



# **CONSTITUENCY OUTREACH IN SIERRA LEONE:**

**A GUIDE FOR MEMBERS  
OF PARLIAMENT**



## **Preface**

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is grateful to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) for providing funds for NDI's constituency outreach activities in 2003, 2004 and 2006 as well as the development and distribution of this corresponding manual. The objective of the manual is to help Members of Parliament (MPs) conduct constituency outreach activities more effectively in the future by building on the lessons learned during the previous program and remembering the important issues in their districts. NDI would like to thank its Sierra Leone team: Nick Demeter, Clara Cole, Mohamed Konneh, and Vandetta Sawyerr, and DC-based staff: Beverly Peters, Brett Lacy, and Caitlin Hurley for their contributions to the program and this publication.

For further information on NDI's programs in Central and West Africa, please go to NDI's website: [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org) or contact:

Chris Fomunyoh  
Senior Associate for Africa  
2030 M St. NW, Fifth Floor  
Washington, DC 20036  
USA  
Tel: + (1) 202.728.5542  
Fax: + (1) 202.728.5562  
[chrisf@ndi.org](mailto:chrisf@ndi.org)

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## I. Introduction

Elected Members have three key roles: **Lawmaking, representation and oversight** - This Handbook is about representation.

In a nascent democracy, constituents often have high expectations of new leadership. These expectations range from providing information, to addressing felt needs, to expediting government initiatives, or funding programs that benefit the community. Consequently outreach and delivery of services is vital.

### *Constituency Work is of Prime Significance*

Members of Parliament have a constitutional responsibility to initiate, deliberate, review, pass, amend or reject laws that govern Sierra Leone. This responsibility makes the work of elected representatives in Parliament very important. Members of Parliament, are also responsible for ensuring that the government works efficiently and for addressing the needs of the people that elected them.

Parliamentary work is an integral part of MPs responsibilities, but it is important to always remain cognizant of the fact that work in Parliament is only half of the job as an elected representative. In actual fact, there could be more work at the constituency level than in Parliament.

Constituency outreach as outlined in this handbook is geared towards enhancing the following key areas:

- *Credibility*: A practical constituency program creates open and visible avenues for decision making to which everyone has equal access. A constituency program also increases credibility in the decision making process as it provides a forum for the expression of divergent view points.

- *Identifying public concerns and values:* Because different interest groups often have fundamentally different points of view, these groups often evaluate any proposed action from a different perspective. A constituency program provides mechanisms by which the elected representative can understand the problems, issues, and possible solutions from the particular perspectives of various interest groups.
- *Developing a Consensus:* With highly divergent public viewpoints, no single philosophy can guide all actions by the Member of Parliament. A successful constituency program provides a framework for arriving at a consensus on an issue by issue basis where different philosophies emerge.
- *Leader in Development:* At any given time, there are different development initiatives going on in the constituency. Government, international institutions or local entities sometimes fund these development initiatives. As an elected representative, it is important to have information pertaining to development initiatives in your constituency and other constituencies, including information on potential international and local partners in development. A constituency program provides a mechanism for monitoring development initiatives and mobilizing support.

#### Defining Constituency Outreach

Constituency outreach and service delivery are limited only by the imagination of MPs. In order to be effective, outreach strategies and services should be tailored to fit the norms, values, traditions, needs and concerns of the district. Constituency outreach consists of activities and mechanisms designed to do the following:

- Bring constituents closer to elected Members.

- Help Members address constituents' deeply felt or urgent needs.
- Engage Members with their constituents in mutually beneficial problem identification and problem solving.
- Inform development, introduction and enactment of, or advocacy for, legislation.
- Ensure accountable, equitable, accessible and appropriate services for all who need them.

Elected legislators, citizens, and political parties all benefit from public outreach efforts. A member who not only has the support of local voters, but who also has demonstrated his/her value to the party, is much more likely to be reelected than a member who has remained silent.



Some of the other benefits of constituency outreach to both MPs and their constituents include:

<b>Benefits of Constituency Outreach – Members of Parliament</b>
Members learn who votes, which will allow them to urge those who do not vote to participate, while encouraging those who do to continue.
Members are perceived as leaders who make things happen.
Members enjoy a higher profile and greater visibility so that their accomplishments can be shared and constituent needs identified.
Members develop ideas that can be turned into legislation or other legislative-related activities such as hearings, fact-finding missions and resolutions.
Members build coalitions with local groups, leaders and opinion makers.

<b>Benefits of Constituency Outreach – Constituents</b>
Constituents acquire useful advocacy, representational or leadership skills.
Constituents gain access to important information.
Constituents learn where and how to mobilize resources and services.
Constituents strengthen community infrastructure and development.
Constituents reinforce accountability and transparency among elected and appointed officials.

Section II of this manual provides guidelines for what sort of preparation is necessary for MPs interested in engaging in effective constituency outreach. Section III outlines a variety of strategies that MPs can use to connect with constituents in a variety of ways. Finally, Section IV provides an overview of the issues discussed in each of the districts during NDI's 2003 constituency outreach program.





## **II. Preparing for Constituency Outreach**

Gathering information about one's constituency is essential for identifying and pursuing the issues most relevant to the district and also helps to identify which local outreach activities are most likely to generate desired results.

Information gathering efforts should be centered on relevant issues, such as the level of impoverishment in the district, adequacy of food and potable water supply, opportunities for local employment or the existence of community driven development projects. The following questions can help guide MPs' information gathering efforts:

### 1. Issues of Interest:

- What are the key issues of importance in the area where constituency outreach is being conducted?
- What excites or angers people most?
- What are the most common issues or problems with respect to health, education, economic development or infrastructure?
- Are there any community hazards (waste dumps, factory emissions, sewage, etc.)?
- What type of legislative or program initiatives have community residents, leaders and activists called for in the past?

### 2. Demographic Factors:

- What are the key demographic indicators that could influence needs? Is the district heavily populated by the young or the elderly? By women or by men engaged in migratory labor? By an influx of internally displaced persons? By university students or industrial or plantation workers?
- What is the geographic profile of the constituency or district? Is it urban, rural or mixed?

- What groups predominate in the population?
- What groups have economic power? Political power?

3. Institutional Factors:

- What are the key institutions in all sectors?
- What role do nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) play in providing services to the community?
- Are there places where groups congregate on a regular basis?
- Where are the headquarters for community based organizations and NGOs in the district?

4. Quality and Frequency of MP-Constituent Relations:

- Do constituents readily come to MPs' offices and seek advice?
- Is MP contact with constituents systematic, or sporadic and episodic?
- With whom do MPs have the most or the least contact?
- Where are these contacts most likely to occur?



With this data, MPs have intimate knowledge of their constituencies. They should be able to identify priorities and provide information critical to solving problems related to key issues, such as national development initiatives and community resources available to constituents.

### III. Constituency Outreach Strategies

A constituency outreach program provides MPs with a mechanism for monitoring community events, mobilizing financial resources and facilitating commitment for development initiatives in their districts.

Communication strategies associated with outreach should be designed to facilitate dialogue between MPs and the people they serve. Carving out a permanent space where such exchanges become the norm will help keep the national government attuned to local needs and inform constituents of policy initiatives in their area and the resources accessible to them.

The following sections provide a variety of strategies MPs can employ to connect with their citizens:

#### Town Hall Meetings

*Annex A provides a checklist for organizers of a town hall meeting.*

Town hall meetings are a useful strategy to begin a dialogue with constituents and can inform more targeted follow-on constituency outreach efforts. Town hall meetings allow MPs to meet in person with a large group of constituents, providing MPs the opportunity to inform constituents of their efforts to meet constituent needs in parliament and providing constituents



the opportunity to raise issues of concern. Town hall meetings typically begin with a brief presentation by the MP, followed by a question and answer session with constituents. A moderator can

help to facilitate the discussion and maintain order. MPs may schedule town hall meetings on general issues or on a very specific topic.

The following tips will assist MPs in conducting productive town hall meetings.

#### Preparation

The meeting will be more useful to the MP and the constituents if the MP prepares in advance.

- Provide advance information to constituents about the upcoming town hall meeting and key topics to be discussed.
- Be prepared to give a brief presentation on activities in parliament and the MP's efforts to address constituent needs.
- Be prepared to answer constituents' questions on a variety of topics.

#### Choose a Neutral Moderator

The role of the moderator is to guide the discussion in the following ways:

- Present the objectives of the meeting.
- Explain the political context of the country, as well as outlining the functions and responsibilities of the three arms of government with particular emphasis on the executive and legislative arm.
- Assist people in understanding their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy. Citizens who feel involved in the political and decision-making processes will be more likely to raise issues in meetings.

- Emphasize the meeting is not a political party meeting and advise citizens not to ask questions or raise concerns that should be addressed at a political party meeting.
- Highlight recent political reforms that have taken place. Discussions at town hall meetings should focus on the rationale for shifting from old governance practices to new ones, specifically highlighting the benefits it will bring to citizens.
- Alert the audience five minutes before the end of the meeting to avoid the possibility of cutting someone off from speaking or not recognizing other questioners when the meeting ends.

Tips for Q&A

- Moderate the question and answer session in a neutral manner. Ensure that questions are asked and answered in an orderly fashion and that one individual or group does not dominate the discussion.
- MPs should clarify confusing questions by rephrasing them in such a way that the whole audience understands.
- MPs should avoid campaigning by making clear that they are acting in their capacity as public servants for all district residents, not just citizens who voted for them.
- MPs should avoid responding to clear provocations and insist that the meeting continue in a calm and respectful fashion.
- MPs should be willing to accept criticism and use critical comments as opportunities to engage in constructive problem solving with constituents.



### *Other Forms of Outreach*

An MP is not limited to public meetings or to town halls in order to reach his/her constituents. There is a broad range of outreach activities from which to choose, including the following options:

- Public service announcements (both radio and television).
- Participation in a radio or television call-in show.
- Use of print media by issuing press releases, publishing statements or announcing events.
- Distribution of a newsletter or other relevant publications.
- Health fairs and other bazaars.
- Cultural, arts, dance music or traditional festivals.
- Panel discussions, "Meet your Member Forums."
- Organization of special events, such as Earth Day or Human Rights Day.

Some outreach activities, such as drafting and distributing a newsletter, can be more resource intensive than others. MPs have a range of options with which to address this dilemma.

To find low-cost ways of conducting outreach, MPs should look for opportunities that coincide with existing community resources or activities. For some events, it may be more appropriate and economical for an individual Member to personally organize them, rather than mobilizing the party or parliament as a whole. For example, rather than drafting and distributing a monthly newsletter, an MP could ask a local newspaper if he/she could contribute a column to the weekly newspaper. This allows the MP to communicate with constituents on an ongoing weekly basis without expend-

ing valuable monies. Holding special events can also be resource and time intensive. Therefore, an MP might choose to attend a community festival or visit a busy local market where he/she could speak with constituents.

Casework is another tool/mechanism of constituency outreach that Members can undertake. Casework can involve an MP helping an individual constituent resolve a particular problem or address a specific issue. This typically involves regular contact with a constituent over an extended period of time. Casework also allows the MP to target different locations in his/her home district.

Depending on available resources, an MP may open a constituent office. Beyond providing a physical location where the MP can carry out his or her duties, an office is rich in democratic symbolism. A constituent office in the district demonstrates the MP's tangible presence among the people who elected him/her and for whom he/she works. To reduce the operational and start-up costs of opening an office, MPs can use existing local office space in either their party's or municipal government's headquarters or offices. If an MP's open office hours are predictable, constituents will know when to go to the party or local government office to take advantage of direct access to the MP.

A community training project is another example of an activity that an individual MP might take on. Or, an MP might participate in a local training opportunity conducted by an NGO. Through their participation, MPs lend a sense of credibility to the project and gain valuable skills, which they can then impart to their constituents.

One of the most common barriers that MPs must overcome is the perception by citizens that the MP should distribute personal financial assistance to individual constituents. MPs often spend a great deal of their personal assets to satisfy the demands of their constituents. While MPs are not responsible for providing handouts to

constituencies, they are charged with ensuring that their districts benefit from state resources. These resources encompass national monies, as well as healthcare, job training and water. An MP can also highlight outside resource distributors who may not be self-evident to the public, such as NGOs or Chambers of Commerce.

Other examples of non-traditional constituency outreach that can be accomplished with limited resources include:

- Provide application forms and information for local lending institutions.
- Organize a workshop of community organizations where citizens can learn about the resources available to them.
- Compile a directory of community organizations and make it available to the community at large.
- Bring community members, Chambers of Commerce and local government together to share information and facilitate dialogue.
- Help citizens initiate small development projects or obtain small loans to open businesses.
- Help constituents access entrepreneurial training held by the government or NGOs.
- Meet with local microfinance program managers and recommend appropriate constituents to participate in projects.
- Serve as a clearing house for information about different programs and projects that have and have not worked in the region.



#### **IV. Constituency Outreach Program Overview**

In 2003, NDI supported efforts of Sierra Leonean MPs to hold meetings with constituents in nine districts around the country. The specific aim of the program was to promote participatory democracy in Sierra Leone and enhance effective parliamentary representation. The objectives of the program were to:

- Introduce MPs in Sierra Leone to effective constituency outreach activities.
- Provide a forum for dialogue between MPs and constituents on matters of local and national concern.
- Provide opportunities for MPs to be held accountable by the electorate.
- Assist constituents in playing a role in the political processes outside of elections.
- Increase the legislature's transparency.

##### Countrywide Themes

Constituent participants across the country raised the following issues consistently:

**1. Presence of MPs in the Districts** One universal theme to the constituency outreach program was the frustration expressed by participants that MPs had not been back to the districts since the 2002 elections. MPs acknowledged this problem but cited a lack of funds as the primary reason they have not returned.

The MPs all acknowledged that they have a collective responsibility to represent the entire district, irrespective of political party affiliation, because the proportional representation electoral system

in Sierra Leone's multi-member districts often results in co-habitation.

**2. Local Government** Many districts wanted to see more power given to local chiefdom police forces. People blame the decline in the importance of the Chiefdom Police for the weakened authority of Paramount Chiefs as well as the general increase in crime throughout the country.

In response to these concerns, the MPs explained how the decentralization process and the government's goal of encouraging citizens' direct participation in governance and development would help address the balance of power between the national and local leaders. The MPs stated that the reintroduction of local government structures would help residents enhance their communities and take ownership of development activities. Elected District and Chiefdom councils would take on primary responsibility to design community development plans, and raise funds to execute those plans.

The MPs also discussed the National Recovery Strategy of the government, which aims to restore all defunct government institutions. MPs added that the government is aware of the significant role played by the Chiefdom Police forces in maintaining law and order. Plans are underway to reinstate the force.

**3. Food Self Sufficiency** Participants from various districts wanted to know what steps the government was taking to deliver on President Kabbah's promise that the country would have a secure food supply by 2007. Many constituents want the government to help their communities by providing resources for fishing and farming, including fertilizer, seeds, instruments for mechanical farming and fishnets. The MPs agreed that the introduction of mechanical cultivation would increase food production as well as the economic well-being of farmers because they could grow a greater

variety of crops. The MPs also explained that the government was working on plans to give support to local fishermen and improve the fishing industry.

**4. Infrastructure/Health/Education** MPs promised to discuss with the appropriate government ministries/agencies the need for roads, increased health and sanitation facilities and a revamping of the education system. MPs informed constituents of the government's plans to improve the roads through an EU grant. To improve the health sector, the government intends to build a health center with essential drugs in every chiefdom, providing accessible and affordable healthcare to all citizens. The government has received funds to build secondary schools in every chiefdom of the country, helping to address some of the educational problems facing the nation.

**5. Unemployment** Constituents are increasingly concerned by unemployment, which affects many young people around the country. They see the rising drug problem among youth as a direct effect of the high unemployment rate. MPs are mindful of the problem but often replied that the government cannot create jobs for everyone.

In 2004, applying lessons learned from its 2003 program, NDI began the NED funded Constituency Outreach Pilot Program, to foster channels for regular and effective communication between MPs, local councilors and citizens on government activities and community needs and concerns in Kono. The program sought to provide Kono residents with skills to advocate for change in their communities, supported Kono MPs in fulfilling their representation duties and helped reduce continuing confusion for MPs and citizens on the roles and responsibilities of Parliament.

By approaching constituency outreach responsibilities as a group rather than as individuals, MPs were better positioned to take advantage of their collective representation of all the citizens of Kono. The members developed a combined strategy of town hall meetings, call-in radio shows and small group issue discussion. The COP pilot program in the Kono district became an effective model for constituency outreach in other districts around the country.

### **2006 District Specific Themes**

In 2006, NDI facilitated over 30 town hall meetings and radio program discussions with parliamentarians in three districts. Participants discussed the roles and responsibilities of MPs, Local Councillors and citizens in a democracy. Citizens were also given the opportunity to raise issues of common concern with their elected representatives.

Prior to the town hall meetings, NDI facilitated two-day trainings for MPs on topics such as effective communication, leadership, public speaking, research and advocacy.

Highlights of some of the district meetings include:

#### ***Kaliahun District Town Hall Meetings***

Town hall meetings were conducted in five towns with a total of 1800 participants in May 2006. These towns included Segbwema, Daru, Mobai, Pendembu, Buedu and Kailahun town. The Paramount Chief and ten local councillors representing their respective wards participated in these meetings.

Town hall meetings were conducted in six towns with a total of 3,500 participants in November 2006. These towns included Bawala, Jojoma, Manowa, Bunumbu, Kangama and Dia town. The Paramount Chief and six local councillors representing their respective wards also participated in these meetings.

**Constituents:** Constituents in Kaliahun District raised several issues of concern, including infrastructural development such as better road construction, lack of government transport, late payment of school fees for girl child education, no or late payment of teachers' salaries, the limited number of trained and qualified teachers, inadequately trained or qualified healthcare staff and the high level of youth unemployment. Constituents were also concerned with the

ways to monitor development programs in the district.

**Parliamentarians:** To follow-up on citizen concerns about poor road construction and safety, MPs informed citizens that a company had been contracted to survey the roads and make improvements. With regard to concerns over education, three MPs, including a member of the Education Committee, met with the Minister of Education to inform him of ongoing citizen concerns.

#### *Koinandugu District Town hall Meetings*

Town hall meetings were conducted in four towns with 700 participants in June 2006. These towns included Musaia, Sengbeh, Fadugu and Kabala town. The Paramount Chief and six local councilors representing their respective wards also participated in these meetings.

**Constituents:** Constituents raised several issues at the town hall meetings, including poor health facilities, poor sanitation, inadequate supply of medicines, poor educational facilities and ill maintained roads. Constituents also noted that nongovernmental organizations were slow in responding adequately to local concerns.

**Parliamentarians:** MPs followed up with the contractor to discuss the low quality of building materials used in the hospital's construction. In addition, MPs brought the issue of poor health facilities to the Parliamentary Health Committee. After extensive debate, Parliament summoned the Minister of Health to address some of the issues of concern.

## **Annex A: Checklist for Organizing a Town Hall Meeting**

### ***Prior to the Meeting***

#### Venue

- Locate a room suitable for the public meeting
- Reserve a room for the public meeting
- Visit the venue in order to make all necessary arrangements
- Make a seating arrangement (moderator, MP(s), guest speakers, citizens, media)

#### Announcements

- Prepare an announcement stating the place, time and topic, if there is any
- Post the announcement in visible places (tea shops, coffee bars, convenient stores, etc.)
- Spread the word using existing district or town institutions such as traditional rulers, local government officials, the police etc. Also use the media.

#### Research (to become familiar with the potential participants and existent problems in the area)

- Call city officials to enquire about current local issues
- Check laws and rules on how different issues are defined
- Prepare a brief report on findings for other MP(s)
- Consult with MPs serving on oversight committees, government ministries and commissions dealing with issues of interest to constituents

#### Media

- Prepare a media advisory inviting them to the public meeting
- Send the media advisory to all media (local and national)
- Call the media to remind them of the event

Moderator

- Identify a possible moderator who will run the meeting
- Explain to the moderator what is expected of him/her
  - open the floor for questions, comments
  - facilitate the discussion
  - interrupt citizens if they are too long in their speeches or questions or if their discussion is out of place

*During the Meeting*

Media

- Develop a sign-in sheet for present reporters
- Prepare a news release, summarizing the public meeting
- Distribute the news release to all media representatives

Minutes

- Take notes, or have someone volunteer to take notes, during the meeting for future reference

Photos

- Bring a camera to the meeting
- Take photos during the meeting (especially photograph situations that express interaction of the MP with the citizens)

*After the Meeting*

Media

- Encourage media representatives to interview MPs and constituents to gauge opinions about meeting i.e. issues raised by constituents, responses by MPs, what went well, what did not go well, etc.
- Call the media representatives who attended the meeting to ask if they need additional information
- Provide them with photos of the meeting



Follow-up

- Follow-up directly with citizens who have requested additional information.





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