

Decentralisation and peacebuilding in Sierra Leone

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By the time Sierra Leone emerged from 11 years of devastating civil conflict in 2002, it was clear that exclusion, marginalisation and the over-centralisation of resources had been a critical part of the country's problem. This was articulated clearly in the report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2004:

Key stakeholders in society including students, youth and the populace of the provinces were marginalised by political elites. Ultimately, these marginalised groups played a central role in initiating and fuelling the armed conflict... The provinces had been almost totally sidelined through the centralisation of political and economic power in Freetown. Local Government was in demise across the country. Chiefs and traditional structures did little more than the bidding of the power base in Freetown. Regions and ethnic groups were polarised by the contrasting treatment they were afforded.

Effective local government can contribute to political inclusion, peace and development, but Sierra Leone's local government structures were eradicated by President Siaka Stevens in the 1970s. Power and resources were concentrated in Freetown while local infrastructure and services including roads, health clinics and schools collapsed. Recognising these problems, the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah passed the Local Government Act in March 2004.

The new local government system

In the new system the highest level of political authority is the local council. The 2004 Act created 19 local

councils: 12 district councils, 1 rural district council, 5 municipal councils and 1 town council. Councillors are elected through universal suffrage and represent wards: three to a ward in municipal councils and one in district councils. District councils are headed by chairs; municipal councils by mayors. District councils also include paramount chiefs.

Local councils promote development and welfare, mobilising resources by setting tax rates and implementing budgeted spending. They can also make and enforce by-laws – for instance on taxation, the use of streams and rivers, domestic violence and cultural practices. These must be consistent with the constitution and the Local Government Act, and must be approved by the Attorney-General. Councillors are responsible for maintaining close contact with wards and chiefdoms, consulting on key issues, communicating council decisions and promoting development activities.

Councillors reside in their local communities so citizens can engage decision-makers more easily. Ward Development Committees (WDCs) comprise every councillor in the ward, the paramount chief, and not more than 10 other persons, at least five of whom must be women. Ward representatives are elected.

Along with local councils and WDCs there are chiefdom councils, comprising paramount chiefs, chiefdom speakers, section chiefs and village headmen. They work closely with local councils, collect taxes, make and enforce by-laws and hold land in trust. They are the highest decision-making bodies in the chiefdoms and serve as their 'parliaments'.

The Office of National Security has also set up chiefdom, district and provincial security committees to collect data on local conflict and security developments and identify potential conflict triggers or hotspots. They report to the President's Office.

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Civil society groups can complement decentralisation through 'bottom up' initiatives that build governmental accountability and community empowerment. They are involved in strengthening transparency and monitoring the implementation of public projects. The Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD), for example, organises accountability forums at chiefdom and district levels. The forums bring together members of parliament, councillors, WDC members, chiefs, women and youths to discuss issues that affect their lives. Citizens (rights holders) are encouraged to ask their leaders (duty bearers) questions about their actions – or inaction.

To further strengthen local accountability, NMJD has trained and deployed human rights paralegals in communities to help people access justice-providing institutions, to promote alternative dispute resolution, to educate people about their rights and responsibilities and to observe and report on human rights abuses and violations.

Local government action

Local councils are making significant contributions to Sierra Leone's development. Many have embarked on infrastructural projects, providing water and sanitation facilities, renovating primary schools, and building classroom blocks and office buildings. Councillors in the Freetown municipality have used self-help projects to repair roads, bridges and other public infrastructure. Some local councils offer educational scholarships. A 43-year-old woman of Panguma Village, Kakua Chiefdom, said that:

[t]he impact of local councils on our lives and living standard is great. We no longer struggle to fetch water by walking long distances. Nor do we now use the bush for toilets. The councils provide us with protected water wells and VIP toilets. All of this helps to bring us closer together than before.

[Personal quotes are from interviews conducted by the author with members of the communities where NMJD works in Bo district, to assess people's perceptions of the performance of local councils.]

Many WDCs are also implementing development activities: rebuilding roads, community centres, schools, health clinics and water and sanitation systems. Where necessary WDCs, in conjunction with the local people, provide locally-available materials and monitor the implementation process to ensure value for money.

Local councils are required to post their deliberations and financial reports on notice boards in conspicuous places where citizens can easily access them. As well as promoting transparency and accountability, this is designed to strengthen citizens' trust and confidence. Compliance is generally high: all local councils do it, though with varying frequency. But most people cannot read and write – a serious challenge that some local councils are trying to address, such as through radio programmes like Bo City Council's weekly *Council Hour*, which serves as a platform for the council to talk to the people and solicit feedback.

Problems facing decentralisation

WDCs have not lived up to expectations. In many cases members have been handpicked by politicians rather than elected, in contravention of the Local Government Act. Most appointees are there as a political reward, not as a matter of merit. This contributes to local tensions or apathy.

Many WDCs face acute financial problems and are unable to hold meetings regularly. Under-resourcing and weak oversight foster corruption. Procurement procedures are a particular problem, as council officials encourage their relatives and friends to set up companies that are then awarded contracts. The Anti-Corruption Commission has been working with local councils and civil society groups to address this, but with limited success so far.

A lot of problems in the local government system stem from uncertainty about how different parts relate to each other. The line demarcating the functions of the local councils and chiefdom councils is blurred. They are meant to support each other but the extent of collaboration expected is not clear. For example, Paramount Chief Alhaji Issa B. Kamara-Koroma of Gallinas Perrie chiefdom



Woman traders selling their goods at market in Gendema after crossing the Mano River Bridge from Liberia to Sierra Leone // © Aubrey Wade

in Pujehun district complained about 'the exclusion of chiefdom functionaries from the implementation and monitoring of development projects in their chiefdoms', which he called 'a major sticking point between local councils and chiefdom authorities'.

Development is implemented mainly at the chiefdom level. However, when contracts are awarded by local councils, no reference is made to chiefdom authorities, who are excluded from the process. As a result, contractors do not allow chiefdom authorities to monitor the work they do, although local councils still require chiefdom authorities to report on the progress of projects. Chiefdom authorities have refused to provide reports, which has led to tensions with councils.

The Local Government Act has transferred paramount chiefs' responsibility to set tax rates and spending to local councils, while maintaining chiefs' responsibility to collect taxes. This is seen by many people as a barrier to sound financial accountability. Some chiefdoms are denying local councils access to collect revenue. In Lower Banta Chiefdom in Moyamba district, the Paramount Chief has not allowed the council to collect dues from fishermen and has stationed vigilantes around the jetty. There are

similar cases in Gbondapi in Kpanga Kabonde Chiefdom, Pujehun District, and the Barmoi Lumor (Trade Fair) in Mambolo Chiefdom, Kambia District, where there were stand-offs when the Kambia District Council first attempted to collect dues, and it took the intervention of the Minister of Local Government to resolve the resulting impasse. Local councils have also refused to approve budgets for chiefdoms that delay payments from local taxes.

Another source of tension relates to decision-making between chiefs and Members of Parliament (MPs). A conflict between the paramount chief of Sahn-Malen Chiefdom in Pujehun District and the local MP arose when the chief leased land to an agricultural company, SOCFIN, for 50 years without consulting local people. The MP confronted the chief, who regarded this as undermining his authority. The conflict polarised the chiefdom, resulting in violence. When the MP's supporters prevented SOCFIN staff from accessing their lands, supporters of the chief responded with machete attacks. The Provincial Security Committee was unable to manage the dispute. Violence was eventually quelled by the Pujehun District Council Chair after civil society requested his involvement. But no agreement has been reached and tensions have been mounting again.

Centrally appointed District Officers (DOs), who had been removed following the establishment of local councils in 2004, are now being re-introduced. DOs settle land and chieftom boundary disputes, supervise chieftom authorities and serve as a hub for governmental activities. But parts of their role are perceived to usurp functions played by district councils and chiefs. Many feel the Local Government Act and also Chieftaincy Act (2009) obviate DOs and that their reintroduction casts doubts over the government's commitment to the decentralisation of power.

Chiefs also organise (technically illegal) local arbitration processes, widely referred to as 'kangaroo courts'. Chiefs and designated community elders determine verdicts on cases presented by fee-paying 'complainants' and 'defendants'. The losing party is usually ordered to pay a fine and the winning party's court costs. This can generate grudges and polarise communities. The fined party often feels aggrieved and seeks revenge. To pay fines many people resort to selling cherished property or borrowing at high interest rates. Where an offender is unable to pay, they sometimes flee their communities for cities where conditions are often poor.

Local MPs are not admitted to local government structures, as they are not members of WDCs. Some MPs use this to avoid supporting development efforts in their constituencies. Even where they receive money and other resources for the development of their communities, some MPs clearly do not use them for the intended purposes.

There is no provision in local councils for special representation for young people – even though they form the bulk of the population. They contest elections like everyone else, but in most cases stand little chance of being elected for economic and cultural reasons. In the 2008 local council elections in Small Bo Chieftom in Kenema district, the major political parties denied youth aspirants the 'party symbols' they needed to contest the polls under party banners. The youths consequently stood as independent candidates and lost, with most voters continuing to vote on party lines. In the event, many youths resorted to civil disobedience by refusing to pay local taxes or participate in communal work. It took the effort of NMJD 'Animators' to get them to cooperate with the local authorities.

Making decentralisation work

Decentralisation is important to building peace in Sierra Leone, particularly in rural communities. Given the disconnect between government and people, and many Sierra Leoneans' sense of alienation from the state, more effective local government bodies will mean they are better able to mediate disputes and spot conflict warning signs. Better relationships between local and central government can help connect marginalised citizens with central political structures.

Talking decentralisation is not enough. Freetown and its donor partners need to follow up on how decentralisation works in practice, consulting communities about whether and how their political voice is being heard, and how local governance structures respond to their needs and deliver essential services.

A clearer definition of roles and responsibilities within Sierra Leone's local government system would help to reduce ambiguity and the potential for conflict between its various components, and facilitate better collaboration and cooperation. Chieftom councils and district councils in particular must work together more effectively, where blurred lines of authority have led to tensions and community violence in the past.

Focusing on 'bottom-up', people-led approaches to promote accountability and empower communities can help. Civil society initiatives like NMJD's accountability forums can link people with local and central administration, incorporating marginalised groups to promote dialogue on key local and national issues. NMJD-sponsored human rights paralegals have also helped to connect traditional and national justice mechanisms and processes.

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