Strengthening governance in Sierra Leone

Nicholas Broadbridge, Programme Co-ordination Unit, GIDD

How the Commonwealth Secretariat has made a difference

Although rich in natural resources, Sierra Leone’s development aspirations since independence have been hampered by – among other factors – significant governance challenges. This has included considerable political instability, including five military coups. There has also been a devastating civil war, lasting almost 11 years until ending in 2002, which, when properly analysed, was brought on by widespread corruption and a lack of responsiveness to the people’s needs and aspirations.

Governance challenges remain a major impediment to development and a risk to peace and stability, as highlighted in Sierra Leone’s 2004 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report:

Endemic corruption was a central factor that produced the dire conditions that made civil war inevitable. Sierra Leone remains in the grip of pervasive corruption, which, if not arrested, will sap the country of its life force and lay the grounds for further conflict.

The Commonwealth Secretariat, with its track record of supporting its smallest and most vulnerable members, has worked closely with Sierra Leone to help it overcome these challenges.

Commonwealth adviser Alison Sutherland engaged in local community consultations
The 1999 post-conflict recovery Action Plan

One of the Commonwealth’s more notable interventions in the country was the high-level post-conflict recovery Action Plan from 1999. This led to over 40 Secretariat initiatives over the following six years, including support for:

- Democratic processes and institutions
- Diplomatic and political initiatives
- Reconstruction of the public sector and public services.

This support proved vital in enabling Sierra Leone’s government to keep certain key public services running in the immediate years after the conflict. It allowed the government to maintain a functional legal and judicial system through provision of judges, prosecutors, building the capacity of the police in community policing and human rights issues, and providing technical support to critical ministries, including agriculture and trade.

While the Commonwealth’s role immediately after the civil war is well documented, its subsequent assistance and support in helping Sierra Leone improve governance is perhaps less well known. More recently, as Sierra Leone has progressed beyond more immediate post-conflict challenges, the Secretariat’s focus has shifted from simply ‘gap-filling’ to more sustainable, longer-term development of public sector institutions and functions – in those areas in which it enjoys a comparative advantage. Some of the more recent examples of assistance provided are profiled below.

Sierra Leone’s 2008–12 national development strategy – known as the ‘Agenda for Change’ – highlights decentralisation as an essential component of the country’s peace and state-building agenda. Despite strong donor support for decentralisation, development of a National Decentralisation Policy stalled for several years, as the relevant ministry lacked capacity and expertise in co-ordinating a complex policy process across government and was unable to effectively articulate and represent the national interest.

Accordingly, in 2009, the Secretariat provided an adviser to assist the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development to lead the decentralisation process. The adviser’s role has been to support donor co-ordination, the monitoring of local authorities, stakeholder consultations and addressing of the gender balance. The adviser has also helped clarify the roles of traditional chieftaindom administrations and local authorities. The technical capacity of the ministry was enhanced through mentoring and skills transfers, which has led to several local staff members being awarded scholarships by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), building upon the Commonwealth’s initial support.

The adviser contributed to the final drafting of the National Decentralisation Policy and helped facilitate its adoption by Cabinet in August 2010. A roadmap for implementation is currently being developed.

The Commonwealth’s strategic support at the centre of government and at Cabinet level has therefore been crucial to facilitating the reform process. It has also helped ensure that the decentralisation agenda and process is fully owned by the Government of Sierra Leone, and reflects national, rather than just donor, priorities.

Building the capacity of Sierra Leone’s Anti-Corruption Commission

Until 2008, Sierra Leone’s Anti-Corruption Commission had a reputation as a somewhat ineffective institution. Since then, however, major progress has been made – with the Commission being given real teeth with the 2008 Anti-Corruption Act.

In this regard, the Secretariat has supported the institutional development of the Commission by assigning a Commonwealth expert as a Special Prosecutor, who has provided counsel, supported capacity development of investigators and junior prosecutors, and developed systems and tools, including a digest on substantive and procedural laws, and a case management system, which is in preliminary use.

As a result of this, the Anti-Corruption Commission now discharges its role much more effectively – helping contribute towards the steady increase in the country’s Transparency International anti-corruption score (1.99 in 2008; 2.5 in 2011), and rating in the Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance, where it has risen from 49th to 30th place. This has helped build up a more positive perception of Sierra Leone both domestically and internationally.

Improving Sierra Leone’s public procurement framework

Another area recognised by Sierra Leone as key to improving governance is public procurement. In this regard, the Commonwealth has provided experts in monitoring and evaluation and procurement law, to the country’s National Public Procurement Agency.

A Commonwealth long-term adviser has assisted with the development and tabling before Cabinet of a revised Public Procurement Act (2012), which now better suits the specific needs of Sierra Leone.
circumstances of Sierra Leone, while maintaining compliance with key international standards. The institutional capacity of the Agency has also been enhanced, with the introduction of new tools, training of staff, and a joint review with the World Bank of the Country Procurement Assessment Report document. As a result, processing times for procurement requests from ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) has improved. The Agency also now has a central decision-making role in the government’s standing committee on financing of key government projects and contracts.

The impact of this intervention has been that 90 per cent of MDA contracts are now compliant with national legislation (compared to a baseline of 49 per cent in 2008). The Agency has also indicated that improved monitoring, evaluation and compliance procedures in procurement have led to significant savings and improved value for money – including savings of almost US$1.6 million alone in procurement of rice seedlings, furniture and 4-wheel drive vehicles. This increased effectiveness of the Agency will ensure greater transparency and accountability in the use of public funds – helping reinforce democratic principles and create an environment more conducive to development.

Strengthening the judiciary and rule of law

A major area of focus in the immediate post-conflict period, the Secretariat has continued to support Sierra Leone’s Judiciary, including through the deployment of Commonwealth judges to the country’s High Court.

Two such judges are currently in place, and are reducing the backlog of pending cases, including corruption cases. In addition, the Secretariat is also providing a consultant as the Master of the Courts, who has completed the staffing and equipping of new court infrastructure under a Department for International Development (DfID) programme. The Master is also playing a key role in building up the judiciary’s capacity on anti-corruption issues, by improving case-management and court-administration procedures, as well as ensuring that wider reform processes – including interventions of major development partners (including DfID, the EU and the German Society for International Co-operation [GIZ]) – are implemented effectively.

Our continued intervention in this area has contributed in no small way to ensuring the relative stability in the country. Is it is expected that recent deployment of experts will improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the judicial
In 2008, Sierra Leone's Public Service Commission was the trial and conviction of the Mayor of Freetown – Herbert George Williams – for corruption in August 2012. In addition to demonstrating Sierra Leone’s willingness to tackle the difficult issue of corruption head-on, the trial also highlighted the ability of Commonwealth judges to handle sensitive domestic cases, which local judges may not be able to address due to political sensitivities.

In addition to deploying Commonwealth expertise directly within Sierra Leonean institutions, the Secretariat has developed the capacity of institutions by nurturing partnerships across the Commonwealth. This includes facilitating a long-running partnership between the Sierra Leone police and the Botswana police services. This approach has included supporting the training of key police officers from Sierra Leone at the Botswana Police College. For example, in 2011, 17 police officers were trained by Botswana in Strategic Leadership, Constable Policing skills, Sergeant Supervisory skills and Inspector Management skills.

Training in community policing has also been a major focus of the partnership in recent years. Indeed, feedback received from the Inspector General of Police has highlighted subsequent increases in the public’s perception of police performance and community relations – demonstrating improvements in the people’s perception of governance at the community level.

Supporting reform of the public service

In 2008, Sierra Leone’s Public Service Commission was in a weak state, unable to effectively discharge its key functions or carry out its role in reforming the public sector. However, as a result of dynamic new leadership – combined with Commonwealth support in the form of a Management and Functional Review – the Commission is now an empowered institution, with leadership and vision. The Review had a catalytic effect, resulting in the development of a more detailed report, whose recommendations have been widely accepted, and championed by the president. A subsequent study tour to Canada provided officials from the Commission with an opportunity to learn from Canadian experiences in this area, as well as highlight lessons and best practices that Sierra Leone’s Commission can aspire to. A further visit is planned to a Commonwealth developing member state, in order to draw upon more immediately applicable lessons and practices. This approach has made use of the Commonwealth’s ability to tap into the diverse and differing forms of expertise and contexts among its membership.

Since the Review, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has begun to collaborate with the Secretariat to further support the Commission through the provision of consultancy services for strategic planning. The EU has also expressed an interest.

Strengthening the political-administrative interface

More recently, the Secretariat has strengthened the political-administrative interface in Sierra Leone – the working relationship between elected officials and civil servants, to enhance effective public authority and service delivery. A forum of ministers and permanent secretaries was held in September 2010, and concluded with a ten-point declaration aimed at building a mutually supportive relationship between the executive and administrative arms of government. The positive response led to a similar forum being held in March 2011 that brought together regional ministers, mayors, local government chairpersons, councillors and administrators, as well as other senior local government civil servants from across the country, to sensitize them to the priorities of the government in respect to decentralisation and devolution. One of the key outcomes of the 2010 forum was an agreement by all parties (politicians and bureaucrats) for a regular process to tease out emerging and ongoing issues and to continue to nurture the positive linkages required if politicians and civil servants are to provide effective support for the national development strategy – ‘Agenda for Change’.

In addition, a Secretariat adviser – Kaifala Marah – has been seconded to Sierra Leone as the Chief of Staff of the Office of the President, helping take forward the country’s ‘Agenda for Change’.

These interventions highlight the Secretariat’s unique ability to work with countries to identify and address priority areas that are seen by the countries themselves as vital to development. It also highlights how such small interventions, when well targeted and matched by strong leadership and local ownership, can have a considerable catalytic effect.

Improving transparency and access to information

Another example of the Secretariat’s efforts to help improve governance in Sierra Leone has been its contribution – through funding and technical support – towards the Transparency Sierra Leone portal (accessible at www.transparencysierraleone.gov.sl). The portal is an Open Government Initiative that is hoped will help redefine the relationship between the citizen and the state, by actively encouraging public participation in the country’s national development.

Harnessing the full potential of the web, the portal allows citizens the opportunity to engage in direct dialogue with the president, to submit proposals and give feedback, and aims to encourage public debate on these efforts. By creating a reliable evidence base covering the full range of
government activities, citizens are enabled to act as online ‘watchdogs’. This helps to ensure their rights are better protected, projects are delivered as promised, and officials are held to account when funds are misspent or misappropriated.

The Secretariat also supported a media and development forum in Sierra Leone in early 2012, enabling the sharing of experiences from a range of Commonwealth African governments. The forum provided a conducive platform for dialogue between media practitioners and government, allowing both sides to better understand and appreciate their respective roles.

Sierra Leone’s Minister of Information, present at the forum, pledged that his office would redouble its efforts to return the Freedom of Information Bill to parliament for debate, as part of developing a more conducive media environment in Sierra Leone.

Conclusion

While a small player in monetary terms, the Secretariat can and has utilised its key comparative advantages to make a significant difference in Sierra Leone in recent years. It has done so by assisting Sierra Leone through building on its own comparative advantages as an organisation. This has included:

- Harnessing the Commonwealth’s shared history of public administration by deploying technical expertise in niche areas (such as public procurement, decentralisation, etc). These experts are able to draw on this shared history, and thus are already broadly familiar with the general constitutional and administrative context in Sierra Leone.

- Developing the capacity of Sierra Leonean institutions over the longer term, through the deployment of technical experts. Most of these experts are from the developing Commonwealth, and can advise on good practices that have worked in similar contexts.

- Using the Secretariat’s ability to rapidly respond to requests to undertake interventions in niche areas. These interventions – which may be considered ‘too small’ for traditional donors – can nonetheless have a significant impact if well designed and targeted, as highlighted by support to the Public Service Commission, or Transparency Sierra Leone.

- Using the Commonwealth’s potential for networking and exchanges to build partnerships between institutions across the Commonwealth, including the police services of Botswana and Sierra Leone.

- Leveraging the Secretariat’s close relationship with the Sierra Leone Government, as well as its status as a trusted partner and convening power, to deal directly with sensitive issues – including by convening ministerial retreats to strengthen the political-administrative interface, or by deploying judicial experts. Traditional donors have been unwilling or unable to effectively address these issues due to the sensitivities, or the perception that they have an external agenda.

References


