved Scarcies crossing, as an enabling investment for Outamba–Kilimi.[3] This means the corridor links not only present livelihoods but future tourism, hospitality, conservation and small-enterprise opportunities. Investors price unreliable logistics into every decision. A credible, all-weather corridor reduces uncertainty and signals that Karene is connected to the national economy.

3. The Infrastructure Emergency

3.1 Mathehun Bridge: a temporary disruption that became a prolonged constraint

Mathehun Bridge collapsed on 10 July 2024 after a loaded truck crossed it. In a public notice reported on 15 July 2024, SLRA confirmed that the scope had changed from maintenance to reconstruction and announced a temporary passage, while directing light vehicles to the Kalangba–Lehondi–Gbendembu route.[7] More than two years after the collapse, the enduring dependence on interim arrangements is itself evidence of systemic exposure.

Government reported in April 2026 that construction of Mathehun Bridge was scheduled to begin after the rainy season.[4] That commitment is welcome and should now be converted into a public delivery instrument showing the approved design, procurement method, contractor, financing source, mobilisation date, implementation milestones, safeguards, traffic management arrangements and expected completion date.

3.2 An unfinished corridor and fragile alternatives

The road is commonly described as approximately 55 miles, while the national tourism strategy uses 92 kilometres.[3][8] Sections improved under earlier works have not produced a complete, resilient, all-weather connection. Public reports in 2025 continued to describe worsening road conditions and risks of loss of vehicular access.[9] A temporary Mathehun bypass was again reported as under construction in June 2025.[10] These records support a clear conclusion: piecemeal interventions have not yet secured reliable corridor performance.

Road users and district stakeholders report extreme wet-season delays, higher fares, vehicle damage, disrupted produce movement and difficulties with emergency referrals. These impacts are plausible and consistent with the observed infrastructure failures, but Government should strengthen the evidence base by publishing traffic counts, journey-time data, crash and referral records, commodity-flow information and contractor progress certificates.

3.3 Ferries and crossings are part of one network

The Government has recognised the strategic importance of replacing unsafe or unreliable ferry crossings. In April 2026 it reported Tomparie Bridge at about 85 per cent completion, expected completion in May 2026, plans for Kabba Ferry Bridge, and additional bridges at Yebele, Batnhoro and Mabantha.[4] The Islamic Development Bank's procurement notice for the 105-kilometre Kambia–Tomparie–Kamakwie road also links paved access with bridges, culverts, lighting, market, health, education, storage, water and feeder-road investments.[11]

This integrated approach should be applied to the Makeni–Kamakwie corridor. SEND has received reports that four locally important ferry services are grounded or unreliable. Because a verified public inventory was not located during this review, SLRA and the responsible transport authorities should immediately publish the name, location, ownership, mechanical status, safety status and repair or replacement plan for every strategic ferry serving Karene.

4. Why Urgent Government Action Is Justified

- Human life and safety: unreliable crossings and long detours delay emergency referral, expose passengers to unsafe movements and weaken disaster response.
- Food security and price stability: Karene's smallholder economy depends on affordable, predictable movement of inputs, produce, traders and processors.
- Value for public money: roads, schools, clinics, agricultural facilities and donor-funded programmes underperform when access fails; restoring connectivity protects investments already made.
- National policy coherence: completing the corridor advances the MTNDP 2024–2030, Feed Salone, human capital development, tourism development and inclusive growth.
- Territorial equity: Karene's rural and dispersed population should enjoy comparable access to national opportunities and essential services.
- Public confidence: published commitments must be matched by dated milestones, visible mobilisation and transparent expenditure information.

- Climate resilience: emergency grading alone is insufficient where drainage, culverts, approaches and bridge design are not built and maintained for intense rainfall and flooding.

5. Impact on Government and Non-Governmental Development Work

Connectivity is the operating platform for service delivery. Government ministries, Karene District Council, NGOs, UN agencies, faith-based organisations and community groups depend on the corridor to move personnel, materials, medicines, learning supplies, agricultural inputs, monitoring teams and beneficiaries. When access fails, programmes face higher vehicle and fuel costs, cancelled supervision, delayed construction, weakened safeguarding follow-up, smaller market participation and reduced value for money.

The consequences are especially serious for last-mile programmes. A project may build a facility or train a community, but the benefit is diminished if teachers cannot be supervised, patients cannot be referred, produce cannot reach buyers or technicians cannot maintain equipment. Better infrastructure would also improve coordination between national agencies, district authorities and civil society, making it easier to monitor results and respond to complaints.

Development sector	Effect of corridor failure	What restoration enables
Health	Delayed referral, outreach and supply movement	Faster referral, outreach coverage and supervision
Agriculture	High logistics cost, spoilage and weak market access	Aggregation, processing, finance and stronger farm-gate demand
Education	Teacher and material access constraints	More reliable supervision, attendance and examination logistics
Governance	Costly monitoring and weaker citizen access	Stronger oversight, participation and district service delivery
Private sector	Uncertain delivery times and vehicle damage	Lower risk, wider markets and investment confidence
Humanitarian response	Slow deployment during shocks	Faster, safer emergency and disaster response

6. SEND Sierra Leone and NMJD's Priority Demands

1. Publish a single corridor delivery plan. SLRA should issue an authoritative status report covering the road, Mathehun Bridge, bypasses, drainage, ferries and connecting feeder routes, with maps, contract packages, financing, milestones and accountable officers.
2. Secure safe access now. Maintain and drain the Kalangba–Gbindembu alternative route; install signs, barriers, lighting or reflectors where necessary; enforce load and speed controls; and provide a wet-season traffic management plan.
3. Operationalise emergency referral. The Ministry of Health, DHMT, ambulance service, NDMA, police and road authorities should agree a 24-hour crossing and detour protocol, emergency contacts and priority passage arrangements.

4. Deliver Mathehun Bridge to a published schedule. Confirm design, procurement and financing; mobilise the contractor; apply climate-resilient engineering and road-safety standards; and independently certify milestones.
5. Complete the corridor, not isolated structures. Resolve outstanding contractual and financing constraints on unfinished sections and connect bridge works to approaches, culverts, drainage, road safety and maintenance.
6. Audit ferries and crossings. Publish a verified inventory and rapidly repair, safely recommission or replace strategic ferries, subject to independent mechanical and safety certification.
7. Protect livelihoods during works. Maintain market access, consult transporters and communities, minimise avoidable closure, provide safe pedestrian movement and manage environmental and social risks.
8. Create public accountability. Release monthly physical and financial progress updates and hold quarterly district review meetings with Parliament, Council, chiefdoms, women, youth, persons with disabilities, transporters, traders, farmers, civil society and the media.

7. Proposed 12-Month Government Action Framework

Timeframe	Priority action	Lead institutions	Public proof of progress
0–30 days	Joint inspection; contract and finance review; ferry inventory; emergency traffic and referral plan	SLRA, Finance, works ministry, NDMA, MoH/DHMT, Council	Published baseline dashboard, route map, contacts and dated decisions
31–90 days	Funded mobilisation; bypass grading and drainage; safe interim crossing; ferry repairs or replacement procurement	SLRA and relevant transport authorities	Site mobilisation, certified works, safety notices and expenditure update
3–6 months	Mathehun substructure/superstructure milestones; priority road, culvert and approach works	SLRA, contractor, supervising engineer	Engineer-certified milestones, photos, payment and variance report
6–12 months	Complete agreed bridge/road packages; independent safety inspection; maintenance and handover plan	SLRA, Council, Road Maintenance Fund and oversight bodies	Completion certificates, road-safety audit, maintenance budget and citizen review

8. Financing, Procurement and Accountability

Urgency must not weaken due process. It requires faster coordination, clearer decisions and stronger disclosure. Government should identify which interventions can be funded through existing appropriations, the Road Maintenance Fund, emergency allocations or approved development financing; distinguish maintenance from capital reconstruction; and prevent fragmented contracts from leaving critical approaches or drainage unfunded.

For each package, public reporting should show: approved contract value and variations; amount certified and paid; physical progress; elapsed time; safeguards and compensation status where applicable; revised completion date; reasons for delay; and corrective action. Independent technical verification and citizen monitoring should complement—not replace—formal Government supervision.

9. A Constructive Call to National Leadership

SEND Sierra Leone recognises Government's announced investments in Karene, including Tomparie Bridge, the planned Kambia–Tomparie–Kamakwie road, Kabba Ferry Bridge and the stated intention to begin Mathehun Bridge construction.[4][11] These commitments show that Government understands the district's strategic importance. The present appeal is to join these projects into a coherent network, protect access while construction proceeds and make delivery visible to citizens.

The people of Karene should not have to choose between a dangerous crossing and an unaffordable detour; between selling produce at a loss and watching it spoil; or between seeking urgent care and waiting for the road. This is why action cannot be postponed to the completion of another planning cycle.

Publish the plan. Secure the crossing. Mobilise the works. Restore the ferries. Protect emergency access. Complete the corridor. Report progress to the people.

10. Conclusion

Restoring the Makeni–Kamakwie corridor is one of the clearest opportunities to convert national policy into visible development in Karene District. The intervention would protect lives, strengthen Feed Salone, widen access to education and health, improve Government and NGO delivery, unlock tourism and enterprise, and restore confidence in public commitments.

SEND Sierra Leone respectfully calls on the Government of Sierra Leone to treat the corridor as a time-bound national delivery priority and to work with Karene District Council, Parliament, communities, civil society, development partners and the private sector until safe, reliable and all-weather connectivity is achieved

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