

Improving the Regulation of Packaged Water in Sierra Leone



Packaged water is an opportunity to provide consumers with cheap, accessible drinking water. However, regulations and an efficient monitoring system are needed to ensure its quality.

- The packaged water industry in Sierra Leone is expanding. The benefit of accessible low-cost water is balanced against the stress on the municipal water systems providing the water for the packages, the questionable quality of the water, and the environmental effects of the disposable plastic packages.
- The current consensus is that the packaged water industry in Sierra Leone is not appropriately regulated to protect public health. The legal framework is outdated and incomplete and there are gaps in institutional responsibilities among the various governmental actors regulating the sector.
- The Water Institute is partnering with a local NGO, Focus 1000, on a DFID funded project to improve the packaged water industry.
- The project focuses on reviewing the existing legal framework, developing draft regulations for the industry, and training regulators and producers in ways to improve the packaged water industry.

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Baseline Assessment

A baseline survey of 77 packaged water businesses throughout Sierra Leone revealed confusion and inconsistencies within the packaged water industry regarding what legal institution was responsible for licensing and regulating the industry.

The majority (74%) of surveyed producers use the municipal water supply as their raw water source. All producers reported using some form of water treatment before packaging, however maintenance and functionality of the treatment equipment was not investigated.

Only 60% of surveyed packaged water producers reported testing the quality of their finished products. Site inspections revealed only 70% of packaged water businesses had hand washing facilities.

Consumer Perception

Focus groups of consumers were carried out in both rural and urban areas to determine public perception of the industry.

Many households purchase packaged water due to the unreliable supply of public tap water. Packaged water is generally perceived to be of higher quality than tap water.

For sachets, consumers usually bite the corner of the package and drink directly from the sachet. This highlights two health risks: one related to the quality of the packaging and ink, and another concerning possible contamination on the exterior packaging.

Legal Analysis

The existing legislation outlines overlapping mandates for various institutions within Sierra Leone. However, the Public Health Act (1960) gives a clear mandate to the Ministry of Health and Sanitation to promote and protect public health. They have the legal power to develop regulations for the packaged water industry.

Draft regulations for the packaged water industry will be developed to help clarify and coordinate the various roles of institutions within the government to achieve an efficient regulatory system for the industry.

Water Quality

Water quality testing will be conducted to assess the risk to public health at various points along the supply chain including the raw water supply, packaged water products, point of sale, and the exterior packaging.

Water samples will be tested for physical, chemical, and microbiological parameters.

Development Phase

Guidelines, manuals and trainings will be developed to help inform both regulators and producers regarding safe production of packaged water and proper monitoring.

A social media campaign will be developed based on the results of the focus groups to help educate consumers about the benefits and risks associated with packaged water.