

Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007

Reforming and Building Capacity of the Sierra Leone Police, 1997-2007

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The working paper series on Sierra Leone is part of the research programme 'Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007'. These working papers present perspectives from both Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom regarding the implementation of activities broadly defined as security sector reform (SSR) in the period towards the end of and following the Sierra Leone war.

Following a core narrative constructed around four key events in the history of post-war Sierra Leone, starting in the mid-1990s and finishing with the successful General Elections of 2007, the work draws on a range of experiences from the process that may be used to inform future SSR policy and implementation. The final output of this research is a book documenting the security system transformation activities in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007.

This series is both an intermediate stage and an important output in itself. All papers were written by Sierra Leonean and British participants in security system transformation activities. The philosophy of the series is to edit as little as possible so that the views and opinions of the individuals are expressed, as much as possible, in their own words. As such, while the papers vary considerably in style and length, they provide a unique, collective insight into the Sierra Leone security system transformation process.

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Introduction

By 1999, it became obvious by every standard that the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) needed immediate reforming in order to regain both public confidence and international credibility. At the time, the SLP was considered a spent force, with little or no logistical support to enhance its capability. Its methods of policing were very unprofessional and displayed blatant disregard for human rights; corruption was the order of the day. Morale and motivation among police personnel were very low.

This was the state of affairs when the incumbent President, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, appointed Keith Biddle, a retired United Kingdom (UK) police officer, as Inspector-General of Police (IGP) in November 1999. At the time of his appointment, Biddle was head of the Commonwealth Police Development Task Force, which was transformed into the Commonwealth Community Safety and Security Project (CCSSP) in 2000. The main focus of the CCSSP was to support SLP operational activities, including capacity-building, in order to enhance prompt and effective response to crime and public disorder.

Under Biddle's leadership, comprehensive reforms of the SLP occurred, leading to a much more transparent and accountable police force increasingly responsive to the needs of the people. It is important that we look at the details of the reforms that took place in the SLP within the period under review.

Institutional Reforms

Ranking System

One of Biddle's first restructuring moves was to flatten the ranking system in the SLP from 22 to 10, in order to focus the force on their roles and responsibilities. This move ended past confusion about roles and responsibilities and also shortened the communication hierarchy.

The Executive Management Board (EMB)

Before Biddle's appointment, the IGP office was so powerful that everything emanated from and ended there. There was no recognition of the value of teamwork in decision making, let alone the freedom to use one's own

initiative. Upon assuming office, Biddle appointed a team of officers from the senior cadre to assist him in managing the Force. This body became known as the Executive Management Board (EMB), the highest decision-making body in the SLP. Members of the EMB were Senior Assistant Commissioners (SACs) who share national-level responsibility for Personnel Training and Welfare, Professional Standards and Support Services. Regional Commanders (REGPOLS) were also appointed to assist the IGP in the four regions of the country. Teamwork became the benchmark of Biddle's administration.

The Operational Support Division (OSD)

The OSD is the armed wing of the SLP. Its personnel were heavily involved in fighting alongside government troops during the war. After the war, their strength was too small to cope with rising security demands; restructuring was in order. Under Biddle's dynamic leadership, with strong support from the CCSSP, the OSD was restructured by another UK advisor, Ray England. The OSD was divided into the following professional units capable of meeting the country's internal security needs:

- **The Police Support Group** is responsible for maintenance of public order, cordons, searches and raids and renders assistance at major disasters and incidents.
- **The Static Protection Group** provides protection for key installations, institutions, premises and strategic locations.
- **The Mobile Armed Response Group** responds to armed attacks on key personalities, installations, institutions, premises and strategic locations.
- **The Armed Intervention Group** resolves armed sieges and hostage situations.
- **The Close Protection Group** provides bodyguards for key personnel, e.g., His Excellency the President, the Vice-President, Cabinet Ministers, Diplomats, visiting VIPs, Judges and Senior Police Officers.
- **The Training Group** is responsible for training all units mentioned above.

As a result of this robust restructuring process, conducted since 1999, the OSD can now meet international standards and the country's internal service delivery needs.

New SLP Departments

The restructuring process also established new departments in order to respond adequately to the policing needs of the people. These departments include:

- Family Support Unit – FSU
- Major Incident Support Team – MIST
- Complaints, Discipline and Internal Investigation Department – CDIID
- Community Relations Department – CRD
- Media and Public Relations Unit – MPRU
- Corporate Services Department – CSD

Police divisions were also restructured as Local Command Units; their Commanding Officers, formerly referred to as Chief Police Officers (CPOs), became Local Unit Commanders (LUCs). Police stations and some barracks were constructed throughout the country to provide adequate office space and accommodations. The Police Training School at Hastings was refurbished and new structures were built in order to strengthen its training capability. Work is in progress to transform the School into a Police Academy, in order to provide a more professional curriculum and expand in-service training.

Capacity Building

An integral component of the restructuring process was capacity building in terms of manpower and resources. Various training programmes at both national and international levels were pursued to enhance skills development and professionalism. A good number of senior officers were sent to the UK to pursue an International Commanders Course. Senior Officers also benefited from Senior Management Courses delivered by the Institute of Public Administration and Management at the University of Sierra Leone. Other courses at the national level, including basic Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and FSU courses, research methodology and management courses, a Sergeants Development Course, an Inspectors Development Course, are delivered periodically. The capacity of vehicles and communications equipment has been greatly improved. The SLP now has over 800 vehicles and communications coverage almost everywhere in the country.

The Family Support Unit (FSU) - A Case Study of the Sierra Leone Police Restructuring Process

The FSU started as a Domestic Violence Unit which I established at the Kissy Police District Headquarters in Freetown. After the January 1999 invasion of Freetown by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), I was posted as Commander of the Kissy Division, a district which was home to thousands of ex-combatants and their “wives” and other relatives. As the so-called “wives” struggled to regain their freedom (for jungle justice was no longer applicable in the city), there was stiff resistance on the part of the ex-combatants who wanted to control them. This precipitated a dramatic rise in domestic violence cases which overwhelmed my personnel; I decided to create a special unit to handle them.

When the CCSSP brought in expatriate CID Trainers from Britain in 2000, IGP Biddle, Bill Roberts, a UK Adviser, and I considered it appropriate that the Domestic Violence Unit be developed into a more comprehensive unit to respond to not only sexual offences, but also cruelty against women and children. After deliberations between police headquarters and the CCSSP, the unit was transformed into the FSU and officially launched. It then became a unit under the CID with a Director at Police Headquarters answerable to the Director of Crime Management. We launched a major FSU publicity campaign in all broadcast and print media and in schools, markets, youth groups and area organisations. As a result, the FSU became a household name and everybody became interested.

Massive training exercises were conducted by FSU Trainers to equip the police to investigate sexual offences, domestic violence and child abuse and to meet the increasing number of cases reported. We also established partnerships with other organisations interested in protecting women and children from abuse. For example, the International Rescue Committee (IRC – Rainbo Centre) conducted (and still does so) free medical examinations and treatment for all victims. The Ministry of Social Welfare provided social workers who were trained with FSU police officers in joint investigations of sexual abuse. (During joint investigations, the police look for criminal elements involved in prosecution, while the social workers look at issues of victim and child protection.)

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) provided motorbikes and other forms of assistance for FSUs, the CCSSP funded all the training and the FSU was ultimately established in twenty-six police divisions country-wide. United Nations Civilian Police Force (UN CIVPOL) officers also worked with the FSUs all over the country and were very impressed with their effectiveness and professionalism. With their assistance, UNAMSIL provided training for FSU personnel. Senior CIVPOL officers were attached at FSU headquarters to advise and mentor personnel working in the unit.

The Justice Sector Development Programme (JSDP) replaced the CCSSP in 2005 with a view to establishing safety, security and access to justice for the people of Sierra Leone, especially for the poor, vulnerable and marginalised. The JSDP established a multi-sector approach, working with government and civil society to deliver even-handed justice. This programme still addresses judicial issues such as prisons, police (especially the FSU), juvenile justice, human rights and gender issues.

In 2006, I was appointed chairperson of the JSDP Task Force, which was comprised of justice sector middle management officials. We met often with the JSDP team to develop a strategic plan for the justice sector that reflected the needs of justice sector institutions and civil society. The JSDP constructed FSU offices at police stations in, among other places, Lumley, Kissy, Cabala Town, Waterloo, Tombo and Goderich. (They had already built the pilot office at the Moyamba Police Station.) The programme also supplied FSU office furniture, including televisions and video sets for abuse victims and children's toys for interview rooms. Plans are in place to construct seven additional FSU offices in the provinces.

Even though there was much delay in dealing with FSU cases in courts, we still achieved enough convictions to send a clear message to the public that sexual offences and cases involving protection of women and children from abuse are considered very serious matters. With the help of two British judges in the High Court, convictions with up to 16 years imprisonment were handed down. Convictions were also achieved in the provinces, thereby increasing public confidence in the FSU and the courts. This led to a great increase in the number of cases

reported. Today, Sierra Leoneans realise that no one will be spared in the dispensation of justice to vulnerable women and children.

International Recognition

In June 2005, UNICEF Liberia requested the SLP to train the Liberia National Police (LNP) in the investigation of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) in order to counteract the increasing occurrence of sexual offences in that country. The SLP was contracted after careful observation of police institutions in West Africa in their handling of women and children suffering from various forms of abuse.

The IGP, Brima Acha Kamara, approved the SLP contract to help the LNP establish a FSU prototype. Together with Sergeant (now Inspector) Vandi, we spent two months doing research and preparing a training package of international standards for Liberia. UNICEF Liberia requested the heads of NGOs and sexual abuse specialists from the United Nations Mission in Liberia to read and critique our training manual. In August 2005, we left for Liberia; training began with a colourful launching ceremony in full view of the mass media. A total of 25 male and female police officers were trained for one month; the Headquarters of the Women and Children Protection Section, Liberia's FSU prototype, was established at LNP headquarters.

After multiple trainings, a total of 75 LNP personnel are now trained in family support issues and practices. We have also established units and deployed personnel in Monrovia and its immediate environs. Each of our training partnerships also included mentoring and recommendations for further programme improvement. In late 2006, we returned to Liberia to carry out a training of trainers and subsequently returned to observe roll-out of trainings led by Liberian nationals.

Both the UN and Liberians were satisfied with the operation of the Women and Children Protection Section. While, as in Sierra Leone, conviction rates in court rose, though were not very satisfactory, the process of protecting victims has expanded from Sierra Leone to Liberia – a remarkable partnership in the name of individual security.

Impact of the Restructuring Process on the Sierra Leone Police

There is no doubt that the SLP restructuring process has both positive and negative ramifications.

Positive Impacts

The SLP restructuring process has greatly increased the service-delivery capacity of the police. With improved logistical supply, the force has been able to reduce crime rates around the country. Experience has shown that violent crimes are rampant in post-conflict countries, but we have managed to be on top of our situation. (It is important to recognise that crime can never be totally eradicated.)

As a result of rapid training (recruitment) exercises, the strength of the force has increased to about 9500 personnel. This has greatly increased police visibility in our communities. The restructuring process also exposed a good number of SLP personnel to national and international training. Over 150 senior officers have attended the UK International Commanders Course. Junior Officers have attended training sessions in Ghana, Nigeria, India, Botswana, South Africa and other countries. This has enabled the force to meet international standards and led to the aforementioned training partnership with Liberia. Since then, SLP officers have served in UN peacekeeping missions in Haiti; currently, they are serving in Sudan's Darfur region.

SLP bureaucratic and regimental bottlenecks in the past were perhaps the greatest impediment to the force's progress. Today, the reduction of ranks from 22 to 10 is viewed by many as the solution to this problem. Due to command streamlining and an improved communications system, policies and communications from the IGP's office can now reach down the system to local constables anywhere in the country in a short period of time.

Through the restructuring process a good deal of infrastructure development took place in the SLP. New police stations and posts and barracks were constructed all over the country. These improvements in working and living environments contribute to improved force morale and motivation. The restructuring process also brought new uniforms, which made us smart-looking. The public admires us and calls us "our police officers" with pride and dignity.

Establishment of the CDIID has resulted in personal accountability of every Police Officer. This system of checks and balances has helped reduce unprofessional and arbitrary behaviour and has increased public confidence in the SLP tremendously.

The introduction of community policing has bridged the gap between the police and the people. Local Policing Partnership Boards were established in every division to enable community members to have a say in the policing of their neighbourhoods. Regular meetings are now held with civilians to encourage them to assist us in day-to-day policing – we could never succeed without them.

Among the most important impacts of the SLP restructuring process is the improved respect for human rights. Before restructuring, people were kept behind bars for as long as the police wanted for very minor offences, such as common assault. There were blatant violations of human rights; cells were filthy and unfit for human habitation. In response to this violation of basic rights, human rights desks were created in police stations. Today we have police officers who routinely inspect stations for over-detention and cell conditions. United Nations Observer Mission (UNIOSIL) personnel also visit police stations to check the cells and interview inmates. I am proud to say that even juvenile detention is now a thing of the past in the SLP.

However, despite our progress, the SLP is not perfect.

Negative Impacts

The reduction of ranks in the SLP has become one major source of disgruntlement among affected personnel. During restructuring, the ranks of Sub-Inspector (SI) and Corporal (Cpl) were taken away, without promoting those who held these ranks to Inspectors and Sergeants respectively. Instead, SIs and Cpls were demoted to Sergeants and Constables respectively and were understandably demoralized and unmotivated. However, in the period before the 2007 elections, these over-looked employees were promoted and the situation redressed.

The high number of university graduates and other certificate holders in the SLP has created problems. Upward mobility for those who do not have certificates is now remote. Even graduates will find it difficult to move up the ranks, given that there are now only 10 ranks.

Despite all the mechanisms put in place to make us professional, five police officers were dismissed last year for stealing exhibits. Another two were dismissed for raping a suspect in custody and charged to court. In late 2007, two police officers caught stealing National Power Authority (NPA) fuel were dismissed and charged to court. This is a clear manifestation that there is no perfection anywhere; we are trying very hard to eradicate the unwanted elements.

Conclusion

From the above analysis we can safely conclude that it was extremely necessary to reform the Sierra Leone Police from what it was before 1999 to what it is today.

We can now proudly walk along the streets of Sierra Leone and other countries as members of the Sierra Leone Police – A FORCE FOR GOOD – with a vibrant FSU protecting our women and children.

Footnotes

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