



## **STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN CABINET PROPOSALS**

### **Introduction**

This note describes the above project in Sierra Leone, initiated by the African Cabinet Government Network and funded by the Australian Government's Direct Aid Program (DAP).

### **Africa Cabinet Government Network**

ACGN is an International NGO registered in Sierra Leone. It is not-for-profit. It operates in Sierra Leone and currently with 12 other Cabinet Secretariats in Africa.

The ACGN is governed by the Council of African Cabinet Secretaries. Dr Ernest Surrur, the Sierra Leone Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, was elected President of the Council in February 2014, while the Cabinet Secretaries from Zambia, Liberia and South Sudan were elected Regional Vice Presidents.

According to its Charter updated by the Council of African Cabinet Secretaries in April 2016, the Africa Cabinet Government Network is a voluntary organisation established for the benefit of members and, through them, the governments and peoples they work for.

The official purpose of the Network is to provide formal and informal opportunities for collaboration, mutual support and sharing practical experience, as well as providing technical assistance to Cabinet Secretaries and others involved in managing Cabinet processes in Africa, in order to facilitate evidence-informed collective decision-making by governments and effective implementation of their decisions.

Since its inception, a priority goal of ACGN has been to improve the quality of policy proposals being submitted to member Cabinets across Africa.

The Network provides support and advice on government decision-making processes. Its Charter does not allow it to provide advice or support on the content of government policies or other decisions, unless requested by the government concerned.

### **Background to the Project**

An ACGN survey of all 45 written proposals considered by the Sierra Leone Cabinet during May-September 2013 found that only 11% provided any evidence of external consultation and only 2% mentioned future consultation, while 56% would have benefitted from engagement with communities or other stakeholders in the preparation of proposals. The Cabinet Secretariat and most Ministries lacked the capacity to undertake and manage such stakeholder engagement.

The Australian-funded project has built that capacity by working with Secretariat staff and four pilot Ministries (the Ministry of Sports, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security, the

Ministry of Youth Affairs and the Ministry of Mines and Mineral Resources) to build their capacity and commitment to engage with stakeholders when preparing policy proposals.

The Sierra Leone Cabinet Manual, approved by Cabinet on 25 March 2015, encourages Ministers to seek input and participation from external stakeholders, such as community and industry groups likely to be affected by proposals. A 3-year DFID-funded project conducted in partnership with ACGN supported implementation of the new Cabinet procedures, but did not address this need to build capacity for stakeholder engagement.

## **Project Objective**

The aim of the project has been to increase the input and participation of relevant community and other stakeholder groups when Ministries are preparing policy proposals for Cabinet consideration, in order to improve the impact of Government decisions, to ensure that they can be implemented effectively to address national priorities and, especially, address the needs of vulnerable groups.

The expected result of the project will be a measurable increase in the proportion of policy proposals to Cabinet that are informed by community and/or other stakeholder engagement, compared to the baseline survey mentioned already.

Increased stakeholder engagement was a major theme of ACGN's 2015 Roundtable Meeting of Cabinet Secretaries in Accra. As HE the (then) President of Ghana emphasised in his public keynote address to the ACGN meeting, "... no public policy or program is worth the paper it is written on if it has not engaged the primary stakeholders, the citizens, in its formulation, implementation and tracking its performance ..... No longer can policy proposals be developed by bureaucrats behind closed doors and then imposed by political leaders, but this requires careful planning. We need to ensure that the voices of powerful interest groups do not drown out the weak or the silent majority." New Cabinet procedures in Sierra Leone encourage this stakeholder engagement as part of the Government's drive to ensure proposals are informed by evidence.

The Australian support has built the capacity and commitment of selected Sierra Leone Ministries and the Secretariat to engage meaningfully and effectively with communities and other stakeholders through ACGN's employment of an experienced Sierra Leonean community facilitator to work within the government system. The facilitator, Mr Steven Keifala, was employed by ACGN and was based in the Cabinet Secretariat, which provided the necessary authority for him to work closely with Ministries in preparing Cabinet proposals and to access secret Cabinet documents.

## **Outputs**

There have been four main outputs of the proposed project:

**1) CAPACITY BUILT IN PILOT MINISTRIES** to engage with relevant stakeholders in developing policy proposals for Cabinet. Key outputs included an introductory workshop in each Ministry, followed by a training programme and hands-on support to line Ministry staff working on specific policy proposals (where possible), helping them to design and conduct activities to provide input and participation by relevant groups. These activities were tailored to the specific policy proposal and target groups (a key lesson), but in future Ministries will be able to conduct effective public hearings, focus groups, surveys and engagement through CSOs. Because of this focus on actual proposals, the selection of Ministries and the extent of work in specific Ministries depended on relevant policy proposals being developed for Cabinet's consideration at the time of the project.

**2) CAPACITY BUILT WITHIN THE CABINET SECRETARIAT**, especially for staff in the new Cabinet Policy Review Unit, to enable them to recognise proposals where communities and stakeholders need to be engaged and to continue to provide guidance to Ministries to undertake such activities following the completion of the project. A particular focus was ensuring engagement methods are appropriate for the relevant target groups, especially the most vulnerable.

**3) NATIONAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT GUIDE** for Sierra Leone Ministries conducting community and stakeholder consultation in developing policy proposals for Cabinet. This drew on the practical experience in (1) above and provides a main resource for the Cabinet Secretariat in (2). The draft Guide was thoroughly discussed at a validation workshop on 2 March 2017, chaired by the President's Chief of Staff and attended by 19 Ministries, mostly at Permanent Secretary level.

**4) SHOWCASING THE INITIATIVE AS AN INTERNATIONAL DEMONSTRATION PROJECT** at the 2017 annual ACGN Roundtable meeting, expected to include the Chief Secretaries/Cabinet Secretaries or equivalent from Ghana, Liberia, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana and Somalia. A number of these Cabinet Secretaries are very interested in how to respond to pressure for more open Cabinet processes (without unduly compromising Cabinet confidentiality and the need for Governments to consider options in private before committing to significant decisions).

The results of the project will be assessed through: (a) feedback survey already conducted in participating Ministries; (b) results of a subsequent survey of Sierra Leone Cabinet proposals on external consultation (compared to the 2013 baseline survey); and (c) feedback from international participants at the 2017 ACGN Roundtable on whether the project results are likely to help improve their own consultation processes.