

IN CONVERSATION WITH
YVONNE AKI-SAWYERR

Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr OBE was Mayor of Freetown from May 2018 to February 2023 and was re-elected to serve for a second term in June 2023.

Freetown's Innovative and Collaborative Climate Agenda



Freetown's first Climate Action Plan was developed in 2020 based on international standards such as C40 Cities' Climate Action Planning Framework, set to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement—to limit global warming to 1.5°C and strengthen climate resilience by 2050. It comes after the broader "Transform Freetown—Transforming Lives" agenda, in which climate action is one of four strategic clusters.

Apart from climate change, Freetown also faces several competing needs such as health and sanitation, economic growth, and air pollution. Nevertheless, you have championed the climate change agenda and prioritised it for the city. Please share with us what were the challenges of developing the first Freetown Climate Action Plan?

When I campaigned to be Mayor in 2018, I presented a platform that prioritised addressing the consequences of climate change, especially those that were already being experienced by residents of Freetown—flooding and landslides. As we subsequently developed the Transform Freetown agenda, resilience was elevated as one of the strategic clusters, with environmental management and climate action at its core.

The preparation of our strategy towards climate action, which ultimately informed the Climate Action Plan in 2020, required an institutionalised response to climate change. From a policy leadership standpoint, we first established a Climate Change and Disaster Response Committee and later created a dedicated Climate Change and Disaster Response Department within the Council.

Developing the Climate Action Plan itself was challenging. While we had a broad understanding of the climate issues, particularly from an adaptation perspective, there was a lack of detailed, evidence-based information. Much of the existing knowledge was anecdotal. For this reason, the formulation of the plan required robust research which was intense and time consuming. We were thrilled that at this stage, C40 Cities provided us with a technical expert who was able to dedicate time and expertise to support the research and analysis process.



The Climate Action Plan represents a refinement and expansion, a more detailed and data-driven articulation of interventions and areas of focus already established in the Transform Freetown Agenda.



How did the City of Freetown leverage existing key policies and frameworks, like the Transform Freetown Agenda and the #FreetownTheTreeTown community tree planting programme, to set the climate agenda and inspire change?

The Transform Freetown Agenda was published in 2019, a year prior to the launch of the Climate Action Plan. On 3 January 2020, the #FreetownTheTreeTown community tree planting programme was initiated. These interventions predated the Climate Action Plan but served as important foundations for its development.

The relationship between the Climate Action Plan, and the Transform Freetown Agenda is direct and evident. Most of the measures outlined in the plan originated from priorities set within the Transform Freetown Agenda, particularly in relation to resilience and environmental management. The overarching strategy for climate action is therefore built on both: the #FreetownTheTreeTown initiative as a core intervention, and the Transform Freetown Agenda as the structural framework.

Also incorporated within the framework were green urban mobility, and sanitation and waste management, which have since been embedded in Freetown's strategy for climate action. In this sense, the Climate Action Plan represents a refinement and expansion, a more detailed and data-driven articulation of interventions and areas of focus already established in the Transform Freetown Agenda.

It has been six years since the announcement of the Transform Freetown Agenda, and almost five years since the release of the Climate Action Plan. How is the progress of climate action in Freetown?

Implementation has been progressing, though not without challenges. For example, while the feasibility study for the proposed cable car system has been completed, we have yet to secure government support to mobilise



Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr OBE planting a tree as part of Freetown's urban greening drive.
Source: © Freetown City Council | Capital of Sierra Leone

the necessary financing. Similarly, for our carbon credit accreditation process, which is a key component of our climate strategy, we have elected to take an important step forward even amidst ongoing financial constraints. Our progress is measured annually, with reports aligned to the Climate Action Plan, ensuring both transparency and accountability in Freetown's climate journey.

We are making notable progress along many fronts, including with our tree planting initiative. Among the more than 1.2 million trees planted, we have had an impressive 82% survival rate. In Kroo Bay, one of Freetown's most flood- and erosion-prone communities, residents have planted over 75,000 mangroves with the support of the World Bank and Bloomberg Philanthropies. This initiative is restoring vital natural buffers, enhancing community participation, raising awareness, and creating cooler, greener neighbourhoods, while also providing protection against mudslides and flooding.

Our flood mitigation programme continues to thrive through strong youth engagement, with community-led teams mobilised to clear and maintain drainage systems, thereby strengthening local resilience and reducing disaster risks in vulnerable areas.

In collaboration with C40 Cities' Breathe Cities and African Cities for Clean Air, we are advancing air quality management by establishing pollution baseline levels and deploying low-cost sensors across the city. This will help us identify pollution hotspots and better assess residents' exposure to harmful air pollutants. With support from the Rockefeller Foundation's "Enhancing Heat-Health Resilience" project, we are also integrating climate and health data collection, delivering community training, and fostering inter-agency collaboration to address the growing risks of extreme heat.



Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyer OBE visiting the Kingdom Faecal Sludge Treatment Plant in Freetown.
Source: © Freetown City Council | Capital of Sierra Leone

Furthermore, the introduction of the 2024 New Sanitation By-laws marks a landmark reform, modernising and formalising waste management in the city through Public-Private Partnerships. This is an essential part of our broader climate action interventions.

Finally, we continue to raise public awareness on the protection of water catchment areas and are implementing slope stabilisation measures to safeguard communities from flooding, landslides, and water insecurity.

#FreetownTheTreeTown adopted a first-of-its-kind “pay-to-grow” scheme where city residents partnered with private and carbon markets, which helped to fund the planting and monitoring of trees and mangroves. Similarly, the Freetown Heat Action Plan was launched in 2025, in conjunction with the first African Urban Heat Summit, to bring together city leaders and climate experts from African cities to collaborate on solutions to mitigate rising heat across African cities.

What is the role of stakeholder partnerships in advancing climate action for the City of Freetown? How has engagement with different stakeholders transformed Freetown’s approach to climate change?

Freetown City Council remains severely under-resourced, reflecting broader economic constraints, limited local revenue mobilisation, and restrictions on borrowing or accessing capital markets. In this context, partnerships have been transformative.

For example, through the Bloomberg Philanthropies’ Mayors Challenge, we were able to secure the funds required for accrediting the #FreetownTheTreeTown initiative. This was a prerequisite step for participating in the carbon market, and has subsequently paved the way for our long-term financial sustainability. And, with support from the UK Government’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), we constructed the city’s first wastewater treatment plant, which enables the conversion of faecal sludge into briquettes, thereby reducing reliance on charcoal and firewood for cooking. Likewise, collaboration with the C40 Cities Finance Facility facilitated the completion of the cable car feasibility study.

Without these strategic partnerships, the scope and scale of our climate action efforts would have been significantly diminished. They have enabled us to move beyond ambition to implementation, and to demonstrate that with the right alliances, cities can deliver impactful and sustainable climate solutions.



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Our heat action initiatives are primarily directed towards vulnerable groups, particularly residents of informal settlements.



Temperatures in informal settlements in Freetown can rise up to 6°C higher than surrounding regions. The City of Freetown's Heat Action Plan therefore sets out to equitably and sustainably combat heat risks, while bolstering urban resilience, particularly for the most vulnerable. How does the City of Freetown ensure that the Heat Action Plan enhances heat resilience for all of Freetown's urban population?

Our heat action initiatives are primarily directed towards vulnerable groups, particularly residents of informal settlements. As the area of urban heat adaptation is relatively new, our approach has necessarily involved testing and refining interventions. For instance, we introduced shade covers in markets to protect informal sector workers, especially women traders. The initial design proved effective during the dry season but was unable to withstand wind and rain during the rainy season. A redesigned model has since been developed and successfully tested, continuing to prioritise the protection of these workers.

We have also implemented measures related to roofing and the expansion of urban tree cover. Heat-mapping exercises identified the locations of urban heat islands and highlighted the heightened impact of corrugated iron roofing in informal settlements with minimal vegetation. These findings informed targeted investments in tree planting and greening in those areas. In addition, we set objectives for the creation of green corridors. While implementation has faced delays, other interventions have been successful. For example, the construction of a heat pavilion has provided both a place of respite from extreme heat and a visible demonstration of climate-responsive urban design. Furthermore, pilot tests of roof-cooling materials have shown promise and are now being evaluated for potential scale-up.

Collectively, these efforts represent an evolving, evidence-based approach to reducing heat risks and protecting vulnerable urban populations.



Freetown the Treetown was a 2023 Finalist for the Earthshot Prize.
Source: *The Earthshot Prize*

How do you hope to see Freetown transform in the next 5 to 10 years?

Looking ahead, gaining authority over land-use planning and building permitting will enable significant expansion of green spaces across the city. I also anticipate the Freetown Cable Car to become operational and two wastewater treatment plants to be constructed. In addition, the mechanisation of briquette production is expected to substantially reduce reliance on wood and charcoal for cooking—cutting pollution, lowering emissions, and preserving tree cover.

From a sanitation perspective, the new by-laws should, within the next five years, be firmly embedded in practice. Recycling plants currently under development are expected to become operational, supporting the conversion of the city's two existing dump sites into material recovery facilities complemented by sanitary landfills. Together, these developments would represent a profound transformation of Freetown's environmental and urban landscape. 🌱