

# THE ROLE OF NGOS IN POVERTY REDUCTION: EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF UMMAH WELFARE TRUST'S PROGRAM IN SIERRA LEONE

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, NGOs have emerged as important institutions assisting governments, especially in poverty reduction. While many studies have focused on NGOs' roles in social welfare, this study examines the role of NGOs in poverty reduction by evaluating the effectiveness of the Ummah Welfare Trust (UWT) program in reducing extreme poverty in Sierra Leone. We employed a qualitative research approach, gathering data from in-depth interviews, peer-reviewed journals, reports, and online resources. We analyzed the data interactively using NVivo 12 Plus software, based by Richard M. Steers' effectiveness theory across three dimensions: integration, adaptation, and goal attainment. Our findings reveal that: (1) Integration – UWT has effectively woven its poverty alleviation program by managing policy outreach and enhancing communication while fostering public consensus. (2) Adaptation – UWT has refined its strategies through capacity building by localizing its programs to address the local community's needs. Lastly, (3) Goal attainment – although UWT is yet to achieve its objectives, it has significantly impacted extreme poverty reduction in Sierra Leone, with the rate decreasing from 26.6% in 2020 to 24.5% in 2024. This study offers evidence of how NGOs contribute to poverty reduction, highlighting their essential role in supporting governments' efforts in nation building.

## INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, poverty has been a central topic of discussion in both academia and society. This is evident in the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals, where Goal #1 is "Zero Poverty." The World Bank defines poverty as living on less than \$2.15 per day, while in the Africa Sustainable Development Report, (2024) it is defined as a lack of necessities such as clothing, food, energy, water, sanitation, and shelter, as well as the quality and outcomes of health, education, and employment. According to the



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World Bank, about 8.5% of the global population, nearly 700 million people, live in extreme poverty, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa and conflict-affected regions (World Bank, 2024). Unfortunately, Sierra Leone is among the nations where individuals endure extreme poverty. In 2023, Sierra Leone ranked the second-poorest country globally based on GDP per capita (Hashim, 2023) and had the second-highest inflation rate in Africa, averaging 47.6% (World Bank Open Data, 2023). Based on data from the world poverty review, in 2018, Sierra Leone recorded a poverty rate of 56.8%, the highest among West African countries, surpassing Guinea (43.7%), Togo (45.5%), Ivory Coast (39.5%), and Niger (40.8%). The Sierra Leone government has implemented various initiatives to address extreme poverty, such as The Agenda for Prosperity, the National Social Protection Strategy of Sierra Leone, and Sierra Leone's Medium Term National Development Plan 2024 – 2030.

Despite the government's earlier efforts, extreme poverty continues to be a significant concern, as shown in Figure 1.

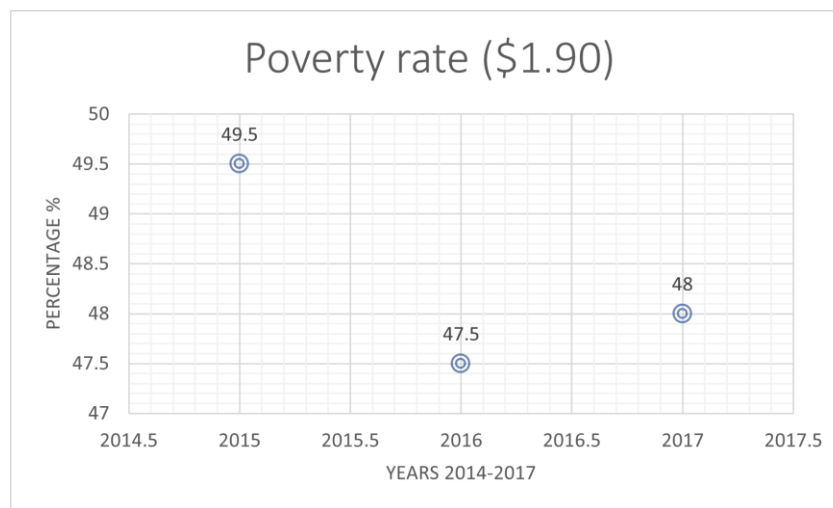


Figure 1. International Poverty Rate in Sierra Leone (\$1.90)  
Source: (Aikins, 2024), processed by the authors using Excel

Based on Figure 1, the national poverty rate fluctuated from 2015 to 2017. From 2015 to 2016, Sierra Leone experienced a decline in the poverty rate; however, it increased by 0.5% in 2017. This indicates that the government's initiatives have not significantly impacted the fight against poverty. To address these challenges, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Ummah Welfare Trust (UWT) have intervened to bridge the gap. UWT has made substantial contributions to various initiatives in Sierra Leone, including school construction, well drilling, educational support, and empowering instructors and community leaders, aiming to alleviate extreme poverty and foster sustainable development through Islamic social financing.

Previous scholars have shown a growing interest in the role of NGOs in reducing extreme poverty across developing countries, especially in contexts where state capacity is limited. For example, Fuseini et al. (2022) found that community-based NGO programs in Ghana significantly enhanced food security and income generation through skills training and microfinance initiatives. Similarly, Hossen (2021) emphasized that in Bangladesh, NGO-led education and health programs have directly contributed to poverty reduction by improving human capital and reducing household vulnerability. In Uganda, Faridah et al. (2023) noted that the effectiveness of NGOs in rural poverty alleviation



depends on strong local engagement and tailored interventions that reflect community needs. However, not all studies present purely positive outcomes. For instance, Dube (2025) argued that in Zimbabwe, some NGO programs fail to create sustainable change due to donor dependency and a lack of coordination with local governments. In the context of Sierra Leone, Kargbo et al. (2017) highlighted the significant role of smallholder farming supported by NGOs in poverty eradication efforts, while Bangura & Kim, (2017) demonstrated that NGO investment in education has long-term impacts on reducing poverty. These findings underscore that while NGOs play a vital role in poverty alleviation, their effectiveness depends on factors such as local ownership, strategic policy alignment, and adaptability to specific socio-economic conditions.

While there has been a growing body of research on poverty reduction strategies in developing countries, studies specifically examining how NGO-led interventions contribute to extreme poverty reduction in Sierra Leone remain limited. Existing literature has largely focused on the role of NGOs in enhancing food security, improving income generation, expanding access to education and healthcare, and contributing to poverty reduction through community engagement. However, the effectiveness of poverty reduction programs implemented by NGOs, particularly in fragile post-crisis contexts like Sierra Leone, has received little scholarly attention. This gap is especially relevant given the increasing reliance on NGOs to provide essential services in areas where government capacity is limited. Therefore, this study addresses the following research question: How effective is the Ummah Welfare Trust (UWT) program in reducing extreme poverty in Sierra Leone? The novelty of this research lies in its focused evaluation of UWT's approach as a charitable organization working through education, food support, and localized poverty intervention strategies. Unlike prior studies, this research explores UWT's program through the lens of policy implementation and adaptability, offering a grassroots-level perspective that has not yet been explored. The study is particularly timely, as Sierra Leone continues to recover from the compounded effects of economic hardship, health crises like the Ebola pandemic, and high unemployment rates—all of which contribute to persistent extreme poverty. This research contributes to the academic literature by offering empirical insights into the role of NGOs in achieving Sustainable Development Goal #1 (No Poverty) in low-income, post-crisis nations. It also offers practical guidance for policymakers, development practitioners, and non-governmental actors seeking to design more effective, locally relevant poverty reduction strategies.

This study examines the effectiveness of the UWT Program in reducing extreme poverty in Sierra Leone. To achieve this, it applies Richard M. Steers's theory of policy effectiveness to assess the success of policy implementation, considering factors such as policy substance, context, affected interests, types of benefits, desired changes, and available resources. The study employs three key indicators—integration, adaptation, and goal attainment—to demonstrate the UWT program's effectiveness in addressing extreme poverty. This theory is well-suited for the research, as it provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating UWT's operations, interactions with stakeholders, staff, and beneficiaries, and its ability to adapt to external shocks and challenges.



## METHOD

The study employed a qualitative method with a case study approach. According to Creswell (2014), the qualitative approach is vital for understanding and interpreting the meanings of things in their natural environments. Meanwhile, the case study technique thoroughly explores a current occurrence (the "case") within its real-world environment (Rashid, Rashid, Warraich, Sabir, & Waseem, 2019). In this study, the Ummah Welfare Trust (UWT) is chosen as the case. This method is preferred for acquiring detailed, context-specific information crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of the UWT's poverty alleviation program in Sierra Leone. This research utilized both primary and secondary data for analysis. Primary data, known as firsthand information acquired directly from sources (Ajayi, 2023), was gathered through in-depth interviews with key participants. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, which involves the selection of individuals according to specific criteria (Stratton, 2024), such as familiarity with the UWT program and years spent working with the program to ensure their relevance to the study's focus. The interviews were conducted with a staff member, a stakeholder, and an employee to gather varied perspectives on the program, thus ensuring the collection of precise information essential for understanding individual experiences and insights. Conversely, secondary data, known as data collected from existing sources (Bargagliotti & Gould, 2022), was obtained from scientific articles, newspapers such as Sierraloaded and The Calabash, policy reports, government and international reports such as the UN, and the World Bank, as well as government policies and strategies targeting the achievement of SDG #1.

This study involved analyzing the collected data through the interactive model of qualitative data analysis as outlined by Miles et al., (2014), which encompasses four phases: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The model was selected for its ability to offer a detailed step-by-step framework that enables individuals to reach valid conclusions. All the data were imported into NVivo 12 Plus software. NVivo is a collection of tools designed to assist in the systematic analysis of qualitative data, enabling the derivation of valid conclusions (Dollah, Abduh, & Rosmaladewi, 2017). During the initial phase: data collection – all imported data were systematically categorized in NVivo 12 plus, drawing on key themes identified from primary sources via interviews, as well as secondary sources and document files. During the second phase: data reduction – all significant statements from both primary and secondary sources were narrowed down and categorized into themes related to the Richard M. Steers policy theory, specifically focusing on integration, adaptation, and goal attainment. In the third phase, data presentation, the coded data were presented through visual representations. The percentages displayed in the figure were automatically generated by NVivo 12 Plus, which computes the proportion of references categorized under each theme in relation to the total coded references. The visualization illustrates the percentage distribution of coding references, highlighting the contribution of each category to the overall analysis. In the final stage, (4) conclusion and verification, the findings were validated through the formulation of sound conclusions based on the data collected. The interactive model is shown in Figure 2 below:



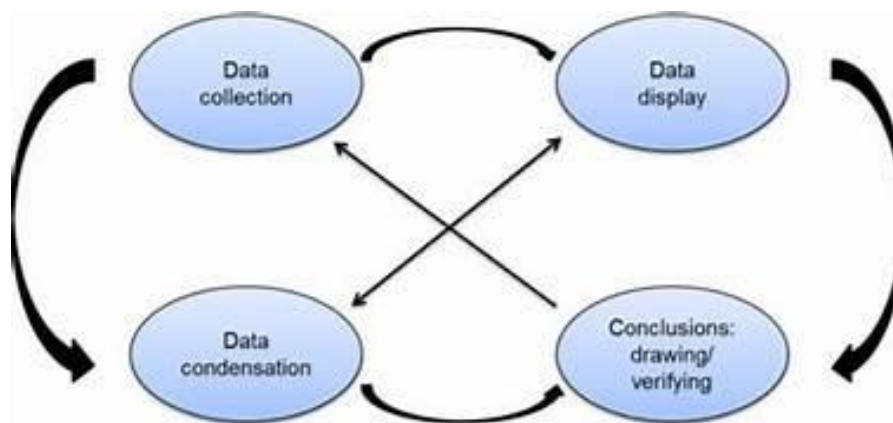


Figure 2: Interactive Model of Qualitative Data Analysis  
Source: (Miles et al., 2014)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The theory of policy effectiveness and the Ummah Welfare Trust program in Sierra Leone

This research utilized the effectiveness theory developed by Robert M. Steers. This theory was chosen for its significance in evaluating the effectiveness of the UWT program in reducing extreme poverty in Sierra Leone. The Effectiveness Theory by Robert M. Steers is a framework that emphasizes an organization's ability to efficiently acquire and use limited and essential resources to achieve its goals while continually addressing the needs of key stakeholders (Steers, Mowday, & Shapiro, 2004), including employees, beneficiaries, and the operating environment. Moreover, the theory asserts that for an organization to thrive, it must balance internal procedures with external outcomes to achieve long-term success Nyeleker & Suswanta, (2025). Steers' organizational effectiveness theory elaborates that effectiveness involves not only achieving results but also includes factors such as employee satisfaction, the organization's resilience to shocks, its adaptability to change, and its capacity to maintain strong relationships with external stakeholders. The Ummah Welfare Trust and its stakeholders must understand the population's needs, promote empowerment, and adjust the program based on feedback and changing circumstances. The effectiveness theory underscores the importance of integration and adaptation for the success of programs like UWT. This illustration exemplifies the effectiveness of the theory and the outcomes associated with the Ummah Welfare Trust's program designed to alleviate extreme poverty.



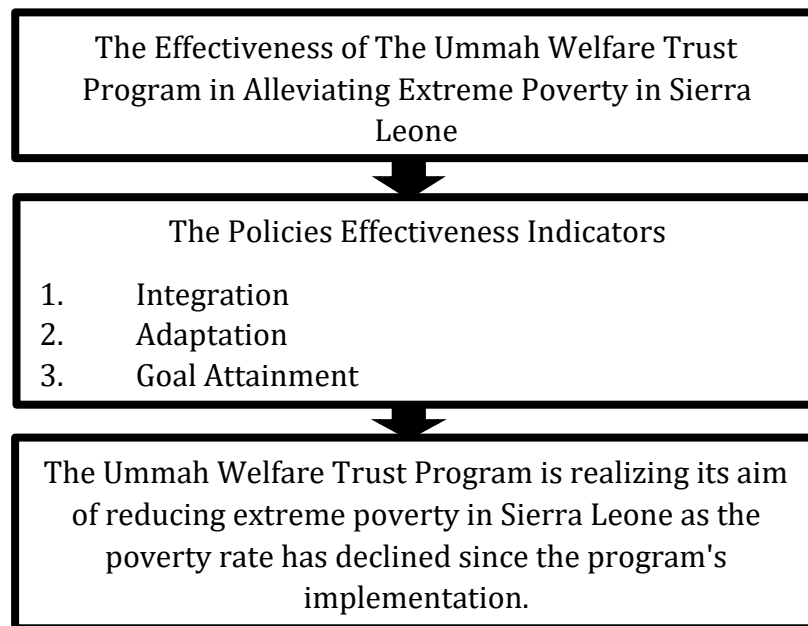


Figure 3: The theory of policy effectiveness and the UWT program  
Source: (Steers et al., 2004)

This study employs effectiveness theory to evaluate the UWT program's success in achieving its objectives, concentrating on three key indicators: integration, adaptation, and goal attainment. Integration, the first indicator, pertains to the Ummah Welfare Trust program's capacity to enhance the socialization process. Adaptation, the second indicator, underscores the criteria for procurement and staffing procedures. The third indicator, goal attainment, signifies the realization of the program's primary objectives.

### The Ummah Welfare Trust program in Sierra Leone Integration

The first indicator of the effectiveness theory is integration, evaluated through the program's ability to improve communication, foster consensus among stakeholders, and manage outreach (Kann, 2016). Integration involves the socialization of the program across various sectors, including government, stakeholders, and local communities, to implement the program and oversee outreach (Van Duijn et al., 2018). This research examines the integration process of the UWT program in mitigating extreme poverty in Sierra Leone. The research employed crosstab analysis in NVivo 12 Plus to assess, categorize, and visualize the results, as demonstrated in Figure 4 below:

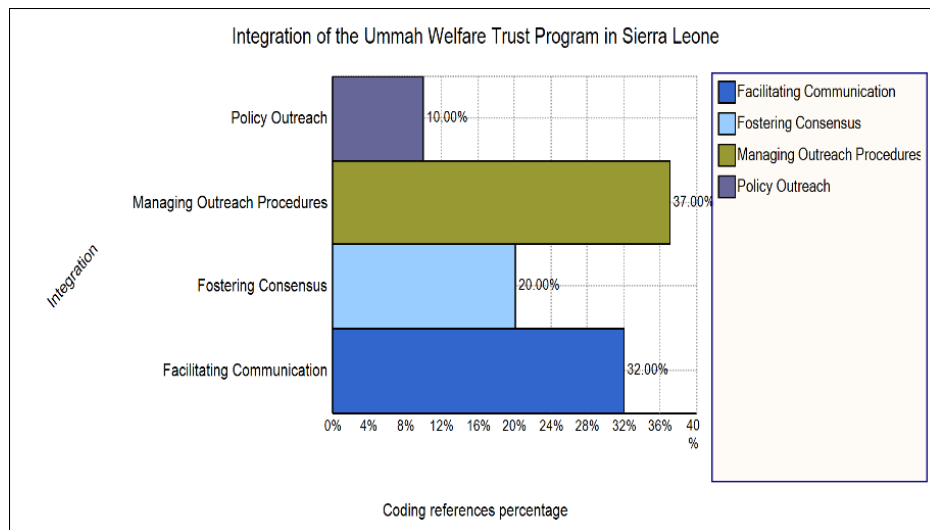


Figure 4: Integration of the Ummah Welfare Trust Program in Sierra Leone  
Sources: Processed by the authors using NVIVO 12 Plus

The crosstab analysis conducted using NVivo 12 Plus reveals that managing outreach procedures accounts for 37%, highlighting the significant emphasis of UWT programs on effectively reaching their target audience. Outreach management involves mobilizing and administering resources to ensure that programs reach the most vulnerable populations in a timely and organized manner (Yang & Rajgopal, 2021). This high percentage is attributed to UWT's extensive operations, which span nearly every region of the country, as noted by Muslim Media Sierra Leone. As of September 2024, UWT has supported over 35,000 students across 14 districts and employed 1,500 teachers nationwide (Mansaray, 2024). In Sierra Leone, managing effective outreach encounters challenges stemming from geographical, economic, and infrastructural constraints (Gbla, Munu, & Yusuf, 2024). Despite these obstacles, UWT has made significant strides to enhance the effectiveness of its outreach strategies, promoting widespread adoption and impact in poverty reduction initiatives. Anggriawan, (2015) emphasized that effective policy management is crucial for ensuring that poverty reduction efforts successfully reach their intended beneficiaries.

Facilitating communication is the second most significant factor in the analysis, accounting for 32%. One informant, a teacher, stated that:

*"UWT employs various communication methods, including a system that enables direct communication between teachers and staff in the UK."*

This indicates that the program effectively fosters communication among all stakeholders, including beneficiaries, staff, and partners, to ensure the program's smooth operation. Communication is acknowledged as a vital tool for individuals and organizations to achieve their objectives (Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, & Werder, 2018). UWT ensures the smooth flow of information through effective communication. In Sierra Leone, programs like UWT rely heavily on community engagement to understand local needs and develop appropriate solutions, making clear and open communication essential. This guarantees that all participants in the program fully understand its objectives, reducing misunderstandings. As a result, the program operates efficiently and



effectively addresses community needs. Hidayat & Dariyanto (2023) emphasized that ineffective policy communication often obstructs poverty alleviation efforts.

Furthermore, fostering consensus accounts for 20% of the coding in NVivo, which is relatively low compared to the first two parameters. This parameter reflects the UWT program's ability to unite individuals from various backgrounds, including government officials, community leaders, stakeholders, and local members, to reach an agreement on the program's objectives and implementation strategies. In a country with significant multicultural and socioeconomic diversity, like Sierra Leone (Roy, 2024) Building consensus is essential by integrating universal values with regional cultures. (Steel, 2024). This approach facilitates dialogue, exchange, and cooperation among different groups. One informant who is staff at UWT stated that

*"UWT implements its programs based on the consensus of local authorities and the local people, ensuring that all their initiatives are aligned with the needs of the community."*

Nonetheless, the low percentage associated with this parameter may be attributed to the diversity of stakeholders within the country. The UWT program should enhance its ability to foster consensus and establish a more unified approach to extreme poverty reduction, ensuring alignment among all stakeholders. Handoko et al., (2020) emphasized that a weak consensus can hinder policy success, ultimately reducing its overall impact.

Lastly, policy outreach had the lowest percentage in the crosstab analysis, accounting for only 10%. This parameter reflects the UWT program's efforts to engage with government policies and ensure that its activities align with national and local strategies for alleviating extreme poverty. Policy outreach includes advocating for beneficial policies, complying with existing regulations, and ensuring that the program's goals align with government initiatives to reduce extreme poverty (Arimoro, 2023). In the case of UWT, its programs complement the efforts of the Sierra Leone government, particularly in providing free, quality education to underprivileged students across the country (Karim, Zoker, Karimu, & Hassan, 2023). However, the relatively low percentage associated with this parameter suggests that while UWT has engaged with policy frameworks in education, it may be lacking in other areas, which presents an opportunity for further development. Enhancing policy outreach could enable the program to influence national poverty reduction policies, ultimately increasing its overall impact in Sierra Leone. Thun & Manh, (2021) highlighted that collaboration between NGOs and the government enhances community welfare initiatives.

### **The Ummah Welfare Trust program in Sierra Leone Adaptation**

The second indicator of Steers' theory is adaptation, which measures how well a program adjusts to its environment. In this research, this indicator will be used to assess the adaptability of the UWT program in Sierra Leone to the local environment. This can be evaluated through the four parameters of adaptation: local contextualization, flexibility in implementation, feedback mechanisms, and capacity building, as demonstrated in Figure 4 below:





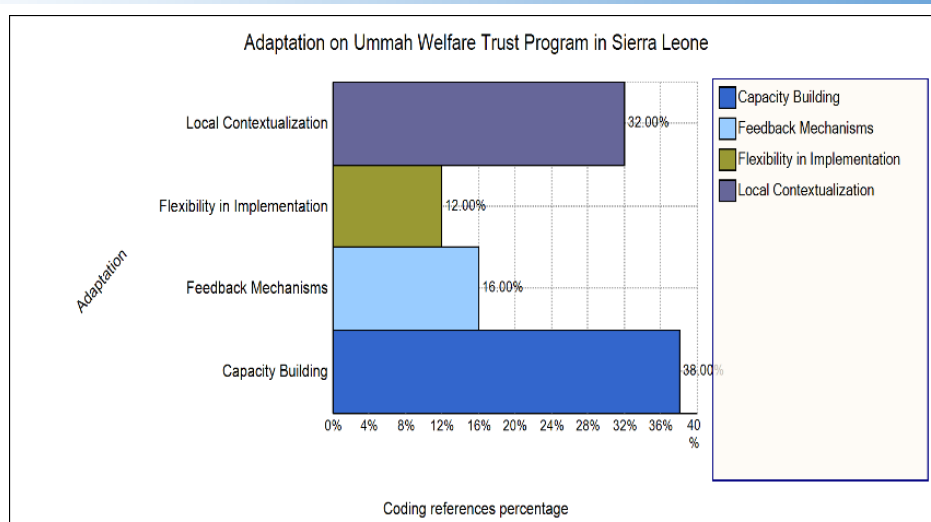


Figure 4: Adaptation of the Ummah Welfare Trust Program in Sierra Leone  
Sources: Processed by the authors using NVIVO 12 Plus

The crosstab analysis reveals that capacity building holds the highest percentage under the adaptation indicator (38%), indicating UWT's significant efforts to equip local staff and communities with essential skills and knowledge. In this context, capacity building encompasses training individuals in project management (Deprez, Busch, Ramirez, Pedrozo Araque, & Bidonde, 2023). UWT provides free education to children from low-income families and ensures effective instruction by conducting weekly training sessions for all teachers. The teacher informant stated that,

*"UWT holds weekly training sessions for all teachers, where they receive guidance on the curriculum for the upcoming week."*

This demonstrates UWT's commitment to delivering high-quality education that prepares students for a better future. Capacity building is essential for long-term success, ensuring program sustainability even after external support is withdrawn (Maponga, Mhazo, & Morse, 2023).

This commitment is further reflected in UWT's income-generating initiatives, such as providing imams with motorbikes and livestock to enable them to generate income independently. Additionally, UWT has contributed to building schools, mosques, and clean water facilities for remote communities (Kamara, 2024). The emphasis on capacity building underscores UWT's commitment to strengthening local systems and empowering residents to manage poverty alleviation efforts independently. Amrudin et al., (2025) highlighting that empowering communities through skill development and economic opportunities is essential for sustainable poverty reduction.

Local contextualization closely follows capacity building at 32%, demonstrating UWT's significant efforts to align its initiatives with the social, cultural, and economic realities of Sierra Leone. Understanding individual needs is essential for any poverty alleviation initiative, as it ensures that proposed solutions are both relevant and acceptable to the target population (Chaigneau, Coulthard, Brown, Daw, & Schulte-Herbrüggen, 2019).

In Sierra Leone, where traditional beliefs, religious practices, and community structures play a vital role in daily life (Pemunta & Tabenyang, 2017). UWT's ability to



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tailor its programs to these local factors enhances its effectiveness. This is evident in its food distribution efforts for students and educators, which reflect an awareness of the economic hardships caused by rising commodity prices (WFP, 2024). The emphasis on local contextualization improves the program's flexibility and adaptability to the population's specific needs, increasing its chances of successfully alleviating extreme poverty. Benjamin, (2024) asserted that inclusive and locally adapted program designs are more effective for reducing poverty.

The feedback mechanism constitutes the third parameter of this indicator, accounting for 16% of the total, which is relatively low compared to the earlier parameters. A feedback system refers to how an organization gathers information and evaluations to enhance its initiatives (UNHCR, 2024). The informant's teacher said:

*"UWT personnel from the UK travel to the country twice a year to gather input from students, educators, and beneficiaries regarding the program's execution. They use this data to improve their programs to better meet the needs of instructors."*

Additionally, the program facilitates sessions for educators to discuss the challenges they face, allowing UWT to identify and address these concerns. The teacher further noted

*"Recently, with the rise in commodity prices, teachers faced difficulties due to low incomes. They brought this to the attention of the appropriate authorities, leading to a 50% increase in their salaries."*

An efficient feedback system enables UWT to continuously improve its operations and address challenges encountered during program execution. While UWT has made efforts in this area, there is still room for improvement, as feedback is currently collected only twice a year. A more frequent and structured feedback system could provide critical insights into the program's efficacy and areas for enhancement. Nesti & Graziano, (2024) highlighted the significance of feedback mechanisms in poverty alleviation policies.

The data in Figure 4 indicate that flexibility in implementation is the least represented component, accounting for only 12%. Despite this, it remains a crucial element of the program's adaptability. This figure reflects UWT's ability to adjust its implementation strategies in response to changing circumstances. Given the evolving socio-economic landscape in Sierra Leone, flexibility enables UWT to modify its strategies, schedules, and resource distribution as needed during program execution.

Adaptability is especially crucial when addressing external challenges such as natural disasters, political instability, and economic fluctuations, which are prevalent in low-income countries like Sierra Leone (Turay & Gbetuwa, 2022). By remaining flexible in its implementation, UWT ensures the ongoing effectiveness and relevance of its interventions in alleviating extreme poverty. Hudson et al. (2019) emphasized that the success of a policy depends not only on the policy itself but also on the support mechanisms provided for its implementation.

### **Goal attainment of the Ummah Welfare Trust program in Sierra Leone**

The final indicator of the theory is goal attainment, which assesses the program's progress in achieving its objectives. This indicator evaluates whether the UWT program has succeeded in alleviating extreme poverty in Sierra Leone. To fulfill this objective, UWT has implemented numerous initiatives since its inception, built facilities such as mosques and schools, provided free, high-quality Islamic education, and supplied clean water to



the local population. UWT has made a significant contribution to impoverished individuals throughout Sierra Leone (Jalloh, 2019). Through its Income Generative Program, UWT has enabled numerous stakeholders to generate income independently (Mansaray, 2024). To assess whether the UWT program has contributed to the reduction of extreme poverty in Sierra Leone, we will analyze the poverty rate in Sierra Leone from 2018 to 2024, as illustrated below:



Figure 5. International Poverty Rate in Sierra Leone at (\$2.15)  
Sources: (World Bank, 2024), processed by the authors using Excel

The data indicates that Sierra Leone's international poverty rate, measured at \$2.15 per day, declined from 2020 to 2024. This suggests that the UWT program has significantly contributed to supporting the government and other initiatives aimed at eradicating extreme poverty in the country. Poverty escalated between 2018 and 2020, primarily due to COVID-19 (Lanau, Grieve, Tengbeh, Enria, & Wayack-Pambé, 2023). Stringent measures were implemented to control human movement and mitigate the effects of the pandemic, resulting in partial or complete lockdowns (Sullivan, 2021), which severely impacted the population of Sierra Leone. In 2023, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 no longer a public health emergency (Duff, 2023). As life returned to normal, poverty rates steadily declined from 26.6% in 2020 to 24.5% in 2024. The consistent reduction in poverty suggests that the UWT program, alongside other initiatives, has effectively alleviated extreme poverty, complementing the measures and policies implemented by the Sierra Leonean government and other poverty alleviation programs.

UWT has played a crucial role in combating extreme poverty by providing essential services, including free, quality education for disadvantaged children, thereby alleviating financial burdens on parents who can reallocate funds previously designated for school fees. As of 2024, UWT serves over 30,000 students through its free education initiative and employs more than 1,500 teachers. Additionally, UWT offers financial assistance to impoverished individuals through commodities or direct cash support to ease their hardships. The organization also empowers widows across the country by providing business funding opportunities. As noted by the stakeholder interviewed,



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*"If a widow or any member of the Muslim community has a viable business proposal, it may be submitted to the program for potential funding."*

This study confirms that UWT, as an NGO, has significantly contributed to the fight against poverty through integration and adaptation strategies. This is evidenced by the decline in the poverty rate from 26.6% in 2020 to 24.5% in 2024. However, this decline is not solely due to UWT's contributions; it also results from government initiatives, such as the implementation of Sierra Leone's Medium Term National Development Plan 2024 – 2030, and other NGO programs aimed at reducing poverty.

## CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the impact of the UWT program on mitigating extreme poverty in Sierra Leone using Robert M. Steers's Policy Theory. The analysis was structured around three principal indicators: integration, adaptation, and goal attainment. The study utilized a qualitative method employing a case study approach, drawing on primary and secondary data from in-depth interviews, scientific journals, international reports, and online sources. The findings indicate that policy integration was highly effective, particularly in managing outreach and facilitating communication through weekly meetings that foster collaboration between the organization and its employees. Policy adaptability was also highly effective, especially regarding capacity building, feedback mechanisms, and locally contextualizing the program by providing various support systems to meet the needs of the people. Concerning the goal attainment indicator, the policy has engaged in numerous programs that have positively contributed to the decline in the poverty rate in Sierra Leone. Since beginning operations in Sierra Leone, the poverty rate has decreased from 26.2% in 2020 to 22.7% in 2024. The limitations of this study include a small sample size of only three interviews and reliance on secondary sources. Future studies should increase the number of interviews and incorporate various secondary data sources for a more comprehensive understanding of UWT's role in poverty reduction.

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