

## **Freedom of Information: Promoting Good Governance in Sierra Leone**

*By Jeet Mistry, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative*

Since Sierra Leone emerged from its bloody civil war three years ago, the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah has had to face the massive task of reversing the chronic problems of poverty, ethnic strife and corruption that may yet threaten the country's stability. However, the government's ability to crack down on these problems may soon be given a vital boost in the new year, if the efforts of some civil society groups result in the Government taking the initiative to pass a national freedom of information (FOI) law.

Currently, around the world, over sixty countries have enacted FOI laws. Formerly considered the province of industrialised nations, developing countries have increasingly viewed the implementation of a FOI law as a key tool for promoting good governance and facilitating public participation. In the last few years, countries throughout the developing world from Mexico, to India – as well as Uganda and South Africa in Africa, have passed FOI laws.

In recent years, FOI has gained increasing recognition in Africa for its potential to help tackle poverty, for example by ensuring the proper expenditure of public funds, the effective implementation of development programmes and the monitoring of the millennium development goals. The importance of access to information as a key governance and development strategy has now led to the drafting of FOI bills in African states such as Nigeria, Ghana, Mozambique, Kenya and Malawi.

Sierra Leone now has the opportunity to benefit from the enactment of its own FOI law. But what exactly is meant by "freedom of information" and why is it so important?

Freedom of information has long been recognised as a foundational human right ever since the UN General Assembly declared in 1946 that "Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and a touchstone of all freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated."

In practice, an effective FOI law legally enshrines:

- the public's right to request information from the government – and even private bodies in some cases;
- the duty on the government to supply the requested information, unless defined exemptions apply; and
- the duty on the government to disclose proactively information that is of general public interest without the need for requests from its citizens.

Freedom of information laws provide a practical mechanism for achieving the good governance principles of transparency, accountability and public participation. In particular, they can strengthen a country's democratic processes. The right to information has a crucial role in ensuring that citizens are better informed about the people they are electing and their activities while in government. The public can regularly access information on the government's activities and policies, thus making the governments directly accountable on a day-to-day basis rather than just at election time.

Indeed, an effective freedom of information law can even make elections much more meaningful. The underlying foundation of the democratic tradition rests on the premise of an informed constituency that is able thoughtfully to choose its

representatives on the basis of the strength of their record and that is able to hold their government accountable for the policies and decisions it promulgates. With a FOI law in place, constituents have more information on which to assess the government and are thus better equipped to make an informed decision at the ballot box. Voters rely less on political propaganda and may well be less inclined to fall back on their ethnic, religious, or geographic affiliations when voting.

An FOI law can also open up channels of communication between civil society and the state, which could be crucial to the state-building process underway in Sierra Leone since 2002. Openness and information sharing can entrench national stability by establishing a two-way dialogue between citizens and the state, helping to promote public trust in the political system. Such a dialogue can combat feelings of alienation and reduce the risk of disillusioned sections of the public resorting to violence to promote their political ends. In this way, entrenching an effective freedom of information law can enable people to be part of decision-making processes thus reducing any public perception of exclusion or unfair advantage of one group over another.

By promoting dialogue between citizens and their governments, a FOI law can also help to ensure the effectiveness of development and poverty alleviation strategies. Indeed, much of the failure of development strategies in recent years has been because governments and donors have designed and implemented policies without the active input of the very people targeted by such policies. With a FOI law in place, governments would be obliged to share information on their poverty alleviation strategies with the public, who can then have a voice in determining how these policies can more effectively improve their lives.

In recent years, many countries in West Africa have turned to the free market as a means to accelerate economic growth and development. A government that is transparent and committed to freedom of information can more successfully attract private and foreign investor confidence in the economy, thereby encouraging long-term private investment and bolstering growth. Furthermore, freedom of information can ensure that small-scale stakeholders also have a voice in economic policies, which can help economic growth and development to take place in a more equitable, balanced and therefore stable manner. A freedom of information law could also help economic development by deterring corrupt practices in the mining sector - a crucial source of revenues and often cited as a reason behind conflict and instability in the country - by exposing information on how revenues from the sector are spent.

In conclusion, the development of a national FOI law represents a crucial opportunity for Sierra Leone to consolidate its stability and the state-building process since the end of the civil war. Indeed, FOI could at last give the country a real opportunity to turn a corner and leave behind its bloody past for a future that promises stability, inclusive democracy and participatory development for all its citizens.