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Press Statement for Immediate Release

Freetown, 2nd June 2022: NEW's Position on the Provisional Results of the Controversial 2021 Mid-Term Population and Housing Census

National Election Watch (NEW) is aware that on the 31st of May, 2022, **Statistics Sierra Leone** (Stats-SL) announced the Provisional Results of the December 2021 Mid-Term Population and Housing Census.

- NEW has consistently raised concerns about the flawed nature of the Mid-Term Census project. In our press release dated 26th July 2020, NEW questioned the lack of inclusivity of 'all voices and opinions (political groups, civil society etc.) in the census – a critical feature of democratic governance. NEW further highlighted issues around the 'ever-growing trends of government actions that keep casting shadows of doubt on critical governance events and processes and how such actions set a negative tone to future works'. The Government's unwavering prioritization of a Mid-Term Census at the height of a health pandemic (COVID-19) was particularly concerning.
- In another press release dated 26th October 2020, NEW noted that while it agreed with, HE 'the President on the value a census brings to national development, NEW believes that the reasons for such a process must be transparent and clearly communicated to the nation'. NEW in the same press release stated that 'the outcome of a Mid-Term census to be held in April 2021 (after postponement) will not be available for public use till sometime in 2022 when we shall be holding Local Council Elections and General Elections in 2023. This presupposes the fact that the outcome of this census will not add any value to the development planning of this government as espoused by the President in his proclamation and no government will re-focus its Development Plans in the 4th year and yield the desired results when all attention would be shifted to campaigns'. Unfortunately, the required communication and consultation needed to build consensus among actors were never properly sought, before, during, and after the counting. Besides, there were widespread protests by some opposition political parties, including (at the eve of the census) the withdrawal of funding and technical support by the World Bank; a number of citizens equally raised concerns that even though they were willing to be counted during the exercise, they never saw an enumerator.
- Unsurprisingly, the Provisional Result published by Stats-SL falls squarely within the concerns raised by NEW from the beginning. Relative to the 2015 Population and Housing Census, the 2021 Mid-Term Census, the population in some districts in the northern and western regions dropped drastically while districts in the south and east had unprecedented population increases, raising questions on sharp regional variations. While we acknowledge

populations can change over time, the gravity of the change within such a short period is hard to understand.

- In Bombali for instance, a district which had a population of **606,544** in the 2015 census, dropped to **387,236**, representing a 36% reduction in the district's population. Port Loko which had a population **615,376** in 2015 dropped to **528,038**, representing a 14% decline in population. NEW however notes that after the 2015 Population and Housing Census, Karene, a new district was created drawing population from Bombali and Port Loko District. The Western Area Urban, which had a population of **1,055,964** in the 2015 census, dropped to **606,701**, representing a 43% drop. This is especially striking, given the accepted fact that Freetown continues to see an influx of new settlements almost daily.
- NEW notes that Western Area Urban (Freetown) had a Voter Registration (adults 18 years and above) of **606,939** in 2017, while the 2021 Mid-Term Census Results indicated a population **606,701** (citizens and non-citizens). It is difficult to understand how the new population of Freetown in 2021 is less than the registered voters in 2017. This analysis draws attention to the fact that around half of the population, which is typically considered to be under the age of 18, is not accounted for.
- Conversely, in Bo, a district which had a population of **575,478** in 2015 increased to **756,975** in the 2021 Mid-Term Census, indicating a 32% increase. In Bonthe District, which had a population of **200,781**, increased to **297,561** representing a 48% increase. In addition, Kenema District which had a population of **609, 891** in 2015 also increased to **772,472** representing a 27% increase.

Therefore:

- Consistent with our position in 2020, before the commencement of the census exercise, NEW is convinced that the Mid-Term Census despite any well-intended purposes, remains a flawed process and cannot be the basis for future planning and growth of Sierra Leone. Moreover, the process remains controversial, lacks inclusivity, and was ill-prepared for, as noted by a World Bank press statement dated 7th December 2021, which stated that '... several critical action points require further technical work to be satisfactorily addressed, including evaluation of the pilot census, the field operation plan for the enumeration, and ensuring enumerators are adequately trained. All these outstanding actions are necessary and must be addressed prior to commencing data collection to minimize the risk of inadequate and poor data quality. There is insufficient time between now and December 10, 2021 to satisfactorily address all pending actions'.
- NEW further notes that the current status of the Mid-Term Census data defeats the purpose of the President's proclamation of a Mid-Term Census designed 'in order to help us plan properly, ensure equitable distribution of resources, and foster economic and social development'. Based on this analysis, it is clear that such data is not reflective of the population of Sierra Leone and has the potential to further exacerbate the already tense ethno-political divisions. Using such results will have multiple, long-term implications and consequences for political processes and development interventions across the country.

- Considering all these issues surrounding the Mid-Term Population and Housing Census results, NEW calls on the Government to revisit or completely declare the provisional results of the Mid-Term Census null and void and not to use this data for political and developmental purposes. NEW also welcomes the opportunity to discuss the way forward with the Government together with other stakeholders, including but not limited to representatives of civil society, media, independent experts, community and religious leaders, political parties, and the international community.

National Election Watch is a coalition of local and international organizations in Sierra Leone with a common objective of supporting free, fair, and peaceful elections. NEW will continue to follow the process and will report its findings to the public accordingly.