



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

DELIVERING ON A PRESIDENTIAL AGENDA: SIERRA LEONE'S STRATEGY AND POLICY UNIT, 2010 - 2011

SYNOPSIS

In 2010, President Ernest Bai Koroma struggled to implement his development agenda for Sierra Leone, unable to count on consistent follow-through by his own ministries. He had won election in 2007, five years after an 11-year civil war had decimated the civil service and destroyed much of the West African country's infrastructure. Early in his presidency, Koroma had established an advisory group called the Strategy and Policy Unit (SPU) in a bid to monitor ministries' progress on major projects and to hold ministry staff accountable. During 2008–09, the SPU had made a few notable gains, particularly in formulating performance contracts with ministers and steering completion of the giant Bumbuna hydroelectric dam. But by 2010, major elements of Koroma's development agenda had faltered, and the president knew he had to improve coordination and accountability at the center of government in order to address Sierra Leone's daunting challenges. He hired a chief of staff, Kaifala Marah, and charged him with overhauling the SPU. Marah hired expert support staff and sharpened the unit's focus. Victor Strasser-King, a retired geology professor who oversaw the successful completion of the long-delayed Bumbuna project while working as an SPU adviser, became director of the unit. Rather than spreading its efforts across all of the president's priorities, the unit under Strasser-King targeted a handful of flagship projects. The revamped SPU held regular coordination meetings of the president and ministry officials that strengthened monitoring and accountability and identified logjams and bottlenecks that required presidential intervention. By late 2011, with support from the Africa Governance Initiative, the United Nations Development Programme and other partners, the SPU had increased interministerial coordination and significantly improved progress on priority programs. This case study describes the reforms in the president's office at the center of government.

Michael Scharff drafted this case study on the basis of interviews conducted in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in October 2011. Case published February 2012. For more examples of how Sierra Leone strengthened its center of government, see related cases, "Turning on the Lights in Freetown, Sierra Leone: Completing the Bumbuna Hydroelectric Plant, 2008–2009" and "A Promise Kept: How Sierra Leone's President Introduced Free Health Care in One of the Poorest Nations on Earth, 2009–2010."

INTRODUCTION

President Ernest Bai Koroma won election to Sierra Leone's highest office in 2007, pledging improvements in energy, transportation and social services such as health and education. Only five years earlier, an 11-year civil war had ended and left an estimated 50,000 people dead. An additional two million Sierra Leoneans had been displaced out of a prewar population of five million. When the fighting subsided, 80% of the population lived on less than US\$1 a day, according to the United Nations.

In April 2008, Koroma consolidated his campaign pledges into an "Agenda for Change," a vision document that aimed to lift Sierra Leone from its position at the bottom of the U.N.'s global human development rankings. The international community would judge Sierra Leone's progress on the headway it made toward achieving its Millennium Development Goals—concrete targets, including improvements in education and child health that U.N. member states agreed to realize by the year 2015.

Koroma quickly found that implementing his agenda was far more difficult than writing it. Although his vision statement was full of good ideas, the document lacked any concrete plan for engaging the ministries responsible for doing the heavy lifting required to enact real change.

Shortages of experienced staff and procedural and structural weaknesses hindered the president's ability to ensure that government employees implemented his vision. Many of Sierra Leone's most talented people had fled during the war, and Koroma had few trusted and competent advisers to make sure that ministries followed through on his plans. In addition, the war had destroyed much of Sierra Leone's infrastructure. Many ministry buildings lacked power and running water, communications equipment was in shambles, and most roads were unpaved.

Koroma was not the first head of state to wrestle with the challenge of making Sierra

Leone's center of government more effective and purposeful. His predecessor, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, had tried to reorganize his office and relationships with the ministries both before he was ousted in a coup in 1997 and again after he returned to power in 1998. Upon his return, Kabbah had established the National Policy Advisory Committee, which consisted of retired government advisers. Although the committee provided guidance and ideas on policy matters, it had little impact through the end of Kabbah's term in 2007 on the main problem confronting Sierra Leone's government: ineffective implementation of top-level strategy. The committee ended with the Kabbah presidency.

When Koroma took office in late 2007, he realized he would need a stronger structure and greater accountability in order to implement the changes that Sierra Leone needed. The next year, he established a Strategy and Policy Unit (SPU) in his office to support ministers to get things done. Koroma appointed Abdul Rahman Turay, the former head of Sierra Leone's central bank, to serve as a coordinator for the unit. The president also hired five advisers and divided their responsibilities among the government's 22 ministries.

In a key move that would have ramifications later on, Koroma assigned advisory responsibility for the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources to Victor Strasser-King, a retired geologist and former principal of Fourah Bay University, Sierra Leone's leading institution of higher learning. In his capacity as SPU adviser, Strasser-King played a major role in shepherding the completion of the long-delayed Bumbuna hydroelectric dam. The success of the power project gave the capital, Freetown, its first reliable source of power while earning public plaudits for Koroma and widespread respect for Strasser-King's management abilities.

Donors and other partners provided support to the unit. Because Sierra Leone's postwar

government did not have the resources, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) promised financial assistance until 2010. Staff from the Africa Governance Initiative (AGI), a nonprofit organization founded by former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, provided advisory support from the unit's inception.

Although Koroma's original SPU achieved some other gains from 2008 through 2009—including introducing performance contracts for ministers and developing ways to track ministry performance, for example—it had spotty success in completing its main task of accelerating progress on presidential goals. SPU advisers struggled to get an audience with the president, and the unit's staff, overwhelmed by the number and complexity of presidential priority projects, was unable to monitor progress effectively. When U.N. funding for the SPU expired in early 2010, the advisory team dissolved and the unit shuttered.

This case study documents Koroma's efforts during 2010–11 to restore and strengthen the SPU to focus on major priorities, improve decision making and bolster the capacity of the center of government to support and closely follow the work of ministries in implementing national strategy.

THE CHALLENGE

Although Koroma counted the completion of the Bumbuna dam as a key success of the original SPU, by early 2010 he realized that the unit had fallen far short of what he hoped it would be. The problems were manifold.

Many of the challenges that Koroma confronted in 2010 were the same ones that he had faced two years earlier, when he had set up the original SPU. First, a lack of trained and experienced staff, both at the ministries and in the president's office, hindered successful action and worked against effective decision making at all

levels. Most educated people had left the country during the war, and the public sector was bloated and under-resourced.

In Sierra Leone's civil service, the lines were blurred between nonpartisan career workers and political appointees. During the war, presidents often had filled ministry positions with allies who were unsuited to the jobs and unable—or unwilling—to do what was needed. Koroma's administration was concerned about the possibility that ministry staff of opposing political parties might try to sabotage the president's efforts and that staff simply would not do their work or would not do it well.

Second, persistent infrastructure gaps hampered the ministries' ability to implement and monitor projects. Working conditions at the ministries were difficult. Ministry buildings in Freetown still needed substantial repairs. For example, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology had no power, and other ministries had electricity for only a few hours a day. The roads system was in shambles, and posed a major hurdle for government officials who had to travel around the country to check progress on ministry projects.

Third, the president's office found it difficult to track what ministers were doing. Although the president had introduced performance contracts for ministers after the original SPU was set up in 2008, accurate information for evaluations was scarce. Owing in part to the president's heavy load of regular duties and his entanglement in the details of various projects, formal evaluations of ministers often fell by the wayside.

Finally, the president still struggled to get his 22 ministries to work together. Because of the lack of coordination, problems that required combined action by several ministries often remained unaddressed.

In an attempt to stay abreast of the many projects each ministry had under way, the original

SPU had used off-the-shelf software to create simple spreadsheets that listed key priorities, the individuals responsible for delivery of each priority, and the status of progress on each. However, most of these spreadsheets listed only broad goals, and lacked details about the actions and resources needed to accomplish specific projects.

The original SPU was supposed to help Koroma navigate these challenges in order to get things done, but the president found that the unit's design posed its own set of unique difficulties.

The five advisers in the original SPU had not always worked effectively with their ministerial counterparts. All of the advisers had been senior figures—one was a former minister of foreign affairs and another was a former attorney general, for instance—and they had big personalities and egos to match. They sometimes resented engaging with lower-level ministry staff as required by their positions and preferred high-level “blue skies” thinking rather than engaging in the detail of how to make sure implementation actually happened. Advisers also tended to gravitate toward pet projects they knew well and felt most comfortable addressing. Because of the advisers' general lack of technical expertise, the president could not rely on his team for well-considered counsel when ministries brought issues to the SPU.

The unit's mandate was too unclear and too broad to be manageable. Was it supposed to do long-term strategy or ensure delivery or both? Advisers disagreed among themselves about the purpose.

In addition, working relationships between the original SPU and the ministries often were confrontational rather than cooperative. Strasser-King said ministers resented advisers who approached ministries and announced, “I am here from the SPU. I am an adviser to the president.

Let me see what you've been doing.” Ministry staffers complained that the SPU monitored their activities and scolded them for shortcomings but provided little of the support that they required.

Finally, the original SPU had fallen short in one of its priority tasks: to identify opportunities for the president's office to intervene at the ministerial level to help move projects forward. The unit had never established a schedule of regular meetings between the president's office, advisers and ministry staff to analyze progress on presidential initiatives, and a similar lack of structure hindered the effective implementation of ministers' performance contracts.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

In early 2010, Koroma made two key decisions. Aware that speeding up progress on his change agenda meant overhauling the design and function of the SPU, he decided he had to reconstitute the unit with a new round of donor funding. At the same time, he hired his first chief of staff, Kaifala Marah. The chief of staff had government experience. He was a veteran of the Commonwealth Secretariat in London and had worked as a budget analyst for the New York State Senate in the U.S. Hiring Marah allowed Koroma to delegate some of the important responsibilities and tasks that he formerly had reserved exclusively for himself.

Koroma assigned Marah responsibility for writing a proposal to revamp the SPU in a way that would address the challenges the original SPU faced. In particular, the new SPU needed to recruit committed and capable staff, promote better support to ministries and greater coordination between ministries, enhance accountability, and provide expert advice to the president on his priority agenda items. With support from the AGI, Marah crafted his proposal for a revamped SPU between July and November 2010. He concentrated on ways to reduce the

number of priorities on the agenda, develop a stronger rapport with ministers, rework the monitoring system to facilitate implementation, and improve the quality of information provided to the president.

As he wrote his proposal, Marah took note of the recommendations outlined in a consulting report. At the start of the year, just before funding for the original SPU was set to run out, the UNDP had hired a Ghanaian consulting firm to review the SPU project. The report recommended hiring a strong director who would report to the president's chief of staff, easing Koroma's time crunch and paving the way for deeper and more effective involvement by the president's office. The firm also recommended creating two distinct levels of SPU positions—advisers and analysts—with advisers focused on broad issues and analytical support, and analysts concentrating on details related to delivery. Other recommendations involved making recruiting more transparent and ensuring that the unit facilitated delivery in addition to tracking performance.

Marah envisioned a more potent SPU that would stress prioritization, coordination, delivery and monitoring while providing greater support from the president's office and collaborating more closely with ministerial staff. Prioritization was a key element because Koroma's "Agenda for Change" covered a broad spectrum of goals.

Marah also learned from the hard-won completion of the Bumbuna hydroelectric project, which demonstrated how targeting a specific project within a ministry could produce meaningful results. He decided to reduce the numbers of priorities on the president's agenda and focus the SPU's efforts.

The president and his chief of staff decided to select one flagship project for each of the top priorities in the change agenda, yielding projects in health, agriculture, private sector development,

energy, water resources, and roads. "Setting the flagship projects was a way of saying we are going to focus our priorities on these areas because we believe these areas are critical to improving the social and economic landscape of Sierra Leone," said Miatta Kargbo, an adviser to several ministries including the Ministry of Health and Sanitation. Kargbo held a master's degree in international business and had spent more than 11 years in the pharmaceutical industry in the U.S. Her flagship project was the free health-care initiative, which the president had launched in April 2010.

Another prominent example of a flagship was the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security's Smallholder Commercialization Program, a five-year, US\$400 million initiative to bolster agricultural productivity and improve farmers' access to markets, partly by building grain storage units around the country. Abbie Maxwell, an AGI adviser who assisted the agriculture ministry, called the small-farmer program "an ambitious program that would have been complicated for a developed country to achieve." For example, the program required the cooperation of a variety of ministries that were not accustomed to working well together.

In November 2010, the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID) and the European Union joined with the UNDP to fund Marah's proposal as a UNDP-managed project until the general elections in 2012. When Marah set out to hire a director for the unit, he quickly decided on Strasser-King, who had demonstrated his competence as a manager when he oversaw the Bumbuna project.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

The new SPU aimed to monitor and support implementation of the president's flagship projects, analyze ministers' performance contracts and attempt to build effective and trusting

relationships with ministry staff as part of a cooperative effort. Achieving these goals required a competent and energetic staff.

Finding good people

In December 2010, aware that the SPU's success would hinge on the quality of its personnel, Merah focused attention on hiring analysts and advisers. For both positions, he sought candidates with management experience and the strong interpersonal skills essential to build relationships with ministry staff. The SPU advertised for analysts in local newspapers and on the Internet. In accordance with standard civil service procedures, short-listed candidates took an examination that tested analytical skills. They interviewed finalists. Merah managed the hiring of advisers, whose positions entailed broader responsibilities, greater decision-making authority and 10 to 20 years more experience on average than analysts. Merah identified candidates, conducted all interviews and decided who was hired.

Marah hired a total of four advisers and 10 analysts. The original SPU had five advisers and an equal number of analysts. "With the increased staffing level we were able to not only cover a wider spectrum of activities, but able to provide higher quality technical advice," Strasser-King said.

After completing the hiring phase, Merah matched analysts with advisers and assigned each team a set of ministries. Some advisers had more ministries under their purview than others, depending on expertise.

Analyzing and coordinating policy

When Koroma had assigned him oversight of Bumbuna in 2008 as part of his advisory duties in the original SPU, Strasser-King had set up a spreadsheet tracker specifically designed to support his efforts to complete the dam project.

Construction had dragged on for years, beset by a lack of coordination between contractors and ministries. The Bumbuna tracker allowed the SPU and the project team to isolate top priorities for the project and who was responsible for getting what done and when. This was the first time that a specific project within a ministry had its own spreadsheet to keep tabs on progress, and the Bumbuna tracker became a template for the new SPU.

Although all ministries had spreadsheets to monitor their general progress under the new SPU, flagship projects within some ministries had separate trackers. Flagship projects also had separate spreadsheets that tracked month-to-month progress on specific action points that were listed on the overall tracker.

In January 2011, Strasser-King, Merah and their AGI advisers worked closely with SPU analysts and advisers and ministry staff to formulate the specific targets for each flagship tracker. In establishing targets, the SPU encouraged ministry staff to think how to measure the broader impact of each goal. Maxwell of AGI, referring to one of the outputs of the Smallholder Commercialization Program, explained: "We were helping the ministry staff to see that it's not just a grain storage unit per se, but all of the things that a grain storage unit could lead to, such as increased food security and improvements in livelihoods."

Throughout the first few weeks of 2011, the SPU worked to finalize the tracking system. The tracker for the Smallholder Commercialization Program listed all priority components, including the construction of roads for farmers to transport their goods to market. It listed a completion date for each element of the project and included a column that ministry staff updated monthly to report progress toward completion. Ministry staff used three colors—green, yellow and red—to indicate whether a project was on target, in

trouble or behind schedule. “The flagship tracker helped ministry and SPU officials to focus their attention on the most pressing aspects of the program as it developed,” explained Tim Bromfield, an adviser with AGI who worked closely with the SPU. “The key element of the tracker was that ministry staff knew what they were supposed to do, and in what time frame.”

Keeping tabs on progress

The SPU convened monthly progress meetings at the president’s office to review the status of each flagship project. Besides Koroma, Chief of Staff Merah, SPU Director Strasser-King and the SPU adviser attended, along with analysts and ministry staff responsible for the project under discussion.

The minister of agriculture prepared for these monthly progress sessions by meeting every Monday morning with his two deputy ministers and directors to review progress on the small-farmer program. Ndeye Sesay, the SPU analyst assigned to the agriculture ministry, explained the weekly meetings were a chance for those involved in the program to gather data from the directors and update the tracker. Although not all ministries with flagship projects held such weekly meetings, one person in each ministry typically had responsibility for updating the ministry’s tracker as well as the monthly targets sheet on a regular basis.

About three weeks before the monthly meeting at the president’s office, the SPU sent an invitation to the relevant ministry with the dates of the meeting and a pre-meeting. Ten days before the progress meeting, the ministry sent the SPU drafts of three documents—the flagship tracker, the monthly targets sheet, and the progress meeting actions tracker, which noted decisions taken in the previous progress meeting.

A day or two after receiving the documents, SPU analysts sent a written brief to the chief of

staff, and the following day, the adviser and analyst briefed Merah in person. One week before the monthly gathering, which participants referred to as a “stocktake,” the SPU’s director, advisers and analysts met with the chief of staff, minister and other relevant ministry officials to discuss the actions tracker from the previous presidential progress meeting and, if necessary, why any actions agreed upon in the last progress meeting had not been completed. The participants also noted obstacles they felt might impede implementation and decided who from the ministry would address these challenges ahead of the formal progress meeting.

Kargbo, one of the SPU advisers, said these advance meetings helped the SPU to understand “the challenges that required the intervention from the SPU.” Kargbo said that immediately after the pre-meetings, “The SPU did the coordinating that was needed. We wrote letters, facilitated intra- and inter-ministerial meetings, and in general intervened as presidential advisers. We would say, ‘This is the expectation of His Excellency; this is our vision,’ and then ask the participants how we could work together.” Kargbo said the SPU tried to address as many minor issues as possible so that the concerns brought to the monthly meeting were only those that needed presidential attention. The ministry had the opportunity to revise its documents based on what was decided during the pre-meetings, and then, about four days before the progress meeting, resubmitted the documents to the SPU.

Three days before the meeting, the SPU staff sent the chief of staff an overview for him to use while briefing the president. The following day, the SPU staff briefed the chief of staff, who in turn briefed the president the day before the actual meeting.

Although Koroma officially chaired the progress meeting, the SPU adviser led the discussion. The actual meeting, said Kargbo, was

“more of an opportunity for ministry officials to have face time with the president. Officials showed him what had been done and got his opinion on where he wanted us to continue to focus and what he thought he could do to resolve additional bottlenecks.” Kargbo added that Koroma “had an amazing retentive memory” and played an important role in the meetings. “He could remember the exact decisions we made at stocktakes months ago,” she said. “He would say, ‘I thought we agreed on this. Why are we still discussing this?’”

A day after the progress meeting, the SPU sent the ministry an updated actions spreadsheet that included specific instructions for what the ministry should do to meet its targets.

The progress meetings aided coordination by regularly bringing together key people involved in specific projects and providing a forum for the president to learn about roadblocks and offer his intervention as needed. When necessary, the president convened additional gatherings to resolve bottlenecks. For example, one of the stocktake meetings for the small-farmer program revealed that the roads project had run into trouble. Under normal circumstances, the Sierra Leone Roads Agency handled all such construction projects. However, the World Bank and the U.N.’s International Fund for Agricultural Development had expressed reservations with the roads agency’s financial-management procedures and had refused to release funds until the government established an independent body to monitor expenditures.

The SPU convened a meeting at the president’s office with the key people involved in the road-construction project, including the director of the roads agency, the finance minister, the financial secretary from the Ministry of Finance and Development, and the agriculture ministry’s two deputy ministers and directors. As a result of the meeting, Koroma instructed the

SPU to work with the finance ministry to set up a separate maintenance fund for roads, independent of the finance ministry and having its own chief operating officer and accountant. The president directed the SPU to ensure that tax revenue collected from the sale of gasoline that would normally flow to the roads agency was channeled instead to the new fund and earmarked for the feeder roads. After the finance ministry established the fund, donors released the money they had been withholding. The road-building project was back on track.

Strengthening accountability

Performance contracts focused the work of ministers and enabled Koroma to keep tabs on their progress. Beginning in January 2011, Strasser-King, the SPU advisers and Marah sat with each of the 22 ministers individually and defined each minister’s quarterly and yearly targets and deliverables, which they listed on the ministers’ contracts. The targets that appeared on each ministry’s performance tracker table, and, when applicable, the ministry’s flagship project tracker heavily influenced the performance contract targets. Kargbo, one of the SPU advisers, explained: “When you sit to draft the performance contract, you think, ‘What do we need to accomplish this year to meet the vision the president has outlined in his Agenda for Change?’ And you say, ‘This is where we need to get to. And for us to get there, what are the steps in-between?’”

The president signed the contract with each minister after the conversation. Kargbo said the contracts were the president’s way of saying to each minister, “This is your contribution to achieving our development goals, and at the end of the year I will assess you and hold you accountable to the agreement.” Analysts reviewed the contracts and shared evaluations with the advisers on a quarterly basis. Following each

review, the president invited all of his ministers to his office as a group and reviewed their general performance.

Building relationships

Shifting the SPU's role from loosely monitoring ministry efforts to closely tracking progress and providing active support required improving relations between the unit and ministry staff. Strasser-King said ministry staffers generally viewed the original SPU as a "big brother" operation that often was more hindrance than help. For the revamped unit, he emphasized the power of personal relationships. He told his advisers and analysts that they should introduce themselves to their ministry colleagues and pay regular visits to the ministries. "I always stress this. ... There should be mutual respect and there should be mutual understanding of what the roles are," Strasser-King said. "I am not the minister. ... He is the head of the ministry. I am only there to help him."

The SPU provided active support to ministries, departments and agencies in several ways. First, the unit offered project management and planning expertise. Second, with its convening power, the SPU could draw upon the authority of the president, the chief of staff and the SPU director to get the right people around the table, which helped facilitate decision making. Third, SPU analysts worked on the front lines, visiting ministry representatives daily to explain government processes, establish priorities, set deadlines, promote completion of action items, point out weaknesses in plans, and identify issues that required the attention of advisers. The stocktake meetings and quarterly reviews of the performance tracking tables helped SPU advisers identify key delivery issues to guide the support they offered to ministries.

Kargbo said that to be effective at her role as an SPU adviser, she had to earn the ministry staff's trust. "You have to be a partner," she said.

"If you take a back seat and see yourself as a presidential adviser, the monitor, the senior prefect, it's not going to work. The goal of my team is to go within our assigned ministries and be true partners in driving change, implementing key projects and helping them achieve the goals they have set out to reach." Sesay, the SPU analyst assigned to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security, said that her message to the ministry staff was straightforward: "We're not here to beat anybody up, but if you don't tell us what is going on, we can't help you."

The progress meetings offered an opportunity for SPU staffers to demonstrate their commitment to building trusting relationships. Advisers were quick to praise ministry staff for good work. "I reward those who are doing a great job by giving them the praise that is due in front of the president," Kargbo explained. "We highlight accomplishments." She said that even when ministry staff missed their targets, she tried to frame her comments as constructive. "For those directorates that are not doing a great job, the evidence is there to show, and we challenge them to work on what they need to do and how we can help," she said.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Delays and unforeseen complications were inevitable in the kinds of complex, interconnected government projects that the SPU worked to shepherd, and flexibility was sometimes a crucial asset.

"When the SPU set the targets and deadlines at the beginning of the year for the flagship projects, the president gave explicit instructions that the targets had to be met, and on time," said AGI adviser Maxwell. But by May 2011, for example, the minister of agriculture realized that many of the target projects for the small-farmer program were behind schedule. Although the ministry had overall responsibility for the program, and all of the targets were listed on the

ministry's flagship tracker spreadsheet, certain components had been subcontracted to private contractors who had problems of their own.

In May, procurement and funding delays in the contracted parts prompted the minister to write a letter to the president requesting an extension of the small-farmer program's deadlines. The president, despite his earlier insistence on sticking to the schedule, agreed to allow the ministry to alter some targets and change the completion dates. Strasser-King said the president's willingness to allow a mid-course adjustment, rather than reprimand ministry officials, demonstrated the center of government's flexibility in working with ministries. Still, he stressed, "There are situations where we may consider the request unreasonable."

Ministry staff and SPU advisers decided which targets the ministry could realistically meet on schedule and which should be realigned. The ministry then produced a document listing each revamped target and set one of three end dates: December 2011, June 2012 or December 2012. Under each target, ministry staff listed the steps that were needed to ensure deadlines were met. While considering the revised targets, the president discussed with his SPU advisers the steps that his office would take to ensure the new deadlines were met.

ASSESSING RESULTS

The SPU introduced detailed performance monitoring backed by a system of political authority and accountability. Spreadsheet tools used to track progress emphasized shared agreement on priorities among the president, ministers and ministry officials by keeping all focused on a small number of critical issues. Progress meetings enhanced coordination and, coupled with ministers' performance contracts, strengthened accountability.

Strasser-King said that one of the SPU's greatest strengths was its ability to help ministries,

agencies and departments coordinate with one another. "A ministry may be implementing a project and need the support of some other ministry," he explained. "If the coordination is not very good, then the activity may stall. So to ensure that things move, we help them in their coordination effort."

Sesay pointed to the improved relations between the SPU and the ministry as a measure of the unit's success. She noted that "ministry staff call me and ask, 'Ndeye, when is the next stocktake?'" Sesay said that ministry staff recognized the value of regular meetings with the president and that the president's office, through the SPU, could help the ministries complete projects.

Because Sierra Leone did not have a functioning cabinet secretariat, the SPU took on functions often carried out by such bodies. For example, secretariats traditionally act as an intermediary between ministries and the head of state's office. In addition to setting the cabinet meeting agenda, secretariat staff monitor ministry activity for the executive, develop information on ministry projects, and brief the executive on ministry activities.

The AGI's Maxwell said the various tools developed by the SPU, including the performance contracts, "provided the ministers with a framework to understand where their projects are and for their deputies to understand what their targets are." As a result, she said, "The entire ministry is able to manage targets much more easily." However, in January 2012, there was not yet enough data or consistency in the tracking process to determine what percentage of flagship projects' action items were delayed or completed on time.

Kargbo called the progress meetings "a very good process because it keeps the focus on the priorities." She said that for the meetings to work effectively, participants had to "be clear on expectations and delivery dates and who owns it."

Strasser-King added that the progress meetings “assured that they [ministry staff] performed at a certain level, because they had to give their stewardship to His Excellency on a regular basis.”

Reflecting on the evolution of the SPU, Mia Seppo, the UNDP’s country director, noted the unit’s successes but also highlighted the unit’s challenge to balance its emphasis on delivery with its ability to provide impartial and knowledgeable advice to the president. Seppo added that increased monitoring by the president’s office should be accompanied by “overall civil service reform: improved working conditions, pay reforms, retrenchment and recruitment policies and training, and introduction of tools needed to get the job done.”

Miatta Kargbo, the SPU adviser who held a master’s degree in international business, said her health, management and implementation experience made her well suited to oversee the ministries she had been assigned, including the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, the chief ministry behind the flagship free health-care initiative. Yet while SPU advisers and analysts often had technical competencies that spanned more than one area, their responsibility for multiple ministries with disparate goals (just four SPU advisers shared responsibility for 22 ministries) meant they could not always provide highly knowledgeable counsel in all of the areas assigned to them. Kargbo suggested more personnel were needed to handle the diverse challenges of the ministries.

REFLECTIONS

Seated in his office at Sierra Leone’s Statehouse, down the hall from President Ernest Bai Koroma’s suite, Victor Strasser-King, director of the Strategy and Policy Unit, said that he would advise other governments interested in setting up a similar operation to start by making

prudent hiring decisions. “You have to be very particular about the people you hire as advisers,” he said, referring to his own experience as an adviser in the original SPU. “You don’t want people who come in with their own agenda.”

In late 2011, with a general election scheduled for the following year, some questioned whether the unit, which was created and empowered under Koroma, would survive a change in administration. Others suggested ways to improve the unit if it were to continue in the years to come. Ndeye Sesay, the SPU analyst for the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security, said the unit needed additional staffing in order to function more effectively. Staff turnover threatened to undermine the ability of SPU staff to build relationships with ministry staff. Indeed, some people, like SPU advisor Miatta Kargbo—who had taken a leave of absence from her full-time job—were in their positions temporarily. “The challenges are overwhelming,” Sesay said. “I’m just one person, and my attention can only be in so many places.”

Despite its shortcomings, Strasser-King’s unit had achieved important gains by bolstering coordination and accountability at the center of government. Reflecting on the improved relationship between the SPU and ministries, Kargbo said: “If a ministry is just told to ‘set targets and implement and we’ll be back to you later,’ it’s not going to get done. But the monthly updates, the advisers being in the ministries and engaging as partners, the whole change in the model that you’re not just there to monitor and evaluate, but there to partner, drive change, remove bottlenecks and facilitate getting the work done, that’s really important,” she said. “Together you are achieving the goals and vision that the president has outlined, and together we are transforming our great nation.”

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