

Constituency Outreach in Sierra Leone:

**A Guide for Members of
Parliament**



About this Manual

This manual provides information about methods that parliamentarians can use in communicating with citizens and in providing services for their electoral districts. The handbook is written for Members of Parliament (MPs) as well as their national and district political party members. The manual reflects experiences from other countries around the world and developing best practices. It seeks to provide principles rather than prescriptions. The application and adaptability of the strategies and mechanisms outlined here will depend on individual elected representatives and the availability of human and financial resources in constituencies.



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Introduction

Members of Parliament (MPs) have three key roles to play: **lawmaking, representation, and oversight**. The present handbook focuses on *representation*.

In democracies, constituents generally have high expectations of newly elected leaders. These expectations often center on concrete improvements in living conditions, in other words delivering on the promises of democracy by initiating programs that benefit the community. Consequently, constituency outreach becomes a vital tool for MPs to better understand the needs of the communities they represent, while at the same time enabling MPs to inform citizen about achievements and financial and other constraints they face in delivering on citizen's expectations.

The Constitution of Sierra Leone defines the **representation** role of MPs. Article 97(b) states: *all Members of Parliament shall regard themselves as representatives of the people of Sierra Leone and desist from any conduct which they seek improperly to enrich themselves or alienate themselves from the people.*

What is constituency outreach, and why is it important?

As elected representatives, MPs are custodians of the “public interest.” However, one of the biggest challenges for elected representatives is to identify the “public interest” and strategies to address it.

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.

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 constituency. Elected legislators, citizens, and political parties all benefit from public outreach efforts. 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 the credibility of 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.
- *Leadership in community 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.

**Benefits of Constituency Outreach –
Members of Parliament**

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.

**Benefits of Constituency Outreach –
Constituents**

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.

Historically Marginalized Populations and Constituency Outreach

When reaching out to citizens and planning for service delivery, it is important to take historically marginalized populations, like women, persons with disabilities, and youth, into consideration. In exercising their roles and responsibilities in the area of representation, MPs' consideration of the needs of all people in the constituency is important — women and men, young and old, and persons with and without disabilities. Doing so will ensure that all constituents see their experiences reflected in the political agenda.

Obstacles faced by MPs in Sierra Leone

MPs in Sierra Leone face a number of challenges when it comes to constituency outreach. While these challenges are not insurmountable, they should be kept in mind as MPs develop strategies for constituency outreach. Strategies for constituency outreach discussed in this manual take these challenges into account and offer ways to overcome them. These challenges include:

- Lack of resources for constituency activities, including for travel and the establishment of a constituency office
- Poor road and communication infrastructures
- Difficulties in getting volunteers
- High poverty levels in communities

While these obstacles can be significant, MPs can develop a strategy for constituency outreach that is focused, innovative, and flexible enough to adapt to these realities. Some types of constituency outreach activities are less expensive than others. In some countries, MPs have been able to advocate for and take advantage of state funds to establish offices, hire staff, and travel to their constituencies. In other examples MPs have worked with their political parties, local government counterparts, and civil society organizations (CSOs) to communicate with citizens and arrange travel to their constituencies in a cost-effective manner.

Preparing for Constituency Outreach

Gathering information about one's constituency is essential for identifying and pursuing the issues most relevant to constituents 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 constituency, adequacy of food and drinking water, 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 in the area where constituency outreach is being conducted, for example with respect to health, education, economic development or infrastructure?
- Are there any community hazards (waste dumps, mine or factory emissions, sewage, environmental degradation, 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 constituency 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 mining workers?
- What is the geographic profile of the constituency? 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 service sectors?
- What role do 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 CSOs in the constituency?

Constituency Outreach Strategies

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. A constituency outreach strategy should use a variety of methods for speaking and listening to citizens on a range of issues.

1. Options for Outreach

Town Hall Meetings

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

Holding Special Events

MPs can organize special events with particular sectors of their constituencies. Hosting a special event can allow you to reach out to key groups, such as youth, the elderly, persons with disabilities, or women. For example, a group of MPs in Bulgaria organized a football match between themselves and interested young people. Before the match, the MPs discussed some political issues with attendees at the event, informed participants of what the MPs were doing to address the issues, and sought input from their constituents. As another example, a US member of Congress regularly organizes a meeting with elderly citizens. The meeting is a social occasion and allows the elderly to learn about government programs that are available to them.

Advisory Committee

In some cases, an MP may find it useful to establish a volunteer advisory committee made up of constituents. If you are interested in acquiring specialized or expert information from your constituency, you might consider forming an advisory committee. Such a committee should comprise a cross section of citizens who are interested in a particular subject. The constituent advisory committee could be made up of local leaders, issue experts, and citizens who may be particularly affected by an issue. The committee of constituents could serve to provide information about citizen positions on a particular issue and could help inform strategies to address the issue. Members of the committee could be assigned to specific tasks, such as preparing written recommendations or organizing an event.

For example, suppose you are interested in promoting the construction of a few strategically-placed new bridges in your constituency. In order to pursue this project, you could first assemble an advisory committee of construction experts, environmental activists, scientists, development experts and interested citizens. The committee could be asked to organize a seminar on the bridge project to inform citizens and to inform the development of a proposal for project funding. As you prepare to lobby government ministries for the project, such information from experts and community members could be valuable ammunition. Through its involvement in the project, the committee will also become invested in reaching a solution and committee members could be enlisted as useful political allies on other issues.

Writing Letters

A letter provides an opportunity for an MP to articulate positions on key issues, and show that he or she takes the concerns of citizens seriously. While the lack of a reliable mail delivery system in Sierra Leone combined with low literacy levels are challenges, documenting your position on issues can strengthen your ability to represent constituents. Face-to-face contact is usually more effective, but of course given constraints of time, finances, and poor road infrastructure it is not feasible to always talk face-to-face with your constituents.

Conducting Public Opinion Research

In order for you to effectively represent your constituents, it is important for you to know who they are, what they think, and how they feel about key issues. You can find out a lot about your constituents through visits to your constituencies, town hall meetings, and some of the other strategies discussed here. However, sometimes it is useful to gather public opinion through a simple survey in a more organized and scientific way. You may find that people appreciate being asked for their opinion, and that conducting a survey may increase your credibility. Conducting public opinion research can not only help you understand what your constituents think about issues, but it can also help you get honest and objective answers to questions you might have. Obtaining feedback from your constituents can assist you in prioritizing your activities and improve on areas that your constituents identify.

A questionnaire should be of a very simple design, limited to one page, and should ideally ask questions that can be answered with a “yes” or a “no” or by selecting one of three to four answers. Questions should focus on one issue, and answers from constituents can be used to inform your position on the issue or to help define the approach you take to address a problem.



Questionnaires can be conducted by going door-to-door either yourself or using volunteers. This method can increase your visibility within the constituency and can demonstrate to voters that you and your party care about them and their issues. Formal research projects conducted by professional researchers can be complicated, time consuming and very expensive. With the limited resources that an elected representative might have, it is probably better to design, conduct and analyze a simple survey yourself, with the help of local volunteers and active party members. You might also try to use secondary school or university students to help you during holiday periods. Administering a questionnaire can also serve to strengthen your network of volunteers.

Issuing a Newsletter or Bulletin

Some legislators prefer to issue a regular newsletter to citizens, which can be read over the radio, to keep citizens informed of goings-on in parliament. Such a newsletter can be a valuable tool to keep constituents informed of what you're doing in parliament to benefit them. Newsletters also have the potential to reach a broader audience than other methods of outreach. In addition, you could participate in a regular radio talk show to publicize the information in your newsletter or bulletin.

Press Releases

Word of mouth may be your most important form of publicity. News travels fast in the villages and small towns and your constituents will soon hear about your work if you are active in your constituency. It can be beneficial to ensure that your outreach activities are covered by the local and national news media.

An effective way to generate free media attention is to create a press release. A press release can be used to publicize an event or highlight specific accomplishments. Press releases should be short (about one page), concise in content, and be of general interest to constituents. In all press releases, be sure to list a contact name and number so that reporters can follow-up if necessary.

Work with Local Organizations

You can reach out to your constituents and better represent them in government by working with civil society organizations (CSOs) who are active in your constituency. Through working with CSOs undertaking development in your community, you can also help increase their capacity to mobilize financial, human and technical resources and effect development. You can also help CSOs identify what projects are priorities for your constituents. For example, an elected representative in northern Namibia knew that his constituents often drew water from polluted streams during the rainy season. The elected representative convinced a CSO to provide four shallow wells and helped supervise the project.

Other Forms of Outreach

In addition to what is discussed above, there is a broad range of outreach activities from which to choose, including:

- Public service announcements (both radio and television)
- Participation in a radio or television call-in show
- Cultural, arts, dance music or traditional festivals
- Panel discussions, “Meet your Member Forums”
- Organization of events, such as on Independence Day or during other festive periods
- Organize a workshop of community organizations where citizens can learn about the resources available to them
- Help citizens initiate small development projects or obtain small loans to open businesses
- Help constituents access entrepreneurial training held by the government or CSOs
- 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 or district



2. Responding to Individual Citizens, or Constituency Casework

As an MP, individual constituents may contact you to seek your assistance on personal or individual problems that involve the government. Constituents will look up to you and may ask you to solve their problems.

Doing “casework,” or assisting individual citizens when they have problems that involve the government, can help you to acquire a first-hand understanding of the way in which parliament and government is working – or not working – for your constituents. Examples of case work include helping a pensioner who has not received his or her check for several months, assisting a family whose son has been wrongfully detained by the police, or working with a widow who has lost her estate to the relatives of her deceased husband.

If you determine that an individual’s case is an important one, you can consider playing an advocacy role. You can do so by opening a “case” and giving a person a chance to tell his or her story. It is common practice in many countries to ask constituents in such situations to complete a one-page form in which they describe their problem and formally ask for assistance. If you chose to advocate a person’s case, be sure to keep track of your work and document your efforts. For example, be sure to take notes of phone calls you place on behalf of the citizen.

Also keep in mind that it is okay to say “no.” Saying no can be difficult to do, but in the long run it is better to say no than to raise unrealistic expectations. It is important to make sure that constituents are aware of the limits to the power of an MP so that they do not have false expectations. You can also refer a case to the appropriate agency to handle the constituent’s problem.

ANNEX A

CHECKLIST FOR ORGANIZING A
TOWN HALL MEETING

Prior to the Meeting

Preparation is a key element of conducting a successful town hall meeting. The meeting will be more useful to the MP and to constituents with strong advance preparations.

Venue

- Locate a room/space 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 (shops, markets, convenient stores, etc.)
- Spread the word using the media and existing constituency or town institutions such as traditional rulers, local government officials, the police etc.

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

- Call city officials to enquire about current local issues
- Check laws and rules on how different issues are defined
- Consult with MPs serving on oversight committees, government ministries and commissions dealing with issues of interest to constituents
- Prepare to deliver a brief presentation to constituents on the activities of parliament and your efforts to address constituent needs

ANNEX A

Media

- Prepare a media advisory notifying them of the town hall and 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
- Discuss strategies to utilize media to reach a greater number of participants, such as considering a call in radio show during or following the town hall meeting

Moderator

- Identify a possible moderator who will run the meeting. Be sure to select a moderator who is perceived to be neutral.
- Explain to the moderator what is expected of him/her, including:
 - Facilitate discussion
 - Open the floor for questions, comments
 - Moderate discussion and manage time, including keeping discussion from being too long or from straying off topic
 - Alert the audience 15 minutes prior to the close of the meeting to avoid the possibility of cutting someone off or not recognizing other questioners when the meeting ends

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
- Conduct radio interviews

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)

ANNEX A

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 constituency 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.

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. To enable you to do so, request that the volunteer taking notes write down what citizens raise what issues, as well as any promises you may make, to enable to you to more easily follow-up as needed with constituents.
- Upon return to Freetown, think about the needs of your constituents that were identified at the town hall meeting and develop a strategy to address them. Engage appropriate parliamentary committees and government ministries to promote the interests of your citizens. Discuss your constituents' needs with fellow MPs who represent constituencies that may share some of the same concerns as your constituents.

**ANNEX B
MEDIA CONTACTS**

NEWSPAPERS

Organization/ Name	Address	Contact No.
Africa Champion	15 Kissy Road, Freetown www.expotimes.net	077-445853
Awareness Times	17 Garrison Street, Freetown; www.awarenesstimes.com	033-321001
AWOKO	47 Percival Street, Freetown www. awoko.org	224927 / 076-888695
Concord Times	51 Kroo Town Road, Freetown www.concordtimesl.com	077 483 319/ 226357
Democrat	Stop-Press Building, George Street, Freetown	033-374033
The Exclusive	25 Garrison Street Freetown- www.exclusivepress.net	033-414776
For Di People	25 Pademba Road, Freetown	228869 / 076-638025
Herald News	98 Solider Street, Freetown	076-445968/ 077-419361
Independent Observer	29 Rawdon Street	076-608194/ 076-602898
New Vision	29 Rawdon Street, Freetown	076-860948
The News	29 Rawdon Street, Freetown	033-400010
News Citizen	7 Wellington Street, Freetown www.thenewcitizen-sl.com	228693/ 077-564061
Premier News	140 Circular Road, Freetown	227624/ 076-803864
Salone Times	14 Percival Street, Freetown	077-558366
Sierra Leone News Agency (SLENA)	Government Book Shop, Freetown	030-368690
The Spark	Rawdon Street, Freetown	077-421696
Spectator	Pademba Road, Freetown	076-995119
Standard Times	2a Ascension Town Road, Freetown	220064 / 033-777178 076-762822

**ANNEX B
MEDIA CONTACTS**

RADIO STATIONS

Station	Address	Contact No
ABC-TV	Aureol Insurance Building, Siaka Stevens Street, Freetown	033-342581
Capital Radio	DSTV Wilkinson Road, Free- town	076-467142
Citizen Radio 103.7		033-717041 / 076-544982
Cotton Tree News-CTN	Fourah Bay College Building, Mount Aureol Freetown	076-460424
EAGLE FM	C/o Citizen Radio, Old Road Kissy	076-627577 077-291145
Eastern Commu- nity Radio	Kenema District	
Kallone Radio	Old Skool Entertainment, Hill Station, Freetown	076-610468
Kiss FM 104.4	Kissy Town Road/ Bo	
Radio Bintumani	Kabala Town/ Koinadugu Dis- trict	
Radio Democracy	32 Waterloo Street or Signal Hill, Freetown	076-713574
Radio Maria	12 Bright Street, Freetown	076-617242
Radio Moa	Kailahun District	
Radio MODCAR	Moyamba District	
Sky-Radio	Mount Joy, Freetown	077-250000
SLBS	Broadcasting House, New Eng- land Ville, Freetown	033-515241
Search for Com- mon Ground (SFCG/TDS)	44 Bathurst Street, Freetown www.sfcg.org	223 082 / 223 497 / 223 313
UN Radio	Mammy Yoko Aberdeen, Free- town	033-509941
Voice of Women	Forum of Conscience (FOC) Bonthe District	

ANNEX C

SAMPLE CONSTITUENT LETTER TO A MP

Aberdeen Youth Development
Constituency 150
34 Coast Road
Freetown, Sierra Leone
June 10, 2008

Hon. Jinna Konneh
Parliament of Sierra Leone
Parliament Building
Tower Hill
Freetown, Sierra Leone

Dear Hon. Charles Kalawa,

We hope this letter finds you well.

I am writing on behalf of Aberdeen Youth Development from your constituency (constituency 150), we would like to express our concerns to you on certain issues regarding our community.

The most pressing concern for us is the deteriorating sanitary conditions at the cemetery in Murray town and Aberdeen. As you know, cemeteries are supposed to be a place for the dead to rest in peace, but the two cemeteries mentioned have been turned into meeting points for the criminals because they are overgrown with bushes. Both the surroundings and inside of the cemeteries are unkempt, and this makes it an easy hide-out for the criminals from where they carry out their criminal activities against innocent citizens. Also, because of the poor sanitary conditions of these cemeteries, those living close to them are afraid of epidemics in the community.

Another major concern among the youth and the constituents is the high cost of food items, especially rice. As you are aware that rice is the staple food of Sierra Leoneans, and the skyrocketing price of this basic commodity is making lives unbearable for many people in our community. Many people cannot afford a square meal per day any longer and parents are taking their children out of school to trade on the streets. This is a serious issue and a threat to our community and the nation as a whole.

Please, we would like to know what you or the government are doing to address these important issues. A response to our letter will be appreciated.

Thank you for your time and attention to these matters.

We look forward to hearing from you very soon.

Sincerely Yours,
Amadu Brima Kamara
Coordinator

ANNEX C

SAMPLE RESPONSE FROM A MP

Honorable Jinna Konneh

Member of Parliament of Sierra Leone
Parliament Building, AOU Drive
Tower Hill, Freetown
Telephone: 076- 110-333

June 25, 2008

Mr. Amadu Brima Kamara
Coordinator,
Aberdeen Youth Development
34 Coast Road (Constituency 150)
Freetown, Sierra Leone

Dear Mr. Kamara:

Re: Conditions of Cemeteries and Rising cost of Food Prices

I would like to thank you and members of Aberdeen Youth Development for your letter dated June 10, 2008 that was sent to me on the above two issues of concern to the Aberdeen community.

I must commend your organization for this initiative, and as your elected representatives, I share your concerns as well and I'm glad you raised them in your letter.

First, on the issue of the two cemeteries mentioned in your letter, I have already taken up this case with the city council when I met with the council chairman two weeks ago. I am happy to inform you that the council chairman promised that the department of public works will start clearing all cemeteries in the city as from next week. According to the chairman, the council suspended work on all the public cemeteries when their machines broke down about three months ago. However, the council has acquired new set of machines and work will start at the cemeteries shortly. Also, all the cemeteries within the city will be fenced to prevent un-authorized people from entering them.

Regarding the rising cost of food, especially rice, this has been a major concern to the government as well. In order to address this issue, Parliament has just passed a bill titled: 2008 Finance Act, which cuts down the import duties and other tariffs on rice, flour, sugar and other essential commodities. I am sure that these measures will greatly reduce the cost of these goods, bringing relief to the people.

Once again, thank you for letter. I greatly appreciate it.

Regards,
Honorable Jinna Konneh



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Since launching its Sierra Leone program in 2001, NDI has worked with CSOs, Members of Parliament (MPs), political parties, the security sector, and other actors to strengthen civic participation and political institutions in Sierra Leone. Following the 2007 legislative elections, NDI conducted an orientation program for Members of Parliament and legislative staff to strengthen the capacity of the Parliament of Sierra Leone to serve as a democratic and responsive legislative body. The program assisted MPs and staff to have a better understanding of the role of parliament, parliamentary processes and functions, executive oversight, constituency outreach, and the principles of accountability and representation. This guide was produced in June 2008.