Support to Electoral Cycle 2011-14 Evaluation Summary

UNDP sought a Final Evaluation of the "Support to the Electoral Cycle in Sierra Leone 2011-2014" project to review the performance of the programme, assess project processes, examine the extent that the project contributed to sustainable elections management in the country, and draw conclusions, lessons learned, and make recommendations based on this experience for future electoral assistance projects in Sierra Leone. Earlier the United Nations and international community supported the 2002 elections at the end of the civil war in the country. Then UNDP and the United Nations Mission in the country supported the restructuring of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and assisted them in administering the 2007 elections and broader processes for the electoral cycle. The Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) requested UN assistance, on multiple fronts, with the 2012 elections. UNDP developed the project using the electoral cycle approach. The United Kingdom, European Union, Japan, Germany and Ireland were the main funders of the USD 45 million project, which was also supported by the United Nations (UN) Peace Building Fund and other bilateral donors.

The project's financial and fiduciary responsibilities rested with UNDP; the United National Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) led the programmatic implementation in the public confidence and security outcomes with UNDP maintaining financial oversight. UNIPSIL worked with civil society through PBF resources and supported security through work with the UN Police (UNPOL) with the Office of National Security and Sierra Leone Police. UNDP led programmatic implementation for the remaining outcomes.

The project initially focused on achieving three outcomes:

1. Electoral institutions have the capacity to administer technically sound, credible and sustainable elections (with progressively less international support);

2. Improved public confidence and participation in the electoral process; and

3. Election-related conflict managed for peaceful polls (before, during and after).

A fourth outcome was developed and added after the 2012 elections:

4. Strengthening the Civil Register to support NEC with a technically sound, credible and sustainable Voter Register

UNDP created a Project Management Unit (PMU), led by a Chief Technical Advisor, with a dedicated staff to implement the project. Leadership was provided through a Steering Committee (SC) co-led by the Minister of Finance and Economic Development and the UNDP Country Director.

The evaluation was conducted using standard UN Evaluation Group methods. The independent evaluator conducted interviews in Freetown between 20 September and 7 October 2015, as well as reviewed documentation from the project and other organisations. A validation workshop was held on preliminary findings, conclusions, lessons learned, and recommendations with key stakeholders. Findings are facts provided by informed stakeholders in interviews or documents. Accumulated findings were analysed and used to reach conclusions, determine lessons learned, and make forward-looking recommendations. The evaluation was organized using the outcomes of the project, plus a section on the PMU, and evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

Electoral Institutions

There are two main electoral institutions in Sierra Leone. The NEC administers elections and the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) regulates political parties and supports their development.

The electoral cycle project was an essential partner to the NEC. Project support was critical to the successful delivery of the 2012 elections. This support included technical assistance, equipment, and supplies for the development and use of a new biometric voter registration (BVR) system and for elections themselves, including the vote tally and result transmission system. The project was less successful in supporting NEC capacity building after the elections. Dedicated consultants were engaged by the project to conduct in depth lesson learned and subsequent capacity building of senior to mid-level managers of NEC in operational planning, financial management, voter education, training and IT in 2013 and 2014. The project also funded a capacity needs assessment in 2014 on request of donors, which the Commission continues to follow up on. This assistance was not sufficient for sustainability of these achievements or to enable the NEC to successfully manage future national elections without the support of the international community.

Plans for comprehensive set of activities to build the legal status and operational capacity of the PPRC to implement its responsibilities were not fully executed due to the lack of action on legal reform by Parliament and continued leadership and capacity issues at the PPRC. These pre-existing limits on the PPRC limited the work that the project tried to do with the PPRC. The project led the implementation of assistance to the PPRC in this output; UNIPSIL led in the provision of other assistance to the PPRC for the public confidence output, which was administered by UNDP. This structure complicated project management and led to management issues with broader negative effects on the project, the PPRC, and UNDP – especially once a case of fraud was noted with Peace Building Fund resources from Outcome Two. Limited UNDP engagement combined with limited PPRC capacity to produce limited results in delivery through the project and limited capacity development for the Commission and its partners.

Public Confidence

UNIPSIL-led Outcome Two of the project, which was largely funded by the PBF but financially managed by UNDP. The UNIPSIL-designed Non-State Actors (NSA) project provided support to a wide-ranging set of civil society organisations which was important in encouraging a more inclusive political system as well as non-violence in electoral processes. The NSA project was developed based on political goals and managed in a non-evaluable approach, without baselines or targets. UNIPSIL did not regularly report on the project to or engage with the SC. The outcome focused more on non-violence than participation. The UNIPSIL emphasis on rapid engagement across the country with the PPRC and a large number of CSO partners that had limited financial and reporting capacity led to problems administering this component for UNDP. These problems had a broader negative influence on the electoral cycle project once a USD 200 thousand-corruption case was detected in the PPRC and referred to the Anti-Corruption Commission for action. Audit findings that concluded under USD 200 thousand in a USD 45 million project should be repaid by the PPRC as a result of this corruption did not satisfy some donors who remained upset with UNDP. These DPs strongly felt that UNDP should have done more to manage the financial resources provided to the PPRC. Nevertheless, the activities in the outcome are widely seen to have contributed in important ways to the most peaceful elections in Sierra Leone's history.

Conflict Management

Support for conflict management and security in electoral processes was important in Sierra Leone due to the legacy of the civil war which ended in 2002, social cleavages linked to conflict, and continued political polarisation. The project supported the establishment of the Electoral Offences Courts (EOCs) to deal swiftly with all election related matters including elections related violence cases. However the personnel, including judges who presided in those EOCs, were no different from the normal courts. Hence the same challenges, including prolonged judgment and sometimes political interference, were observed with EOCs.

Support to the main security providers, the ONS and SLP, was provided to train trainers who in turn trained security providers. The project also provided food and fuel to trained SLP and other public safety staff to support their deployment to secure registration, electoral campaigns, and polling stations. The project administered this component directly as neither organisation had undergone the needed vetting for national implementation modalities to be used for the delivery of assistance.

Civil Registration

Project support for the development of a unified civil registry, which could be used to extract the voter registry from, was developed as UNDP and donors sought ways to make voter registration more sustainable. The project did not plan to support the completion of the civil registry as UNDP recognized that the two years that remained in the electoral cycle project were not be enough time to finish Sierra Leone's civil registry process. The electoral cycle project scoped the activity and supported early development for handoff to another UNDP project. The effort would have benefitted from a more

comprehensive approach from outset that built a complete, costed operational plan to take civil registration to a successful conclusion. The future success of the civil registration effort remains uncertain. A working, coordinated civil registry is now needed for the NEC to have a voters register and registration process – or a back-up plan is needed - for the next national elections.

Project Management

While the project was developed and managed in accordance with the principles of the electoral cycle approach, project assistance needed to start earlier in Sierra Leone to build capacity prior to the elections, which could then be used in the elections, and finally developed further after the elections. Project performance varied based on the strengths of project and country office management, which changed over time. While the lean project team was able to manage many aspects of the project efficiently, it was not able to manage UNIPSIL and some key implementing partners like the PPRC, which then led to issues with DPs. A stronger PMU, with a larger role in quality control and support for capacity building of project partners, may have been able to avoid, minimize, or better manage these problems.

MAIN LESSONS LEARNED

Electoral Institutions

Electoral cycle projects should endeavour to start early, with capacity building and detailed, comprehensive operational planning with EMB partners, to increase the effectiveness of these partners, make support more efficient, and increase the sustainability of assistance through greater use of national partners. One of the ways that these outcomes may be stimulated is to begin support under the electoral cycle more than a year before an election to allow more time for capacity building; this is particularly the case for support for activities such as boundary delimitation and voter registration that need to be completed before the elections themselves. Projects should endeavour to develop and implement a comprehensive capacity development plan that emphasizes sustainability for EMB partners as part of the eventual exit strategy for these institutions from international assistance.

Electoral cycle projects need build relationships to consistently and credibly deliver "bad news" to implementing and development partners. Projects should develop ways to test partner capacity and processes to build consensus on capacity needs and ways to support them. Projects should consider building and institutionalizing technical platforms for EMBs and their main partners in the country to meet on a regular basis in a structured way to discuss and address technical issues.

Electoral cycle projects should continue to build-in the capacity to surge resources and international consultants on short notice to support critical, time sensitive processes in elections – particularly for ones that place the election at risk.

Public Confidence

While the UNDP can administer a programme that supports the diverse CSO community, UNDP should consider whether this ambitious reach can be implemented with adequate controls. Risks in this case were recognized by the programme and UNDP management but were not effectively managed, especially during the interim Country Director. UNDP implementation to support UNIPSIL-led programming, based on implementing partners with limited capacity and limited capacity to manage and monitor on the part of UNIPSIL, can have counter-productive effects beyond the outcome itself for UNDP.

Conflict Management

The limited nature of the project's ties to key stakeholders in this outcome made these security stakeholders limited partners in terms of what they were able to accomplish in their activities with the project. This implies that for electoral projects, a judiciary activity with a more limited scope may be sufficient to support electoral justice.

Project support to ONS and SLP as service providers for electoral security was done successfully. Project support can successfully approach security providers not as partners but as providers of support for key outputs, like security. It is important to manage the distribution of funding to security service providers to directly reach those that provide the security at polling stations, as was done in 2012 under the project.

Civil Registration

The outcome supporting the development of a civil registry was added to the electoral cycle project after the elections. Additions to projects should have realistic, achievable goals and build for sustainability through the development of a comprehensive, detailed, complete and fully-costed plan to reach these goals.

Project Management

Complicated, large projects need strong staff and larger staff structures to support sustained technical and PMU engagement with key partners and large numbers of diverse activities with different partners. The strong Steering Committee was important in this politicized area of assistance; the project benefitted from a strong investment in SC partnerships, which were critical to successes in the project.

UNDP can be caught in middle of disputes in project implementation as an implementing partner (IPs) itself supporting other UN organisations "working as one." Controversies, once developed like the PPRC corruption case, may prove difficult to move past with development partners (DPs). The damaging effects of insufficient transparency may be hard to overcome with some development partners.

Project management needs to invest substantial time and resources for working with IPs and their partners on reporting and planning documents. PMU engagement in key processes and projects with partners should start long before the submission of workplans. Workplans need to have adequate levels of financial and programmatic detail for UNDP to manage their implementation and to garner support from DPs.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

Electoral Institutions

UNDP should explore and consider the development of an electoral cycle project to support the complicated elections anticipated in 2017 or 2018. Electoral uncertainties and difficulties have been compounded by the Ebola outbreak and restrictions on political and governmental activities, which delayed activities in the final year of the project and have impeded preparations for future elections.

The NEC requires additional support for the next elections since it does not yet have the resources or tested, full capacity to administer national elections. The experience of 2012 suggests that the NEC does yet have adequate planning and operational capacity or internal management processes to manage complex national election processes on its own. The NEC especially needs a system for permanent voter registration, which now depends on the civil registry that is under development. Areas where support may be particularly needed include the extraction of data from the civil registry for voter registration, the potential for registration and voting by the diaspora, boundary delimitation, tallying and transmission of results, conduct of referenda, and international procurement and logistics. The NEC would be handling diaspora registration and voting as well as a referendum for the first time and need technical assistance in order to manage them successfully. The NEC does not have other sources for support that have a proven record of delivery. And the GoSL has grave resource capacity limits.

The UNDP, the NEC, and DPs should collaborate to mobilize resources to support the finalisation and implementation of initiatives that have come out of the 2014 NEC capacity development assessment, which potentially includes training support for the use of the log frame now under development for management. Future support to the NEC should focus on building a resilient institution and sustainability.

The PPRC requires substantial assistance to revise and meet its mandate and the institution remains a crucial one for strengthening and improving peaceful electoral competition. However, the limited results achieved under the past electoral cycle project suggest that project assistance should be conditioned on legal and institutional reforms that might enable greater effectiveness on the part of the PPRC. UNDP, electoral stakeholders, and development partners should evaluate whether this support should be provided through a separate process from assistance to the NEC and elections.

Public Confidence

While concerns about violence in electoral processes in the country remain, any future public confidence support should consider focusing on broader civic and voter education beyond issues of peaceful competition, which could be developed and delivered through civil society. Civic and voter education should begin sooner than a few months prior to the elections. Assistance to civil society is still needed to support their engagement with and oversight of electoral and political processes; support should target CSO coalitions that focus on elections.

Conflict Management

Training and supporting security provision for electoral processes through the ONS by the SLP and other GoSL institutions by the project was effective in 2012. These processes should be used again as needed for the next national election. An assessment of security risks should inform the decision making about whether risks are high enough to warrant this investment.

Support for the judiciary in this electoral cycle did not demonstrate a clear value to supporting separate EOCs; however the judiciary is still likely to need refresher and new training in electoral law going forward, as revised legislation is expected before the future elections.

Civil Registration

UNDP should continue to support civil registration as critical to future elections, since the civil registry is needed for the extraction of the voters list by the NEC. Support for civil registration could be included in the development of a future electoral cycle project. The alternative of supporting a separate project on civil registration may also be viable; a component of an elections project could be developed to support NEC collaboration with the effort and the extraction of the voters list from the registry.

Project Management

Electoral cycle projects should use a longer time frame to enable capacity development in key partner institutions, and start on capacity support long before elections.

UNDP should invest in strong PMU to provide technical assistance and manage project partners, particularly for highly political partners or large numbers of low-capacity partners like local CSOs.

UNDP should continue to build high-level partnerships with national counterparts and DPs which are needed to decisively identify and pro-actively address issues in project development and implementation.

PMU's should consider developing and institutionalizing staff-level working groups that link the PMU and key partner organization to strengthen communication and increase the engagement of project staff in technical areas. Greater integration should strengthen relationships and may increase trust and confidence in ways that encourage raising and tackling tough issues openly and honestly together in a timely fashion.