

# Strengthening political-administrative relations

## The case of Sierra Leone

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### Why supporting the political-administrative interface is important

An efficient and effective public service has generally been recognised as a necessary condition to enable a government to function and deliver on its mandates (Manning, 2011). In addition, the relationship and interface between the two bodies that constitute the public service, namely political appointees and permanent or professional public servants, is essential to ensure that services are delivered to citizens in a timely and effective manner.

Recognising the critical importance of the political-administrative interface to enable a government to meet its development goals and priorities, the Commonwealth Secretariat's Governance and Institutional Development Division (GIDD) has targeted leadership development in the Africa region (as well as elsewhere) in a variety of ways. One particularly innovative approach has been to provide a platform that brings together Cabinet Ministers and senior public servants (Permanent/Principal Secretaries) to help them work better together as they support the Executive to deliver on the government's policy-making agenda (Kathyola, 2010).

On both sides, Ministers as political heads and Permanent Secretaries as administrative heads have their own respective duties to perform in order for the government to function smoothly. Since their roles and responsibilities are intrinsically linked, a functional relationship between them is therefore essential. Experience across the developing world has shown that where the two sides (political appointees and permanent civil servants) do not enjoy a productive relationship, this can have a negative effect on service delivery – or even derail it completely (Ben Gera, 2009). There are many different reasons as to why relations between these two sides may be complicated and fraught with tension and a lack of trust; politicians may complain that the administrators deliberately delay projects or that they are not loyal, while administrators may cite inappropriate interference or micro-management in matters of human resources or finance, for example. Whatever the cause of the conflict, its impact on the government's ability to deliver on its mandate and meet citizen expectations can be profound.

Therefore, creating a platform where tensions and differences can be addressed in a constructive manner, and where there is an opportunity for politicians and bureaucrats to work in harmony and share experiences, can be extremely beneficial to overall government effectiveness.

This is the premise behind GIDD's engagement in the area – and it is also rather unique, given that this work is highly political in nature. GIDD can provide this type of support to its member countries because of the high levels of trust and access that it enjoys among partner governments. In general, other donors have tended to stay away from engagement at this level, deeming it too sensitive.

### GIDD's engagement in the political-administrative interface in Sierra Leone

#### Context

On GIDD's part, the issue of the political-administrative interface has been taken up in several forums, meetings and workshops to ensure that this critical area is regularly supported. Beyond this kind of general support, in cases where partner governments have requested it, GIDD has provided innovative assistance to strengthen the interface between politicians and administrators in more substantial ways. Such is the case in Sierra Leone. There, GIDD is currently providing support to foster a productive relationship between the different elements of the public service and to put in place appropriate structures for institutionalising the interactions between them.

As a (post-)conflict country that has emerged from a brutal civil war, Sierra Leone has received considerable international assistance from a variety of development partners to lay the foundations for a peaceful, stable and more effective state, and has made important progress in defining its developmental priorities. The current government has turned the country's second Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP II) into its 'Agenda for Change'.

Numerous public sector reform initiatives have been created to build a strong platform that can deliver the objectives of the PRSP II. However, the management of the political and administrative interface has also been identified as a critical area for improvement if ongoing reforms are to be translated into improved services for citizens and if developmental goals are to be achieved. Such recognition has come from the highest level of government in the country. As President Ernest Bai Koroma outlined in September 2010, during his opening speech at the Commonwealth Secretariat's Forum on Strengthening Political-Administrative Relations, held for Cabinet Ministers and Permanent Secretaries:

*Without the support of a competent civil service, political leaders would not be able to effectively translate the aspirations of the people into policies; nor*

*would they be able to ensure that the implementation of these policies have positive impacts on the lives of the people. However, I have noted that the relationships between ministers and civil servants have been less than what is optimal for the effective and efficient implementation of many of the programmes... I will not allow relationship challenges between ministers and senior civil servants to slow down my commitment to transform this country.*

This statement highlights the will of the political leadership not only to recognise and address this contentious area, but also the desire to make progress on the 'Agenda for Change' in an expedient manner.

### Intervention

It is against this backdrop that the Government of Sierra Leone approached GIDD to ask for support in strengthening its political-administrative interface. As noted, GIDD is uniquely placed to provide such assistance given the kind of relationship it enjoys with the countries it works with. Unlike other development partners, GIDD is perceived as a development partner that is devoid of a political agenda, and thus enjoys high levels of trust and access. As such, it is well positioned to foster a safe environment for a free and frank exchange of views between different stakeholders in-country to tackle underlying issues and concerns. In addition, the nature of the Commonwealth means that there are 54 potential member countries from which high level experiences can be drawn and shared and, as highlighted below, lessons and co-operation between members can be encouraged, especially among countries in the developing world.

During the September 2010 Forum for Ministers and Permanent Secretaries, the following goals were outlined:

- To promote better understanding of the priority national outcomes of the Government of Sierra Leone.
- To define accountabilities more clearly so that they are properly understood and accepted.
- To define and promote more clearly a better understanding of the roles of Ministers, Head of the Public Service and Permanent Secretaries, and the relationships between them.
- To define and agree upon key leadership values and principles to guide Ministers and Permanent Secretaries in the conduct of their duties.
- To identify strategies for effectively engaging other stakeholders in the national development agenda.

The three-day Forum, which also included experiences from a former Prime Minister of Tanzania, a former Head of the Civil Service from Ghana, and the then Head of Service from Nigeria, was carried out under a setting that allowed for concerns from both the executive and administrative arms of government to be aired. Both parties were able to discuss what was expected of them, and on this basis, they

were able to reach a common ground from which to move forward. They were also able to learn from the experiences of other countries that seem to be handling similar challenges particularly well.

### Impact

The Forum seems to have been particularly productive. Both the political appointees and the permanent civil servants made proposals to address underlying problems, and they developed concrete agreements and targets on how to work better together. This newfound commitment to make the political-administrative interface work more smoothly was captured in a landmark Ten-point Declaration issued by the Forum. In essence, there is now credible commitment on paper from both sides with accountability for action that can be monitored.

The positive response and agreements reached at the national level have cascaded down to the regional and local government levels. With the Commonwealth Secretariat's support, a second forum was held in March 2011, which brought together regional Ministers, Mayors, local government Chairpersons, Councillors and Administrators, as well as other senior local government civil servants. Among other things, one of the results of this local-level forum was an agreement by all parties (politicians and bureaucrats) that there was a need for regular forums of this nature to tackle emerging and ongoing issues, and to continue to nurture the kinds of positive linkages required if political and permanent public servants are to provide effective support for the government to deliver on its national 'Agenda for Change'.

### Conclusion

This experience of supporting the political-administrative interface in Sierra Leone has helped illustrate how a small but strategically significant intervention of the kind the Commonwealth Secretariat is particularly well placed to carry out can make a real difference not only at the national level but also at the local level. Recognising that this is an ongoing process, the Commonwealth Secretariat has made a commitment to continue to support the Government of Sierra Leone in this area, not only in terms of the implementation and monitoring of the Ten-point Declaration, but of other needs that may arise.

### References

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