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Sierra Leone: The Role of the Rapid Results Approach in Decentralization and Strengthening Local Governance

Although Sierra Leone is endowed with rich natural resources, it is one of the poorest countries in the world. An eleven-year war over the period 1991-2002 destroyed the country's infrastructure and social fabric. The concentration of political power and public resources in the capital city Freetown and the marginalization of the provinces were perceived as one of the root causes of the war. In 2004, Sierra Leone ranked bottom in the United Nations Human Development Indicators, and 70% of the population is said to be under the poverty line.¹

Since the end of the war, the country has embarked on a resettlement, reintegration, reconstruction and recovery program. Public spending on education, health, agriculture and infrastructure has been significant. However, a highly centralized and non-transparent bureaucracy, along with demotivated and under-skilled workforce reduced the impact on service delivery. Reform efforts spread across many fronts with varying degrees of political commitment and design and implementation capacity.²

Since 2003, IDA support has been unambiguously focused on a governance transformation process, supporting fiscal decentralization and strengthening local government. The support is designed to create the political space for development-oriented local politicians to emerge, and for communities to participate in decision-making processes and determine their own development priorities. In February 2004, the GoSL enacted a progressive Local Government Act, establishing 19 local councils, which, over the period of 2004-2008, will take over increasing responsibilities and

resources in education, health, agriculture, roads, water and sanitation. Local Council Elections took place in May/June 2004.³

To support the decentralization process, the councils were encouraged to adopt the Rapid Results Approach (RRA), which became an important driver in building a culture of performance, accountability and results. The initial efforts have also unleashed implementation capacity within the newly-created local Councils that delivered measurable improvements in public services over a short period.

The First Wave of Rapid Results Initiatives

In the first wave of Rapid-Results Initiatives (RRIs), local Council chairmen were asked to identify areas of focus before disbursement procedures were established, bank accounts set up, and even before they had officially taken office. Each Council was provided with a small grant (on average \$30,000) and a coach to implement a high-visibility, high-impact project within 100 days. During the period of September 2004 and January 2005, all Councils launched Rapid Results Initiatives (RRIs) and most achieved their results in water, sanitation, feeder roads, traffic, rice production and mitigating post-harvest loss. Examples of

1. Zhou, Yongmei. "Supporting Governance Transformation in Sierra Leone through Devolution and Strengthening Local Governance: July 2005"
2. Ibid
3. Ibid



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some of the results achieved are:

- Travel time between Sewafe and Kono District was reduced from 1 hour to 15 minutes and transportation costs were reduced from Le 5,000 (\$1.75) to Le 2,000 (\$0.70).
- High-yield quick-harvest Inner Valley Swamp Rice seeds increased yields by 4,000 bushels within 90 days in Pujehun District.
- The total volume of garbage in two lorry parks and two markets in Kenema Township was reduced by 90% within 95 days.

A team member in the Western Rural Area said, “*Projects in the past were never completed. The donors would come in during good times, and then leave during bad times. Next time the donors decide they want to start a new project in Sierra Leone; I will tell them to leave a child behind in the village, so they come back and complete what they started. The RRI project is exciting, because we know we are no longer at the mercy of the donor; we own it and we will finish it.*”

One Council focused on increasing the availability of rice seeds from 20% to 60% of the farming population in 90 days. The goal was achieved and planting took place within the period. This initial success created the impetus to deal with the next level challenge: storing the harvest in a manner that minimizes wastage and increases rice production in ten chiefdoms in the district.

The Councils implemented the RRIs prior to completing a participatory development planning process. The initial wave of initiatives:

- built the confidence of the Council members in their own ability to deliver;
- established the credibility of the Councils with their constituencies; and
- forced accelerated implementation of enabling activities – such as opening a bank account and putting in place disbursement and accounting mechanisms.

In the process of achieving their goals, simple yet effective monitoring systems were also developed. This helped publicize the stories of good governance, as well as recorded failures to create competitive pressures among local governments.

Scale-up and Devolution

In November 2005, most Councils completed their second wave of RRIs. Some of the challenges were to:

- increase the level of production of rice in three sections in Samu Chiefdom from 50 to 3000 bushels;
- increase inland valley swamp rice production from 320- 730 acres in Bo District within 100 days; and
- reduce post harvest loss from 25-5% in six wards in the district within 100 days.

The success of the initial round of initiatives helped persuade the central government to devolve the authority and resources of key service delivery ministries to the local Councils. In conjunction with the second round of RRIs were a set of 60-day initiatives that focused on completing the devolution of assets, staff, and budget for select ministries. This process was completed in health, where services and budgets were devolved to the District Health Offices. Examples of RRIs in the devolved health sector are:

- improve access to safe drinking water from 30-70% amongst residents of two chiefdoms in Pujehun District by March 2006; and
- increase immunization coverage for children under one year from 50-70% in Moyamba District within 90 days;

The agriculture and education ministries began the process of devolution, which will be complete once the budgets are disbursed to the Councils. Devolution has set the stage for a third round by mid 2006, designed to deepen and broaden service delivery while at the same time informing the design of financial management and procurement systems to strengthen governance and accountability.

How was a favorable environment created for achieving such results in a short period ?

By adopting a structured process based on a few principles designed to unleash capacity and empower local teams. Key elements include :

- Collective prioritization of goals by both the leadership and beneficiaries

What is the Rapid Results Approach?

The “Rapid-Results Approach” (RRA) is a set of management tools, processes, and skills that help leaders in organizations use a series of short-term projects to translate long-term goals into concrete actions, results and impact. The engine of the Approach is the “Rapid-Results Initiative” (RRI) – 100-day project designed to unleash the capacity and creativity of teams in pursuit of a strategically critical goal that delivers a real result, and that ties directly to strategic long-term plans. Each RRI becomes a vehicle for achievement, learning, and the advancement of long-term goals.

Teams start by prioritizing the areas they want to impact, and develop capacity as they go – in the context of achieving 100-day results. This has significant implications for the huge investments that are being made in capacity building and training initiatives: less “just-in-case” workshops and more “just-in-time” training and coaching; more learning by doing while achieving; and learning in smaller bites.

The leaders in each case are a diverse group with differing styles. One quality they all exhibited was a stubborn belief in the possibility, or even the inevitability, of succeeding in tackling big challenges by entrusting the people closest to, and mostly affected by, the issue to channel their existing knowledge and capacity to achieve results. These are individuals who step forward and take a risk in spite of the odds. In doing so, they inspire others to take a leap of faith as well – to contribute rather than staying on the sidelines – to own the problem and find the solution.

The Approach emphasizes that implementation and “learning by doing” are integral parts of the policy development process and a means to assess the capacity for, and the political will to, undertaking larger policy reforms through the achievement of tangible results. Despite the tremendous investments and technical expertise provided in developing countries, implementing effective reform remains a very difficult task and simply

looking for better policies may not be the answer.

-Matta, Nadim; Hassanali, Zahra; Balasubramaniam, Rashmir. *The Rapid Results Approach: A Briefing Note*. July 10, 2005.

- A sense of challenge and “stretch goals” – teams reaching for goals that go beyond normal performance thresholds
- A belief that the goals – tough as they may be – will be achieved, despite the usual obstacles and prior failed attempts
- Focus on results: teams were challenged to pursue “results-oriented” goals, versus activities, plans, recommendations and other preparatory steps
- Personal accountability for specific and visible results. This dealt with accountability not in a general, vague, or nominal sense, but a real sense of accountability that keeps one awake at night thinking about how one will deliver
- Leadership buy-in and setting of overall challenges
- Structured support to teams through coaching
- Flexibility in charting the path to the goals – trusting local teams to develop their own solutions
- Credible promise to give the teams “bragging rights” – in a public and visible manner – over their achievements.⁴

The experience of this Bank-assisted program in Sierra Leone shows that improvements in governance are possible even in an environment permeated with pervasive government failures. The RRA helped local Councils deliver results and gain credibility with the central government and their communities. The success was not solely in the realization of the first round of goals, but rather in the momentum and energy created in the process of achieving those results — all while ‘unleashing’ knowledge and capacity already available at the local level.

* *Rapid Results is a tool developed by the management consulting firm of Robert H. Schaffer and Associates and has been applied in partnership with the World Bank in a number of Bank-assisted projects in Africa, Central America, and South Asia.*

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4. Matta, Nadim; Hassanali, Zahra; Balasubramaniam, Rashmir. *The Rapid Results Approach: A Briefing Note*. July 10, 2005