

Improving African Cabinet Decision-Making Through Evidence and Peer Support

Mark Johnston



Over the past three years the Africa Cabinet Government Network (ACGN) has assisted the Sierra Leone Cabinet Secretariat to radically improve Cabinet decision-making procedures: *“the biggest change in Cabinet decision-making procedures since independence in 1961”*, to quote the Secretary to the Cabinet and Head of the Civil Service, Dr Ernest Surrur.

The ACGN was established by interested Cabinet Secretaries to provide opportunities for collaboration and mutual support, as well as technical assistance. From 2013 to 2016, with support from DFID’s Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) program and Adam Smith International (ASI), it brought together 14 Cabinet Secretariats to improve evidence-informed decision-making: from Botswana, Ghana, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Somaliland, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zanzibar. It has also provided in-country support to the Secretariats in Sierra Leone, Liberia and South Sudan.

This note focuses on the successful Cabinet reforms in Sierra Leone, in particular the critical success factors in implementing them despite the challenges of the Ebola crisis.

Before Sierra Leone’s reforms, Cabinet Members rarely asked for evidence to support proposals. Neither did the Cabinet Secretariat. And there was very limited capacity to review the use of evidence in proposals. Through the new procedures and associated institutional capacity building, there has been what the Cabinet Secretary describes as *“a paradigm shift in how Cabinet makes decisions”*. He reports that there is now an *‘evidence culture’* in Cabinet, with other Ministers asking their colleagues, for example: *“How do you know that will work?”* or *“What evidence do you have on the likely impact on women?”*

Sierra Leone’s new procedures have already had a positive impact. Some of the benefits have been quantifiable – decisions that have saved millions of dollars by rejecting expensive proposals with little evidence to support them. More importantly, the new procedures have helped Cabinet to make decisions that will lead to better outcomes. For example, recent decisions on:

- Establishment of post-graduate medical training institutes and a teaching hospital in Sierra Leone, to produce more and better trained doctors;

- A national lands policy, which will facilitate economic development, reduce conflict within communities, and ensure more equitable access to land;
- A national tourism strategy, which will take advantage of Sierra Leone's beautiful beaches and countryside, and wild-life and culture, and help the nation recover economically from Ebola; and
- Restructuring management of Sierra Leone's shipping register, which will enable it to respond to international concerns about Sierra Leone flagged ships being involved in international smuggling of drugs, arms and people.

It is too early to see the full impact of these decisions and it will often be hard to quantify the difference made by new procedures or the use of evidence for specific decisions, not least because of the confidentiality of Cabinet documents and discussions. But there is no doubt that the Sierra Leone Cabinet is making greater use of evidence to make better decisions.

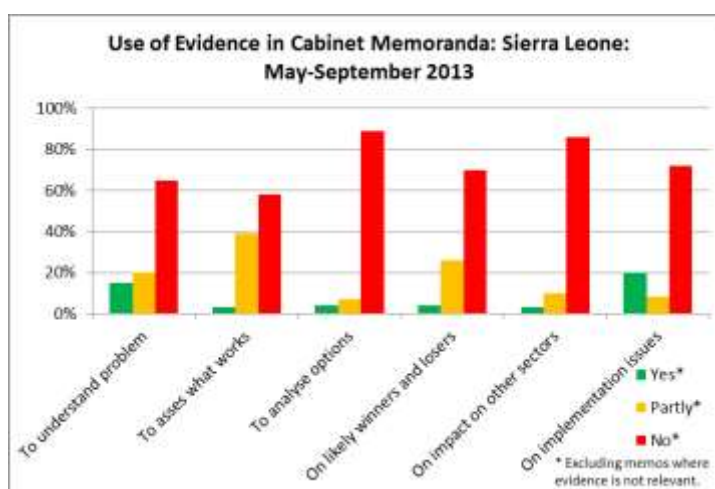
There were a number of critical factors behind the success of the Sierra Leone reforms:

1. Strong commitment and leadership by the President and the Cabinet Secretary:

In 2013 the newly-appointed Cabinet Secretary was looking to make his mark with substantial improvements in the support the Secretariat provided to Cabinet. Importantly, he had the confidence of the President and was also Head of the Civil Service, which facilitated implementation of the reforms.

2. Reviewing Cabinet processes at the outset, to motivate and focus the reforms:

The Government already had data to show that only 50% of Cabinet decisions were being implemented. To explore the reasons for this, the Secretariat asked the ACGN to conduct a confidential process review of all 45 written proposals considered by Cabinet over a 5 month period in 2013. This review, based on ACGN's International Cabinet Process Assessment Tool, revealed that most proposals lacked evidence on key issues, for example on whether the proposed intervention would work, its costs and feasibility and its likely impact (see diagram). Limited resources and capacities available to Ministries were significant factors behind low implementation rates, but the review highlighted that most decisions were not informed by available evidence, including evidence on available resources and capacities.



Similar reviews have since been conducted in 2015 and 2016, demonstrating very significant increases in the evidence used in proposals.

3. Focusing on procedures and institutional capacity, rather than just training:

The new procedures were extensively discussed with the President and Cabinet members before the new Cabinet Manual was finally approved by the Government in March 2015. Delays due to Ebola, allowing time for more discussions, actually increased the level of ownership. High level approval of the procedures, including the requirements to include evidence in proposals, ensured that Ministries complied in order to get their proposals before Cabinet. In this regard the approach was inherently top-down, rather than working primarily with line Ministries to persuade them to submit evidence-informed proposals to Cabinet.

4. A standard template for Cabinet proposals:

The requirement to use a standard template, which prompts Ministers to provide specific evidence to support their proposals, was the most tangible change, having far more impact than the principles and rules set out in the Manual. When the Manual was first approved, the President insisted that all Cabinet proposals for the next Cabinet meeting be submitted using the new template. Apart from a temporary halt in the flow of proposals, the immediate result was that many Ministers and senior officials approached the Secretariat seeking help to meet the new requirements. This provided an opportunity for the newly established Cabinet Policy Review Unit to work with Ministries to build their capacity to use evidence in actual memos they were preparing for Cabinet. The Secretariat did not have to persuade Ministries to use evidence or to attend training; instead they came to the Secretariat seeking help in meeting the specific requirements approved by the President and Cabinet.

5. Steps to improve coordination between Ministries and their capacity to comply:

The new Manual established three Cabinet Standing Committees, to bring Ministers and officials together before Cabinet meetings to discuss proposals and to review the evidence to support them (implemented late in 2016). The Secretariat also established and trained a network of Cabinet Focal Persons across all Ministries, to assist in complying with the new procedures, especially use of the new template. And with support from the ACGN and local trainers, the Secretariat provided training for 150 civil servants in evidence-informed policy development. Most of the training used practical exercises and included rigorous testing of trainees before and after the training.

6. International support from practitioners and peers:

The technical advisers engaged by ACGN and ASI in Sierra Leone and elsewhere all had extensive hands-on experience working in many Cabinet Secretariats. This helped to build trust and recognised the specialist nature of the policy role of Secretariats, which differs fundamentally from policy development in a line Ministry or a policy think-tank.

Peer advice from other Cabinet Secretaries also provided vital support for the Sierra Leone initiatives. Cabinet Secretaries are in a unique position within their governments, without the

local peer support that, say, Permanent Secretaries can call on. The ACGN held three very successful Roundtable meetings of Cabinet Secretaries (who formed the Council of African Cabinet Secretaries), to compare notes and privately share practical experiences on the use of evidence and other issues relating to Cabinet processes. Many of these discussions have been very sensitive, for example about their working relationships with Presidents and Ministers, which is why it has been important for them to come together face-to-face and to control the agenda, rather than being lectured by external experts.

7. Mainstreaming to maximise sustainability:

The focus on mainstream institutional processes and working through the civil service has meant that the new procedures in Sierra Leone are expected to be sustained well beyond the DFID support. They are owned and managed by a permanent Secretariat staffed by civil servants, not a special unit unlikely to survive a change of President. Despite civil war and abrupt changes in government, the previous Cabinet Manual in Sierra Leone lasted more than 50 years, with procedures based on 1950s UK Cabinet processes. Civil Servants in the Secretariat and in Ministries will continue to process evidence-informed memos, even if there is 100% turnover of Ministers following the next election. Civil service promotion exams in Sierra Leone now assess candidates' understanding of the evidence requirements of Cabinet and these competencies are being incorporated into mainstream civil service training.

The ACGN will continue to provide international support to Sierra Leone. Now registered as an International NGO, it has already obtained funding from the Australian Government to improve evidence from stakeholders and is in discussion with other donors. Its members have agreed to a \$10,000 annual membership fee from member secretariats to keep ACGN going. The Cabinet Secretaries are thus not only committing their valuable time to ACGN meetings, but also some of their precious budgets.

The ACGN is actively seeking other Cabinet Secretariats to participate. For more information on ACGN and its work, see 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.