



## HELPING AFRICAN CABINETS MAKE EVIDENCE-INFORMED DECISIONS

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**AFRICA CABINET GOVERNMENT NETWORK**



CONFERENCE  
INTERNATIONALE  
SUR L'EMERGENCE  
DE L'AFRIQUE

Prepared for the International Conference on the Emergence of Africa, Abidjan, 28-30 March 2017

Emergence in Africa cannot occur without Government decisions that can be implemented effectively. Yet in many African nations only 50% of Government decisions are ever implemented.... sometimes even less than 50%. Others are implemented but fail to achieve results.

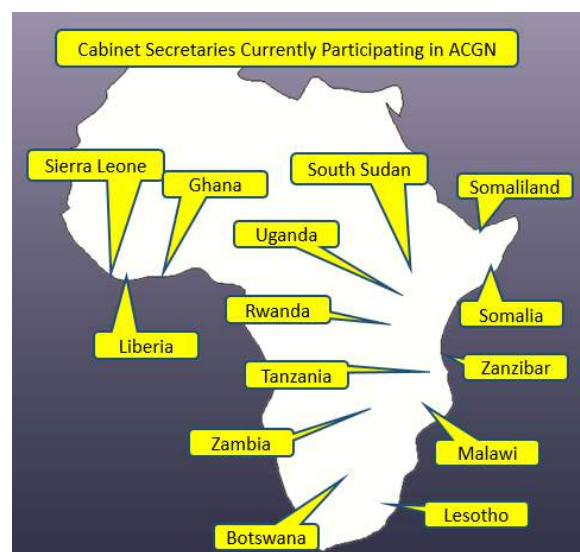
This happens for many reasons being discussed at this conference: lack of financial resources; limited civil service capacity; weak accountability for delivery; missing infrastructure; inadequate depth in the private sector; and conflicting incentives for organisations or individuals.

But often decisions are not implemented simply because they are bad decisions: decisions that fail to take into account the resources and capacities required to implement them; decisions that fail to consider the impact on other sectors; decisions taken without engagement with key stakeholders; and decisions taken without analysis of the evidence on what works, and in what circumstances.

Africa needs Government decisions that are driven by evidence and analysis of the complex issues, rather than simplistic populism, personal or organisational self-interest, or narrow foreign agendas.

The focus on implementation, delivery and results is not misplaced, but it must be built into policy-making processes from the very beginning.

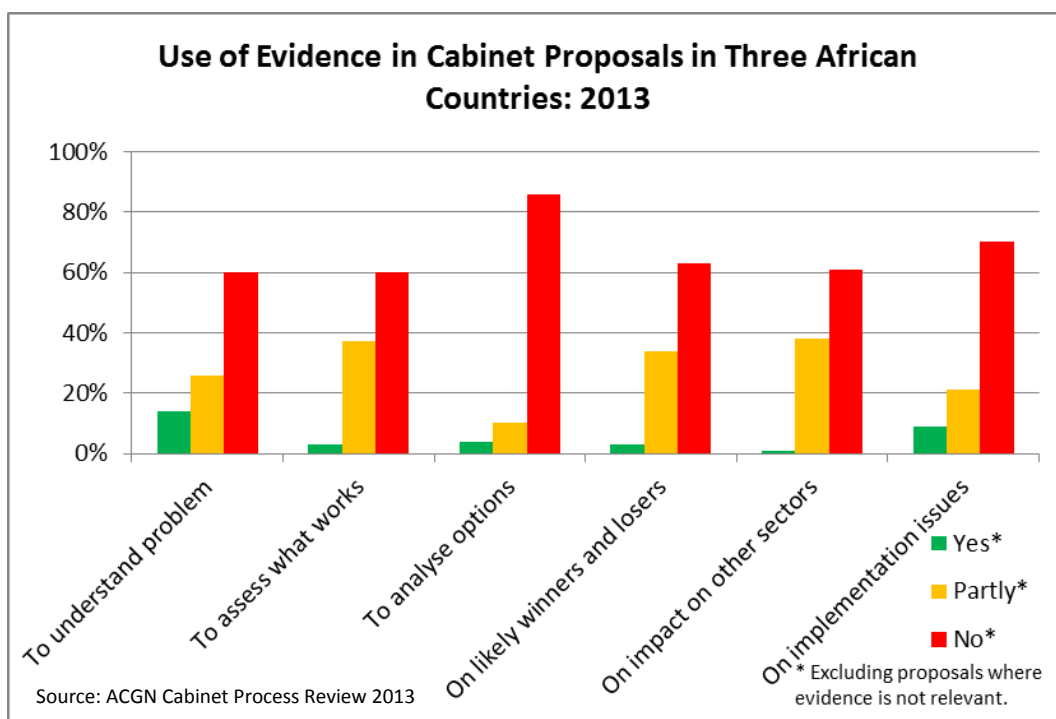
I have the privilege to be Executive Director of the Africa Cabinet Government Network (ACGN), an organisation established by a group of African Cabinet Secretaries to provide peer support and technical assistance to the secretariats that support Government decision-making. In most African Governments, the Cabinet or Council of Ministers is the key collective decision making body that approves Government policies and most of the draft laws submitted to Parliament.



The Cabinet, or Council of Ministers, is the key mechanism where the various Ministries and sectors come together to address the complex challenges facing Governments. Challenges that often require ‘whole of Government’ approaches. Or at least active collaboration between Ministries and sectors, such as for infrastructure planning, poverty alleviation, economic development and ensuring security, locally and at the national level.

The ACGN and its governing body, the Council of African Cabinet Secretaries, have been motivated by unique research highlighting that many policy proposals submitted to Cabinets fail to provide Ministers with relevant evidence on the feasibility and likely impact of proposed policies.

This confidential review was based on the ACGN’s International Cabinet Process Assessment Tool and covered 178 confidential Cabinet decisions taken in 2013 across 3 countries. As shown in the diagram, it revealed that the great majority of decisions were taken without relevant evidence: – evidence to understand the problem; evidence of what works; analysis of options; evidence on likely winners and losers; evidence of the impact on other sectors; or evidence on implementation issues.



The review also revealed problems with the input of many international advisers pushing narrow solutions for complex problems, often without regard to local context or necessary institutional frameworks or national priorities. For example, the report of an international expert on Special Economic Zones, who over-sold the benefits of this mechanism to increase foreign investment. It reminds me of the carpenter who only has a hammer, wandering around looking for nails to hit.

The review also found lengthy papers and reports prepared by international experts that were indigestible for Ministers. This exposed the limited capacity in many Ministries to translate the jargon for the local context.

In ACGN discussions of these results from three countries, other Cabinet Secretaries have reported a similar story: decisions taken in Cabinet with little or no evidence, with the result that many are never implemented or fail to achieve the desired results.

Policy decisions that are announced but never implemented undermine the credibility of Governments with voters and international partners. Failed decisions also undermine the ability of Governments to make credible promises to potential foreign and local investors, promises that are essential to attract longer term investments and economic development. And persistent failure to implement promises to citizens can undermine the credibility of the state, with Governments seen as a major part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

The 14 Cabinet Secretaries who currently compromise the ACGN are therefore working individually and collectively to take practical steps to increase the use of evidence to inform the decision-making of their Cabinets. Last year they made this commitment through the Lilongwe Declaration, signed at the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Roundtable meeting of Cabinet Secretaries, held in Malawi in April.

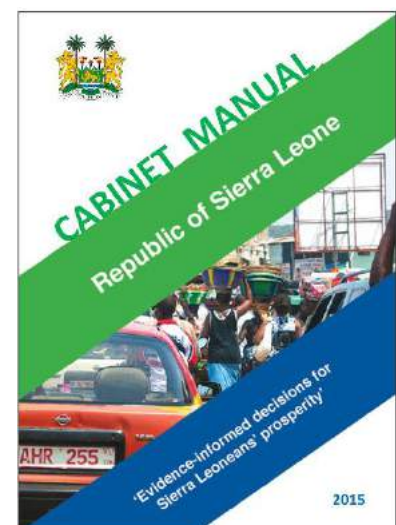
These practical steps include new Cabinet procedures requiring policy proposals to include relevant evidence, developing the capacity of Cabinet Secretariats to promote and review the use of evidence, making effective use of Cabinet Committees, building the capacity of line Ministries, ensuring effect liaison between Secretariats and Ministries, and improving coordination between Ministries to devise and deliver cross-government policies and programs.

They also renewed their commitment to maintain and expand the Network, through its Roundtable meetings of Cabinet Secretaries, international training workshops, exchange programs and other information sharing.



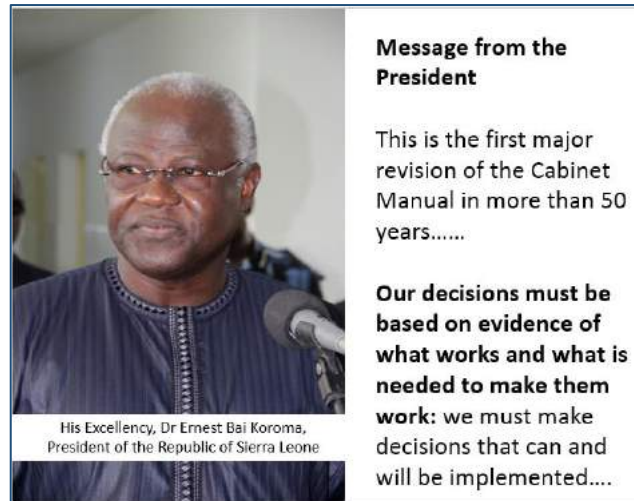
The work of ACGN has already borne fruit. For example, with funding from DFID, ACGN has worked with the Sierra Leone Cabinet Secretariat to develop and implement new Cabinet procedures, described by its Secretary to Cabinet as “the biggest change in Cabinet decision-making procedures since independence in 1961”.

This has resulted in an ‘evidence culture’ in Cabinet decision-making, a “paradigm shift”, to quote the Cabinet Secretary again.



Critical to this success was the personal involvement and commitment of the President, His Excellency Dr Ernest Bai Koroma.

It is too early to see the full impact of these new procedures in Sierra Leone, but they are already leading to decisions informed by more evidence, such as the recent Cabinet decision on a National Lands Policy, which will facilitate economic development, reduce conflict within communities, and ensure more equitable access to land. And a National Tourism Policy, to take advantage of Sierra Leone's largely untapped tourist potential.



Follow-up surveys of Cabinet proposals in Sierra Leone in 2015 and 2016 show a significant increase in the use of evidence in Cabinet proposals, as shown in the diagram that compares these more recent surveys with the 2013 results for Sierra Leone, as shown in the attached diagram.

There is every reason to believe these changes will be sustained. The last Cabinet Manual in Sierra Leone lasted 50 years and the Cabinet Secretariat, staffed by civil servants, will continue to implement the new Manual through future changes of Government. And the Cabinet Secretary, who is also Head of the Civil Service, has incorporated the new procedures into civil service promotion exams.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the members of ACGN are keen to expand its membership with other Cabinet Secretaries, including those from Francophone countries. We are currently planning the 4<sup>th</sup> annual Roundtable meeting for October 2017.

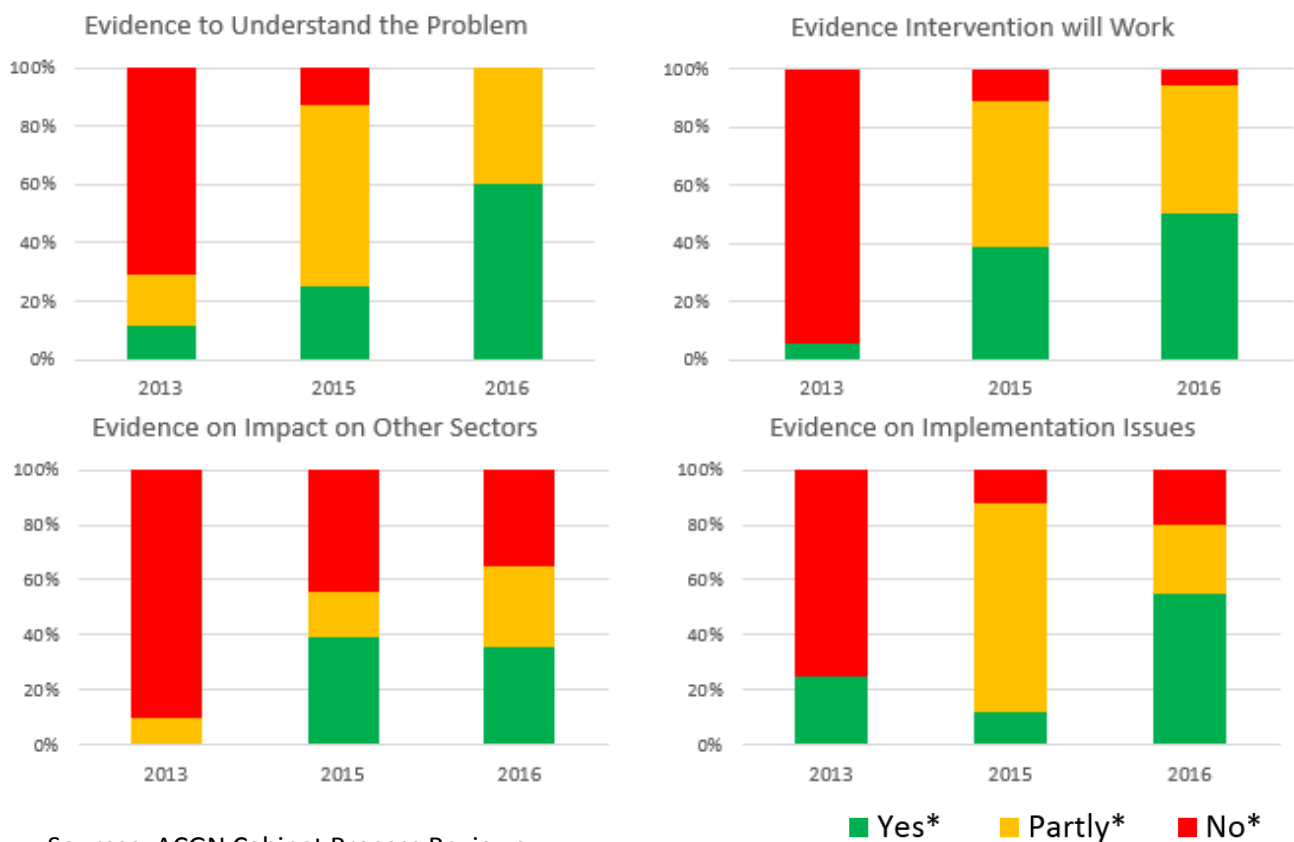
ACGN's Charter also provides for associate members - organisations and individuals with experience working to support Cabinet decision-making.

For more information, see the ACGN website: [www.CabinetGovernment.net](http://www.CabinetGovernment.net).

### ***About Mark Johnston***

*Mark is Executive Director of the Africa Cabinet Government Network, having played a key role in supporting its establishment. He has worked with Cabinet Secretaries and other senior officials in 25 governments across Asia and Africa on public sector reforms, especially Cabinet processes and policy development. Much of this work has been in fragile or conflicted affected nations. This followed a decade in the Australian Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in various senior positions and a PhD in Public Policy from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.*

# Increased use of evidence in strategic Cabinet proposals: Sierra Leone: 2013-2016



Sources: ACGN Cabinet Process Reviews: 2013, 2015, 2016.

■ Yes\*    ■ Partly\*    ■ No\*

\* Excluding proposals where evidence is not relevant.