



Maintains

Research supporting social services to adapt to shocks

Beyond the state: the role of traditional leaders during COVID-19

Learning and recommendations from Kono, Sierra Leone

POLICY BRIEF | October 2020

Introduction

Building awareness of and compliance with government policy on COVID-19 at the community level is a challenge requiring a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. The role of traditional leaders is often mentioned in this regard, but how this works in practice has not been clear.

A rapid qualitative study was conducted in Kono, Sierra Leone, to explore the role of traditional leaders in COVID-19 response efforts. It was based on interviews undertaken between July and September 2020 with Paramount Chiefs and Sub-Chiefs, Mammy Queens, and Youth Leaders. This policy brief summarises the key findings and recommendations – [please read the full report by Kevin Grieco for more details.](#)

The role of district-level government actors

Key finding: District-level government structures had sufficient coordination capacity to be able to formulate COVID-19 policy goals in line with national policies and response efforts.

Even before the first case, a team of district-level actors was meeting twice a day; the District Health Management Team (DHMT) embraced its role as the leading actor, utilising pre-existing infrastructure and tools, and the Office of National Security representative took on his mandated role of supporting the coordination of the district response. When central government mandated a '13-man committee' to manage the initial response, this mostly comprised people already acting on COVID-19 as members of the District Security Coordination Team.

In late April, the National COVID-19 Response Team appointed a District Coordinator to lead the response, with a team of five in support. They set up a the COVID-19 District HQ in a secondary school in Koidu, met with existing district response actors to discuss 'what we have already done, what we intend doing, what we lack, what we have', formalised the new structure and seemed satisfied that things were working well.

District level government actors had three main strategies for conveying messages about COVID-19 to the community level. First, they used radio. Second, some community health workers were trained by UNICEF on response activities, such as case investigation, surveillance, and contact tracing, and were instructed to go from village to village. And third, the DHMT met with Paramount Chiefs, and communicated the need for Chiefs to pass the information down to the community level.

The role of traditional leaders

Key finding: The governance structure of traditional leaders provided the infrastructure for transmitting knowledge to communities throughout the Chiefdom.

Paramount Chiefs: The Paramount Chiefs viewed themselves as bearing the primary responsibility for implementing COVID-19 response policies in the Chiefdoms. They created bylaws that reflected national policy: imposing social distancing, limiting markets, encouraging handwashing and the use of facemasks, etc. Paramount Chiefs began to spread knowledge of the bylaws through the Chiefdom by calling 'general meetings', to which they invited Section Chiefs, Mammy Queens, and Youth Leaders; Section Chiefs cascaded the message down further.

Youth: Before the arrival of the first case in Sierra Leone, national representatives from the Ministry of Youth Affairs met Youth Leaders in Kono to discuss COVID-19. Chiefdom Youth Leaders attended district-level meetings and then worked to spread information down to the community level, including by cascading messages to Section Youth Chairmen, who then reached out to Youth Leaders at the town and village level. Youth also played a major role in supporting the monitoring of crossing points with Guinea and with other districts, complementing the role being carried out by district security personnel.

Mammy Queens: Mammy Queens were also involved in Chiefdom-level sensitisation; at meetings called by their Paramount Chiefs, they were instructed to spread information they had received to the women in the Chiefdom. Chiefdom Mammy Queens cascaded this information to the section level.

Participation in decision-making and coordination

Key finding: Paramount Chiefs were central, Youth Leaders' involvement came late, and Mammy Queens could not participate.

The District Youth Coordinator had to push for a seat at the table. He argued that because the Minister of Youth Affairs was working with the head of the Emergency Operations Centre in Freetown, Youth Leaders should be involved at district level too. Eventually the District Youth Council was 'given a desk' and allowed one representative at the district COVID-19 response centre.

Mammy Queens had no formal involvement in decision-making or coordination. While Chieftaincy and youth organisations are clearly organised under government ministries, this is not the case for Mammy Queens, and it is not clear how they fit into the legal and administrative landscape. As such, Mammy Queens were reliant on receiving information from Paramount Chiefs.

As all of the district's 14 Paramount Chiefs and 14 Chiefdom Youth Leaders are men, the voice of 'traditional leaders' is actually the voice of men.

Recommendations

Traditional leaders have been key to implementing community sensitisation and border control. This is despite being under-resourced and receiving little technical or financial support when COVID-19 first emerged. However, district level decision-making has played out along starkly gendered lines. To address this, the government, working with development partners as appropriate, should:

1. Institutionalise the role of traditional leaders in emergency response.

- Develop policy to outline how government will engage with and empower these functioning and well-defined Chiefdom-level institutions.
- Undertake to provide greater resources to traditional leaders for conducting necessary activities during health emergencies
- Further develop traditional leaders' administrative capacities and infrastructure, including on transparent financial accounting, to support their effective role in emergency response.

2. Institutionalise the role of traditional leaders in an inclusive way.

- Acknowledge the specific roles, relationships, and constituencies of Youth Leaders and Mammy Queens in key policies and strategies, to underscore the need for their engagement in the response.
- Expand and institutionalise the decision-making role of Mammy Queens and Youth Leaders.
- Consider and address the Mammy Queens' lack of official representation at district level, perhaps by formally acknowledging a district-level Mammy Queen position that is linked with and supported by a central ministry.

About Maintains

Maintains is a five-year (2018–2023) operational research programme building a strong evidence base on how health, education, nutrition, and social protection systems can respond more quickly, reliably, and effectively to changing needs during and after shocks, whilst also maintaining existing services. Maintains is working in six focal countries—Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, and Uganda—undertaking research to build evidence and providing technical assistance to support practical implementation. Lessons from this work will be used to inform policy and practice at both national and global levels.

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