

Final report

Election debates

Scoping for scale up

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ELECTION DEBATES

Scoping for Scale Up

IGC Final Report

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INTRODUCTION

In the run-up to Sierra Leone's 2012 parliamentary elections, researchers Kelly Bidwell, Katherine Casey, and Rachel Glennerster used a randomized evaluation to determine the impact of publicly-screened debates on voter knowledge and behaviour, candidate campaign spending, and ultimately the performance of elected politicians.

Findings from the evaluation suggest that publicising candidate debates corresponds to a significant improvement in the political knowledge of voters, ultimately influencing their vote. For example, the share of voters who knew candidates' top spending priorities doubled (from 14 percent to 29 percent) and voters at polling stations that screened the debate were 9 percentage points more likely to have voted for a candidate whose top priority issue aligned with theirs.

Additionally, the debates encouraged more investment by campaigning candidates and enhanced the subsequent accountability of elected MPs to their constituencies. Campaigning candidates spent more in communities where the debates were screened, relative to communities where they were not. Once elected to office, candidates from constituencies where the debates were screened spent an average of US\$6,000 more on verified development projects than the average spent in comparison constituencies, which was US\$3,912. The total amount that MPs had available was US\$11,000.

Encouraged by the results of the impact evaluation, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is seeking to scale up parliamentary debates between MP candidates from rival parties in advance of the 2018 parliamentary elections in Sierra Leone. SFCG has sought technical support from the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) to help ensure that their scale up of the project is achieved in a way that is both cost-effective and in line with the evidence and insights from the randomised evaluation.

J-PAL secured funding in April 2016 from the International Growth Centre to investigate the feasibility of scaling up the debates in Sierra Leone for the next election cycle, projected for February 2018. This report details the objectives, findings, and main outcomes of that investigation.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

This investigative project aimed to build on the momentum generated by IGC lead academic Rachel Glennerster's seminar in February 2016 in Freetown on the impact of electoral debates in Sierra Leone during the 2012 election. It also aimed to make use of the data analysis and mapping work that was done by Mr. Abdulai Kondeh to determine the possible size and scale of a debates programme in 2018.

While the evaluated model of implementing the debates in 2012 seemed to be cost-effective (with a production cost of US\$5000 per constituency) and logistically feasible, our aim was to further investigate these areas at a larger scale. The main thrust of the work was thus to determine appropriate methods of publicising the debates to reach a large population while still creatively operating within the modalities explored in and further suggested by the initial pilot. Further work was also proposed for developing partnerships with civil society and media; further investigating the logistical requirements and costing; generating buy-in among important political actors; and soliciting funding for implementing the debates at scale.

KEY PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES

SCOPING VISITS

Following conversations with Search for Common Ground and the researchers on the 2012 evaluation on their initial ideas about implementing the debates at intermediary scale in the 2018 election, a team from J-PAL and the Sierra Leone office of Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) conducted scoping visits to 11 constituencies in Sierra Leone. The particular **objectives** of the scoping visits were as follows:

- To get an idea of the logistical requirements and associated costs of facilitating group screenings.
- To get an idea of the potential reach of group screenings in various locations.
- To explore the feasibility of additional methods of dissemination besides the group screenings.

SCOPING WORK AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

The scoping team visited 25 towns in 11 constituencies across 5 districts, including Kono, Kenema, Pujehun, Port Loko, and Western Area Rural. Within constituencies, the scoping team primarily targeted towns with 1000 or more registered voters and the towns in close proximity to these primary locations.

In each town, the team held semi-structured interviews with groups that typically consisted of the town chief, one or two other town elders, a youth leader, and a women's leader. In 2 towns, groups also included a worker from the town's cinema hall. Where possible, the scoping team also made an effort to visit potential screenings venues and to gather information from those responsible for the venue.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Ease of travel between neighbouring towns

Road networks between towns are poor, particularly in Kono and Kenema districts, so transportation is a challenge. Despite this, it is common for people to visit other towns, particularly district or section headquarter towns. Visits can be for schooling, markets, social calls and so on. This implies that people will attend screenings in neighbouring towns, though it may be more challenging for older members of the community or those who cannot afford a motorbike taxi ride.

Availability and costs of screening inputs

The most commonly available types of venues were open fields, followed closely by town barriers and community centres, and then cinema halls. Notice needs to be provided to caretakers ideally four weeks in advance, with subsequent follow up.

1. Open fields

Though often used by the entire community, most open fields are connected to primary or secondary schools and are managed by the school, the chief or central committee, or a private individual. Many can host well over 100 people, and can be used at no direct cost.

Open fields are not, however, equipped for such events and would incur several costs – generator, PA systems and other screening needs. They also need to be used in the evenings and on the weekends.

2. Town barriers and community centres

Town barriers and community centres tend to be public spaces, under the authority of the town chief or a town committee and are used for meetings and other community events. They can be enclosed spaces, or open roofed spaces, which allows for daytime screenings. They often have capacity for over 100 people, though generally fewer than open fields. They would also be available at little not no direct cost – the maximum quoted prices is 200,000 SLL.

Similar to open fields, town barriers and community centres are generally ill-equipped for screenings. Few have generators, PA systems or other required inputs, so indirect costs would be incurred.

3. Cinema halls

Cinema halls are a potential screening venue, but are generally less pervasive than open fields or town barriers. Cinema halls are privately run and usually screen football games, though some serve other purposes. The fee for watching a game is usually 1 000 SLL – 2 000 SLL.

Cinema halls are more expensive to rent than all of the previous options. The scoping team spoke to nine cinema hall owners and all but one provided estimates ranging from 20 000 SLL to 500 000 SLL, with the average rental cost at 246 000 SLL, plus generator fuel. They also have the lowest capacity, though some can hold over 100 people. They are, however, the best equipped for the screenings; each has a television and DVD player or laptop, a generator, and all but one has a PA system. Seating is also available for attendees.

Screening times

Findings suggest that people are generally free during the evenings on weekdays starting from 4pm. On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, people are also available in the daytime – Friday starting from around 2pm, and Saturday and Sunday from 10am at the earliest. Regardless, evening tends to still be better. Evening screenings pose a challenge for those coming from further towns, but otherwise offer the best opportunity to reach the most people.

ADVERTISING.

It is in the interest of implementers to engage the town chief and all other reputable community members in the preparation of the screenings. Not only is permission required from the town chief, but buy-in from leaders, including religious leaders, the youth leader and the women's leader, will encourage attendance.

Advertising methods include the town crier, radio announcements, getting the chief or headperson to call a meeting, and announcing events over a mobile PA system. Of these, the most common method is through the designated town crier. Where estimated, the cost of using the town crier is a small token of 10 000 SLL and the cost of batteries, and of the other methods, radio advertisements are the most expensive and a meeting called by the chief is the least.

ADDITIONAL DISSEMINATION METHODS

Radio

Radio is a necessary dissemination avenue to consider, in particular because of the existing evidence on its wide reach and potential to have some of the same effects as the mobile screenings. A nationally representative survey by BBC Media Action finds that 81% of the Sierra Leone population has access to radio.

Airing the audio from the debates may be costly, particularly if it is done as a stand-alone radio event, but it may be possible for news shows covering the election to include clips in their existing shows. The coverage area will be wider than a given constituency so there will be some crossover, but it is possible to use local radio stations to reduce this effect.

Handing out DVD copies of debate footage

Implementers could leave behind DVDs of the debate in the communities where screenings are held. Ideally, this would allow for constituents that were unable to attend the screenings to watch the debates even after the screening team has left. DVDs would have a limited reach as very few households have DVD players. Alternatively, they could be left at telecentres but they would still only be available to individuals or small groups, and for a small fee.

Leaving DVDs with cinema halls would have the greatest reach in additional screenings, which could be done before or during halftime of football matches, or they can organize special viewings. This would incur additional costs, including fuel costs for the generator and potentially the per-person cost of the viewing (if it is offered for free).

Mobile phone dissemination

The majority of towns visited have access to mobile phone service, and across the country 83.5% of the population has access to a mobile phone in or out of the home. The two dissemination methods the team have considered are (1) making it possible for individuals to watch debates on their mobile phone, and (2) sharing clips via WhatsApp. It is common for individuals to store videos on SD cards to watch on their phones, and while people do use WhatsApp, it is mostly in district capitals and chiefdom headquarter towns.

IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the scoping visits, the J-PAL policy team worked to present SFCG with a set of recommendations with respect to implementing the electoral debates in the 2018 elections. These recommendations were based on findings from the scoping visits, the mapping work conducted by Abdulai Kondeh, insights from the evaluation on the underlying mechanisms behind the impact of the debates, and prior conversations with SFCG and the researchers on the evaluation regarding their initial ideas for implementation at scale.

PUBLICISING THE DEBATES

Group screenings

To allow for maximum impact, SFCG should retain group screenings as the dissemination medium of choice at scale. However, they should aim to facilitate these screenings in a less costly and less resource-intensive way than the road shows used during the 2012 elections. In

particular, the J-PAL policy team recommends that in addition to generally targeting more populated towns, SFCG also consider the following for facilitating group screenings:

- **Limit outdoor screenings and screenings in town barriers to the biggest town within constituencies.** This would help to limit transportation and staff costs. This “flagship” screening can then act as a mode of publicising the project as a whole and could be the screening that is attended by invited journalists and important leaders at constituency-level.
- **Use cinema halls as the standard screening venues.** This would help to decrease the need to transport heavy screening equipment and allow for more frequent screenings in a wider pool of screening towns.
- **Contract cinema hall owners in target towns within constituencies to run group screenings;** make use of network of local mobilisers from partner organisations to mobilise local leaders and cinema hall owners.
- **Share DVDs with local leaders and other community members that have access to DVD players;** make use of network of local mobilisers from partner organisations to encourage them to put on small screenings for neighbours and other interested parties.

Findings from the impact evaluation highlight the particular value of constituents watching the full debate in a group setting. The researchers find that the combination of the two types of information conveyed through the debates – “hard facts” regarding candidate policy positions and professional qualifications and “soft” information covering candidate charisma and persuasiveness – is more effective than either type in isolation. While voters update their views of candidates in response to specific information regarding objective facts or personality, only watching the full debates moved voters’ policy stances into alignment with those of their chosen candidate and led to changes in vote choice.

The researchers also find evidence to suggest that group exposure to the debates may have facilitated additional discussion and deliberation among voters that clarified and reinforced the information from the debates. In the eight constituencies where both individual screening and group screenings were tested, the researchers find that while both delivery mechanisms had strong positive treatment effects on political knowledge, policy alignment, and votes for the debate winner, the positive effect for the group screening is larger in magnitude than that of the individual viewing with respect to every outcome except votes for the best performer.

Additional dissemination

In addition to leveraging the pervasiveness of radio as an advertising tool, we further recommend that SFCG consider the following uses of radio for additional dissemination of information from the debates:

- Work with community radio stations to develop ways to incorporate content (in the form of short clips) from the debates into their scheduled elections programming.
- Get community radio stations to have broadcast the full debates. This could help reach constituents in more remote and rural towns.

In more urban constituencies, where mobile phone use is relatively high, we also suggest that Search further explore the popularity of disseminating short clips through Bluetooth transfer or Whatsapp.

TARGETING STRATEGY

Constituencies and screening towns

During the 2012 elections, SFCG held debates for a randomly selected 14 out of 28 constituencies and conducted a mobile road show of screenings in a randomly selected 112 polling centres in those constituencies selected to have debates. At the time, the polling centres targeted were in rural and remote areas to avoid information from the debates spilling over from the treatment to the comparison polling centres.

At scale, however, SFCG plans to encourage information spillovers by targeting bigger towns that lay in close proximity to several other towns. To aid SFCG in gaining a sense of which constituencies are likely to be most suitable for debates, i.e. large number of people can be shown the debate video at low cost due to population concentration, the J-PAL policy team enlisted the help of an independent contractor to do map polling centres within 8km and 2km radius of each other.

In their plan towards intermediary scale in the 2018 elections, SFCG has indicated that they currently have the capacity to target 45 constituencies. This capacity could be expanded further, depending on how much funding is secured for the project. However, the current constraint poses an opportunity to randomly select the 45 constituencies that will host debates from 90 of the most suitable constituencies for the debates, as suggested by an analysis of the mapping data.

Within the target constituencies, we recommend that SFCG use its network of local mobilisers to verify the largest towns in the constituencies against our data on polling centre populations from the 2012 elections. Pending confirmation of budget considerations, we suggest a target of facilitating group screenings in anywhere from 4 to 8 towns with over 1000 voters in each constituency. Early estimations of the cost per head of facilitating groups screenings largely through cinema halls suggest that this is a more cost-effective approach the more towns are targeted.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

Bringing the parliamentary debates to scale presents a unique opportunity for us to learn more about a) whether the impact of debates on voter and MP behaviour is the same when the program is implemented at a large scale, and b) whether the promise that debates will be held in the future changes how current incumbents behave and c) whether different people run for political office when they know that there will be debates. SFCG's willingness to randomly select the 45 constituencies in which debates will be held allows for this opportunity to be seized.

This deeper knowledge can help Search update its own programmes in Sierra Leone and elsewhere across the continent. In addition, this research can inspire other civil society actors and hopefully improve the electoral process across the world. An impact evaluation into the questions presented will be led by researchers Katherine Casey of Stanford University and Rachel Glennerster of MIT (both of who were PIs on the original debates study with Search and have long experience working in Sierra Leone) with support from the J-PAL Africa office.

To help SFCG determine whether the program is delivered as planned and to inform the results of the impact information, J-PAL has designed an independent process monitoring throughout implementation of the debates. The monitoring will capture information on

logistics, advertising, audience, and other indicators related to program implementation. This information will also inform us on what adjustments may need to be made to the project's design in order for it to be successful at a national scale.

This process monitoring will consist of the following:

- **Video verification:** Surveyors will audit a randomly selected 10 percent of the videos to determine that the videos were produced and that they meet a checklist of criteria as determined by the project team.
- **Random spot checks of screenings:** Monitoring teams visit a randomly selected 15 percent that will host mobile screenings. They will assess the screenings based on a given set of criteria to be determined by the project team.
- **Exit poll surveys:** In towns which host mobile screenings, monitoring teams will conduct surveys to observe the various avenues through which constituents were exposed to the debates and information retention further on from the screenings.

SOLICITING FUNDS

Funding for implementing the debates in Sierra Leone and potentially additional countries as we scale will be sought on a per country basis through major donors in each specific market, including the Global Innovation Fund (GIF), DFID, USAID, EU and other bilateral donors interested in supporting evidence-based programming. Other sources may be foundations that focus their efforts on governance and accountability, such as the Ford Foundation, the Commonwealth Foundation, the Omidyar Network, and the Open Society Foundation. At the moment, SFCG is working on proposals to GIF and the EU, who we believe are critical donors for this phase as we continue to innovate and test. With regards to implementation, SFCG at the moment needs resources with the flexibility and innovation-focus that allow them to grow the programme while gathering essential information to deliver it at scale in various contexts.

We expect that a significant amount of the funding will be used to meet production costs. This will include a producer, moderators, and film crew to shoot the debates, as well as the hire of editors, a sound engineer, translator, and a studio to digitise the footage for use in the mobile screenings and other forms of dissemination. Production capacity is a large determinant of how many constituencies we can realistically target and the current estimate is 45 based on available resources (staff and hardware). Funding to expand our current capacity through additional producers and inputs could enable us to reach even more than 45 constituencies.

The funding will be used to support the hire and training of temporary Search for Common Ground staff to organise screenings in target towns, as well a project staff responsible for coordinating the debates and screenings, and managing the movements of the various teams. A staff member will also be responsible for external engagement with political parties and MP candidates, as well as socialisation efforts in the constituencies. Vehicles and equipment rentals will be needed to implement the screenings, including generators, PA systems, and screens, where required. An advertising campaign will be undertaken, which will include the purchase of radio air time and the development of a project jingle.

Funds will also help SFCG pursue additional modes of publicising the debates to reach as many people as possible. It will be used to support early advertising of the constituencies that will hold debates, will enable mobilisers to identify which potential target towns have cinema halls, and support workshops with community radio stations in target constituencies to develop ways to incorporate the content from the debates into their programming.

Funding for the impact evaluation will be sought jointly with the implementation funds where appropriate. Otherwise, it will be solicited for separately by the researchers.

CONCLUSION

In a developing country context such as Sierra Leone, political information is scarce, in part due to limited media penetration. Citizens often vote for candidates with little knowledge of the candidate's future role, policy stances, qualifications, or past performance. This lack of information makes it difficult for constituents to engage critically in the electoral process, dampening their ability to hold their elected officials accountable and reinforcing a reliance on more salient characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, or party affiliation as a basis for political support.

Debates offer a unique platform for candidates to communicate a wide range of information to their constituents, including hard facts on qualifications and policy stances, as well as "soft" information on more intangible characteristics such as persuasiveness and charisma. Increasing constituents' exposure to candidate debates can thus improve voter knowledge in a way that makes their electoral participation more responsive to politician quality and effort, which in turn strengthens the incentive for politicians to perform better in office.

SFCG is excited to scale the electoral debates programme in Sierra Leone and is considering expanding into other countries as well. The J-PAL policy team thinks that other organisations would be interested in rolling out similar programmes and hope that SFCG's planned programme for 2018 and our ongoing support of it can act as a catalyst for this. Already, the J-PAL policy team has gotten requests from an organization in Kenya for assistance in building a similar programme before their upcoming elections.

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