



Mandating Evidence in Proposals Submitted to Cabinet

Cabinet Secretariat, Sierra Leone
African Cabinet Government Network (ACGN)

Why it was introduced

- Like many African governments, the Cabinet of Sierra Leone includes the President, Vice-President, and more than twenty Ministers, and meets regularly to make key policy decisions. The mandate of the [Cabinet Secretariat](#) is to support the policy development and decision making process of the Cabinet, as well as to coordinate, supervise, support, and operationalize the policies and programs of ministries, departments, and agencies. The head of the Cabinet Secretariat, the Cabinet Secretary, is also the head of the civil service.
- In 2013, the Cabinet Secretaries in Sierra Leone and several other African governments expressed frustration that as many as 50% or more of their decisions failed to be fully implemented. They recognized that one reason was a lack of evidence and analysis underpinning those decisions in the first place, leading at times to misguided plans that were unlikely to succeed, especially given capacity and resource constraints. This observation was consistent with the perceived poor quality of many policy proposals submitted to the Cabinets by line ministries, in which capacities and incentives to use evidence were limited. In addition, proposals submitted to Cabinets often reflected sectoral silos with inadequate collaboration between ministries.
- Cabinet secretaries were reluctant to allow national civil society groups or foreign experts access to their internal decision-making processes. Instead, they recognized their common challenges and decided to share experiences with and learn from each other to improve the use of evidence in decision making. In partnership with a team from Adam Smith International and funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) program, the Africa Cabinet Government Network (ACGN) was established

Incentivizing Evidence-Informed Decision Making in Government

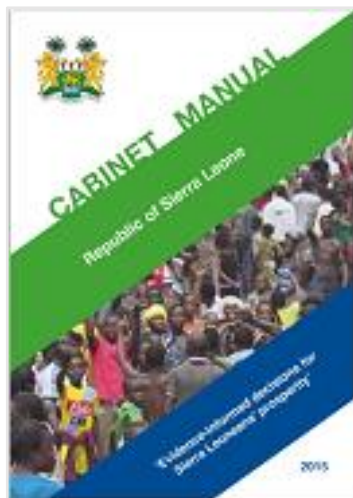
How are public sector officials incentivized to use evidence¹ routinely in their work, whether to inform major policies and decisions, design or alter programs, or guide implementation? The [Results for All Incentivizing Evidence-Informed Decision Making in Government](#) series highlights strategies, processes, and programs that government agencies around the world have used to create incentives for using evidence in government decision making.

¹ We define evidence broadly as the best information available to decision makers, which can include administrative and statistical data, research, evaluations, and citizen input.

by the Cabinet Secretaries of Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Malawi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Somaliland, South Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, and Zanzibar, with Botswana, Lesotho, and Tanzania joining later.

How it works

- Although ACGN offered several [training courses](#) in evidence use for policy analysts from Cabinet Secretariats, it focused primarily on institutional processes and systems, due to the unique role of Cabinet Secretariats as the coordinators of policy development, debate, and decision making, and as facilitators of ministerial collaboration. In particular, the network found that revising outdated cabinet manuals offered a way to explicitly embed evidence use within institutional procedures.
- With help from ACGN, Sierra Leone published a new [cabinet manual](#) in 2015, the first major revision in over 50 years. In his forward, Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service Dr. Ernest Surrur explains that “a major initiative of this Manual is to ensure that Cabinet decision-making is informed by relevant evidence, so that its decisions can and will be implemented effectively.” In addition to elaborating on the importance of decision making informed by evidence and the various types of evidence that may be considered, the manual requires Ministers to submit policy proposals using a standard template in which they must describe the relevant evidence used to shape the proposed intervention; see the excerpt below.



Sierra Leone Cabinet Manual, 2015

Section 6: Evidence that proposed intervention is needed and will work

A) Evidence / analysis that recommended action is needed (including evidence to justify location, if relevant)

B) Analysis of evidence on underlying problem, to ensure intervention addresses causes, not symptoms

C) Assumptions about how people or organizations will change their behavior as a result of government intervention (e.g. whether investors will respond to incentives; whether regulations will be enforced)

D) Assessment of evidence of implementation of any similar interventions in Sierra Leone or elsewhere

- In an attempt to enhance cross-sectoral collaboration, the template also prompts Ministers to list other ministries and relevant stakeholders consulted, as well as whether financial and legal implications were reviewed and supported by the Ministries of Finance and Justice.
- The President of Sierra Leone has required that every proposal submitted to Cabinet follow the standard template, an immediate change that put evidence-informed decision making front and center and institutionalized evidence use in Cabinet processes for the first time. A majority of Ministers and their staff were forced to change the way they do business, and established their own new processes to comply with the requirement. As the ‘gatekeeper’ to Cabinet, the Secretary was able to ensure compliance with the President’s decision that all proposals use the template and contain evidence to support the proposed policy.

- The Cabinet Secretariat established a network of Cabinet focal persons across all ministries and also followed up with training for 150 civil servants, who now had explicit incentives to enhance and apply their skills in policy analysis and evidence use.
- In addition, the Cabinet Secretary formed a dedicated unit that analyzes every proposal and asks questions of the relevant ministries, ensuring that they are well prepared to justify their policies and incentivizing them to be well versed in the underpinning evidence.

What it has achieved

- The new Cabinet procedures in Sierra Leone were preceded by a review of all 79 Cabinet decisions taken over a 4-month period in 2013, in which an assessment tool developed by ACGN was used to assess various types of evidence in documents submitted to the Cabinet. This not only helped the Cabinet Secretary to focus the new procedures and the training, but also provided a baseline against which to assess the results of the reforms.
- Subsequent process reviews conducted in Sierra Leone in 2015 and 2016 revealed significant increases in the inclusion of evidence on all the major issues covered by the review, such as evidence on the likely impact of proposals, financial implications, gender issues, potential implementation problems, and possible impact on other sectors.
- The adoption of the required template and process has created a “paradigm shift” in Cabinet decision-making and helped promote an “evidence culture” in Cabinet, according to the Cabinet Secretary. Compared to an era of mutual back-scratching among Cabinet members (“I’ll support your proposal if you support mine”), policymakers are now more likely to ask about the evidence that a proposal will work, and the predicted impact on winners and losers.

What lessons were learned

- The government of Sierra Leone utilized a rules-based approach to incentivize Ministers to submit policy proposals grounded in evidence – and prove it, or risk having their plans rejected by the Cabinet. Although the strategy was top-down, it has already begun to shift the institutional cultures of Cabinet ministries.
- This experience also demonstrates how international peer networks can provide supportive environments for members to share common challenges, learn from each other, and generate motivation and incentives to achieve progress. The Africa Cabinet Government Network was not only critical in assisting Sierra Leone with revisions to the cabinet manual, it helped to pinpoint limited evidence use as a root cause of poor policy implementation and incentivize the government to do something about it.
- The ACGN Executive Director, Dr. Mark Johnston, highlights a number of success factors behind the Sierra Leone reforms, including its focus on procedures and institutional capacity, as well as the strong commitment and leadership of the President and the Cabinet Secretary. Measuring the evidence content of Cabinet proposals helped to motivate, focus, and track the reforms, and the support of international peers was also highly influential.

What comes next

- Because the new procedures in Sierra Leone are being mainstreamed into civil service processes, including training programs and promotion exams for senior positions, the changes

are expected to be sustained. The Cabinet Secretary points out that the last Cabinet Manual lasted for over 50 years, despite numerous changes of government and civil war.

- Other African Cabinet Secretaries are also moving to increase the use of evidence in the development of policy proposals for their Cabinets. At the ACGN Roundtable Meeting of Cabinet Secretaries in 2016, the participants from 13 African governments issued the [Lilongwe Declaration](#), agreeing to take practical steps to increase the use of evidence to inform the decision-making of their Cabinets.



- The Sierra Leone reforms demonstrate that institutional procedures can be used to incentivize increased use of evidence in decision making at the highest levels of government. However, even in Sierra Leone, there is still a long way to go. Notwithstanding the measured increase in use of evidence in Cabinet proposals, the most recent Cabinet process review in Sierra Leone reveals that some proposals still lack key evidence, no doubt reflecting the limited capacity in many ministries to access and analyze available evidence, as well as the limited availability of rigorous evidence on the major issues facing a nation like Sierra Leone.
- As for the ACGN, its members have ambitious plans to extend the benefits of its collaboration and experience-sharing to all 54 African nations. They are currently planning its 2018 Roundtable meeting and the next international training workshop.

Resources

- ACGN website, accessed February 2018. <http://www.cabinetgovernment.net/>
- Cabinet Manual, Republic of Sierra Leone, 2015. <http://www.cabinetgovernment.net/sl-manual.pdf>
- Interview with Mark Johnston, Executive Director, ACGN, February 15, 2018.
- Mark Johnston, "Driving the Use of Evidence from the Top: Working with African Cabinet Secretaries." ACGN, www.cabinetgovernment.net/driving-eipm.pdf