

# OPEN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE REPORT (Democratic Governance Unit)

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Focus Area:	Governance

## I. Project Summary

- Project title:  
Open Government Initiative (OGI): 1 year project (extension being requested)
- Key partners (local and international) and their roles?  
Ministry of Information and Communication: Overall coordination of projects  
Ministry of Presidential and Public Affairs: Implementation of activities for Presidency
- Budget/contributions:  
UNDP: 300,000 US\$ (through Democratic Governance Thematic Trust Fund)  
Government: In kind operational contribution

## II. Background/Context

Sierra Leone was engulfed in one of the most devastating civil war that lasted over a decade in the 1990's. One of the root causes of the conflict has been traced to the alienation of the population from governance and abuse of power and authority including corruption. The Country has made tremendous strides since the cessation of conflict in 2002 to heal the wounds of the conflict and enthrone good governance. Consequently, it has, among other things adopted a decentralization policy which has led to the resuscitation of the Local Council Administration after 30 years. Most of Sierra Leone population, particularly youths and women reside in the hinterlands. The Open Government Initiative (OGI) was designed to respond to the objectives of the Government to deepen democracy and participatory decision making, as articulated in President Ernest Bai Koroma's Agenda for Change.

## III. Project Design and Implementation

The main objective of OGI is to promote platforms through which the Government and the population directly interact, thereby enhancing transparency in the process of the business of governance and bringing elected and appointed officials to account to the population for actions taken on their behalf. It also is designed to enable the Government feel the pulse of the people and better understand their development needs and priorities. It also provides the government an opportunity to receive feedback on its performances and areas for alignment. Overall, the result will be people-centered governance leading to the deepening of democracy and trust in the governance authorities.. The Presidency and relevant Ministers visit the districts to have face to face discussions with the people about their day to day challenges, such as agriculture, stable energy supply, promotion of girl's education, employment of youth, improvement of health facilities. People can also ask any questions and the Government is required to answer them and utilize the voices of people into their policy development. Available information communication technologies, such as UN radio, community radio networks, mobile text messaging are being used to engage the people nation-wide in this policy dialogue.

Major activities include:-

**Town-Hall meetings:** The President, Ministers and Senior Government officials visit one district in each month (September, October, November, and December 2008) to engage in open discussions with the people on the trend of governance, emerging issues in the economy and suggestion on how the government can improve its performance. All community members, especially women and youth, Civil Society groups, private sector operators are encouraged to participate. Representatives from the government present their report on performances in various sectors and then community members ask questions to President or Minister directly or raise concerns that the people want the Government to consider.

**Project Visits:** The Executive also uses the opportunity of the visit to inspect development projects within the District to determine physical progress and constraint and to agree on solutions for the benefit of the people. It also provides the President the platform to see areas of difficulty not being addressed and to plan for such within the development framework.

**Radio-talk:** This platform provides wider reach for the Executive to discuss and reach out to the public quarterly to report on the performance, constraints and address emerging issues. Special topics for each session are agreed based on the context of the time and addresses. It is basically a discussion, question and answer platform.

**Open-House at the Presidency:** A small number of community members, selected through a competitive process, will be invited to visit the State House, have a feel of the “seat of power”, and meet closely with Mr. President and his cabinet. These members will be chosen as the ‘heroes’ who have been identified for service to their communities (e.g. teachers and health workers), or as ‘innovators’ who have mobilized communities to solve a development problem or have innovated in any sector of human development. These people are honoured with prestigious Presidential award to spur dedicated service by citizens and recognition by the country.

**E-Forum:** This platform is based on the website of the “OGI”. It allows Sierra Leoneans in the country and Diaspora to interact virtually and provide inputs for improving governance and service delivery.

To implement this project, the roles of OGI Team include identification of discussion themes and districts to visit, design the format of discussion and organization of the town hall meeting. The commitment of President and Ministers to visit the field and dialogue with people was the prerequisite to implement the project effectively and build the trust among the people on the government’s initiative to be accountable and transparent.

The dialogues enable the people to voice their concerns and propose solution to emerging issues including the food crises and energy and environmental concerns.

Rice is the major staple food in Sierra Leone and the food crises exposed the country to increases in prices of imported rice. Mining is also heavy in the country with its attendant environmental challenges. In addition, waste management has been a challenge for both rural and urban communities. The interaction sessions enabled the government to feel the pulse of the people and to address issues of rice price, fuel and environmental impact of mining on host communities.

During the discussion on agriculture, President emphasised the agricultural tradition of Sierra Leone and appealed to the people to go back to their farms, which have been deserted during the conflict. Further, in a country where public power supply was almost non-existent after the decade long civil war, the recent fuel price increase, coupled with the commodity price increase, has posed serious threat to the livelihood of the population at large. Therefore, the discussion on energy this year was timely and brought to the highest political authority additional attention to this important topic.

## IV. Project Results

This project greatly contributed to the people's perception on increased transparency and accountability of the government, as well as to bringing the government and people together, which has not been fully achieved by the challenging decentralization processes. This process also has contributed to the consolidation of peace and prevention of future conflict.

Since the beginning of this project in this September, President himself visited districts of Bombali and Port Loko, and Vice President visited Bo district with Ministers of Presidential Affairs, Agriculture, Energy and Power, Information and Communication, Education, Labor and Local Government. OGI was highly welcomed by the people as the first experience to have Presidency in their own community to have a dialogue and discussions on their daily concerns of poverty, health, education, employment, infrastructure. This initiative resulted in the establishment of solid channel to promote the direct information flow and trust building between the Government and the people.

Sierra Leone has been polarized along Political Party lines since the 2007 Presidential elections and there have been perception from the opposition party "SLPP" that the Government is neglecting the interest of the opposition communities. The OGI enabled the President and his cabinet to visit for the first time some of these District and reassure citizens that he is a President for all Sierra Leoneans.

It has also enabled the people and the Ministers of Energy, Agriculture, Commerce and Trade to address the rice and fuel price issues, and the energy concerns. It led to Government measures to mitigate price increases through both fiscal incentives to importers, private sector operators and Governments of India on concessionary rice export terms.

The success of the OGI was also highlighted by President's speech at the Bi-Annual Review Meeting of Peacebuilding Commission on Sierra Leone on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

The entire population of Sierra Leone has benefited through the mitigation measures on price increases on rice, fuel and transportation. The Mining communities have also benefited as there is now better understanding between the Mining Companies and their hosts as well as the environment.

Others who have benefited is the Government as it now feels better the pulse of the people and is regaining trust from the opposition political parties.

Further, community members in the rural area whose voices and concerns are hardly heard by the central government now have a platform for being heard..

Nearly 2,000 community members participated in the town hall meetings in Bombali, Bo and Port Loko. Since Bo was the second visit, particular efforts were made to promote women and youth participation in collaboration with a popular singer who made a theme song of OGI.

Rice prices were kept within reach following complaints from the forum

Fuel prices and transportation cost were kept within reach of the citizens following concerns raised in one of the forums.

The design and implementation of the project was with full involvement of national entities. This has enabled them to fully appreciate the power of the tools used and there are plans to incorporate the lessons learned to the “National Communication Strategy” implementation plan. The highly capable OGI team formed by the Government is also playing an important role in ensuring the effective implementation of the project. The role of UNDP is to provide constant technical support in the choice of theme and format of visit in order to maximize the impact of this activity.

The project has direct impact on the MDGs as follows:

Agriculture is now being addressed with greater people participation to avert the food crises and ensure food security

The increased mobilization of the people around the transparency and accountability theme is helping to reduce corruption and allow more development resources to be channeled effectively.

It has also enabled the Government and the Mining Companies to address the environment impact of their operations and attendant health problems to the host communities in Kono.

While this project does not have direct impact on MDG indicators, it has provided an enabling environment for the Government to address critical needs in the community. Indeed, the themes that were chosen by the OGI are directly related to MDGs targets, specifically Goal 1, 2, 3 and 7.

## **V. Monitoring and Evaluation**

This initial activity has been so successful that the government has incorporated the OGI activities into the national communication strategy. When the current funds run out, it is expected that the government take up these activities as part of the national communication strategy.

The government is planning to expand this project in three ways. The first is the expansion of geographical coverage to increase the number of district to visit. The second is the expansion of national institutions to be involved. Currently the executive branch of government, the Presidency, has been reaching out to the people, and, the judiciary and parliament will also join this effort. The third is the expansion through more effective use of ICT. The service of free SMS and use of nation-wide radio networks will enable larger population to participate remotely.

VI. Photos:

