

Local Governance and Development in Sierra Leone



In brief

- Local paramount chiefs, who were historically introduced during the colonial period as the sole authority of local government in Sierra Leone, are seen by some as local despots who undermine development. Others see them as legitimate and popular representatives of rural people.
- This study attempts to examine the role of the paramount chief, who must be from one of the ruling families originally recognized by the British colonial authorities, in respect to development.
- Our findings suggest that areas where chiefs are powerful have significantly worse development outcomes today; low literacy rates, poor school attainment and low levels of non-agricultural employment are key features of these areas.
- On the contrary, these powerful chiefs' authority is highly respected and their villages have higher levels of “social capital” that may be used in participating with civil society organizations or keeping chiefs accountable.
- This paradox reflects the capture of civil society organizations by chiefs who have structured these organizations to control society. Thus, their authority is more highly respected because of this control and because people rely on them for patronage.
- The current system of paramount chieftaincy does not do a good job of promoting development in Sierra Leone. By making the chieftaincy more competitive, for example changing the institution that chiefs are elected for life, would improve development outcomes. Yet, this is politically unfeasible currently in Sierra Leone.

Policy Motivation

In this research we set out to measure how powerful local paramount chiefs are to distinguish between different competing hypotheses about how local government works in Sierra Leone. One branch of the academic literature sees these chiefs as local despots who undermine the potential for development. Another branch, resting on extensive survey research, sees them as legitimate and popular representatives of rural people. These views seem to be completely contradictory.

Policy Impact

It will hopefully inform the government in Sierra Leone about what the pros and cons of the current system are but it will also be important for international financial institutions because the research has implications for the effectiveness of some of their efforts to strengthen civil society, for example Community Driven Development.

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Audience

The government of Sierra Leone and International institutions such as DFID and the World Bank.

Policy Implications

We show that, consistent with the chiefs as despots view, places with more powerful chiefs have significantly worse development outcomes today---in particular, lower rates of literacy, school attainment and non-agricultural employment. But, consistent with the chiefs as representatives view, these powerful chiefs’ authority is highly respected among villagers, and their villages have higher levels of “social capital,” for example, greater popular participation in a variety of “civil society” organizations and forums that might potentially be used for keeping chiefs accountable. We argue that this seemingly-paradoxical juxtaposition, which is very similar to the different views we discussed above, reflects the capture of civil society organizations by chiefs. Instead of acting as a vehicle for disciplining chiefs, chiefs have structured these organizations to control society. In consequence, powerful chiefs’ authority is more highly respected because of this control and because people need to rely on them for patronage. These findings have policy implications with respect to the further institutionalization of the power of paramount chiefs vis a vis the local councils in Sierra Leone and with respect to the potential changes in the local government act that are being debated. They suggest that as presently constituted, the system of paramount chieftaincy does not do a good job of promoting development in rural Sierra Leone.

Implementation

“Places with more powerful chiefs have significantly worse development outcomes today”

Our research suggests that making the chieftaincy more competitive, for example by changing the institution so that chiefs were elected not for life but for a fixed term would improve development outcomes. Nevertheless, this proposal has been discussed before in Sierra Leone and rejected, so this conclusion in itself does not generate a simple policy bottom line. With respect to the international community the research suggests that the impact of empowerment policies such as Community Driven Development must be conditional on the initial circumstances and power of paramount chiefs and an important research agenda is to try to measure these things in the future when evaluating the impacts of CDD.

Dissemination

“Making the chieftaincy more competitive...would improve development outcomes”

There are two independent angles for here. One is the government and civil society in Sierra Leone. However, one would definitely want to discuss with locals and others what would be the right way to present these findings. As we mentioned above, criticisms of the chieftaincy have been voiced before in Sierra Leone and apparently popular and desirable policy changes have not been implemented. Quite the contrary the old system has even been institutionalized. Therefore to have impact one must engage in a quite extensive consultation exercise and try to understand why previous attempts at reform failed. In terms of CDD and the international community a good idea would be to organize a small conference and invite people who are working on CDD and evaluating it to try to distil lessons learned. Our results suggest that CDD must have very heterogeneous effects in different contexts for development outcomes and it would be good to think through the comparative evidence from this perspective before drawing any sort of guidelines for how to move forward with implementing changes to the way CDD is done.

Further Readings

Casey, Katherine, Rachel Glennerster and Edward Miguel (2011) “Reshaping Institutions: Evidence on External Aid and Local Collective Action,” http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~emiguel/pdfs/miguel_gbf.pdf

Fanthorpe, Richard (2005) “On the Limits of the Liberal Peace: Chiefs and Democratic Decentralization in Post-War Sierra Leone,” *African Affairs*, 105, 1-23.

Fanthorpe, Richard and Mohamed Gibril Sesay (2009) “Reform is not Against Tradition: Making Chieftaincy Revelation in 21st Century Sierra Leone,” Unpublished, Campaign for Good Governance, Freetown.

About the authors

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