



Supporting women to aspire to election  
to political office in Sierra Leone

The experience of the PACER project



## Background

Sierra Leone is located between Guinea and Liberia on the West African coast and has an estimated 6.2 million inhabitants. It is a resource-rich country but has been affected by over a decade of civil war and ranks last of the 177 countries on the Human Development Index. Nearly 45 per cent of its population is aged 14 and under and at around 30 per cent, literacy rates are among the lowest in the world. Life expectancy at birth is just over 41 years; estimates of HIV prevalence vary but it could be as high as seven per cent.

The civil war, which ended in mid-2002, created a large internally displaced population, destroyed infrastructure, hindered development efforts and threatened social cohesion. The impact of the war is still felt and, although the country is unlikely to slip back into conflict, violence is still occasionally used as a means of expression.

## The electoral system

Sierra Leone's first post-war presidential and parliamentary elections were announced days after the ending of hostilities in 2002 and took place that same year. Parliamentary elections take place every five years and use a constituency-based, first-past-the-post system, although amendments were put in place for the 2002 elections. There are 112 elected seats in parliament and an additional twelve seats allocated to Paramount Chiefs (traditional leaders).

At local level, each of the thirteen districts and six major towns has an elected local council. Each district is divided into wards and each ward has a seat on the council. Candidates representing the different political parties contest this seat and the candidate with the most votes wins. In addition to the elected seats, between one and three Paramount Chiefs sit on each council and have voting rights. The first post-war local council elections were in 2004 and they take place every four years.

A decentralisation policy was followed in the post-war period and was seen as an important step in peace building. However, local councils had been abolished in 1972 and at the time of the 2004 elections there was little public understanding of their purpose and function. As a result, voter registration and turnout were low – far lower than at the parliamentary elections.

The Local Government Act of 2004 was ratified after the elections. It sets out the requirement for ward development committees, the administrative level below the district or town council, to be made up of ten elected positions - five women and five men – and the Paramount Chief and councillor. These committees provide the link between the local council and communities.

## Political parties in Sierra Leone

Political power is shared largely, and increasingly exclusively, between the All People's Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). The APC enjoys a stronghold in the north, while the SLPP is predominant in the south and east. Ten parties of varying size competed the

2002 elections, including the newly formed Revolutionary United Force Party (RUF) - the political branch of the rebel forces - but most of these parties failed to gain any seats in parliament. An SLPP breakaway group, the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), competed in the 2007 elections.

A new trend noticed at the 2008 elections was for candidates who were not nominated as their party's official candidate to run as independent candidates. In the increasingly partisan political environment, these independent candidates are perceived as threatening to divert votes from the main political parties, which has resulted in negative campaigning and violence against them.



*The 50/50 office at Kailahun*

### Traditional governance

Traditional governance structures also play an important role in Sierra Leonean society. The country is split into numerous chieftaincies, each headed by a Paramount Chief. These structures are largely male-dominated: in the north, no woman has ever been a Paramount Chief and only a handful of women have become chiefs in the southern districts.

Both men's and women's secret societies are prevalent throughout the country, although women's secret societies exercise little power on the political system. The chiefs are key figures in male secret societies. Membership, initiation and traditions are all subject to strict secrecy but it is widely acknowledged that the societies have a strong influence on politics.

### Women in the political arena

In the months before the 2002 parliamentary elections, women were optimistic about their chances. Women's groups had played a strong role in bringing peace to the country by engaging opposing factions and mobilising around a pro-democracy movement and there seemed to be a general acceptance of women's involvement in public life. The elections were carried out under a constitutional amendment that took into account the post-conflict situation. The war had caused large population movements and skewed the population distribution. A District Block Voting System was used, effectively a proportional representation system, which has been seen to benefit women candidates in many countries. However, despite this, only 18 women gained seats in the 2002 parliament, just over 14 per cent.

The majority vote system was reinstated in 2007. Once again, women had high expectations but a return to the first-past-the-post system seriously hampered their chances. The number of women parliamentarians fell to 17.

At the 2004 local council elections, women won 48 of the 474 local council seats. Women generally fared better in urban areas, though outcomes were extremely varied. Kailahun recorded the highest number of women elected to a district council, with eight seats or 24 per cent. Koinadugu was the lowest, with no elected women. In 2008, the number of women councillors almost doubled to 86 (18.9 per cent), with particularly notable increases in urban areas.

Political parties have agreed to an informal quota system for increasing the number of women candidates but there are no sanctions for non-compliance and there is no evidence to suggest that parties are attempting to meet this goal. Meanwhile, the women's movement is weakening, there is little collaboration between women's groups and no common strategy for awareness raising and mobilisation on women's rights across the country. There is no functioning women's caucus for elected women and the reliance on political parties for election and support prevents attempts at cross-party activity to promote women's rights.

### The PACER project

Sierra Leonean women are disproportionately affected by poverty and are also marginalised at all levels of decision-making. The Promoting A Culture of Equal Representation



Training at the Kailahun offices

(PACER) project aims to address this by increasing the involvement of women in the political process. Its premise is that a greater number of women in parliament and local government will directly contribute to a positive change in the lives of poor men and women.

Oxfam GB has been working in partnership with the 50-50 Group of Sierra Leone. PACER's main goal has been to increase the number of women contesting and winning seats in two districts, Koinadugu and Kailahun, at the 2007 parliamentary and 2008 local council elections. PACER has motivated women to aspire to leadership positions, worked directly with woman aspirants and candidates to support them through the nomination and election process, and raised awareness of the importance of women's leadership among voters and key power brokers.

Car sticker promoting women's representation

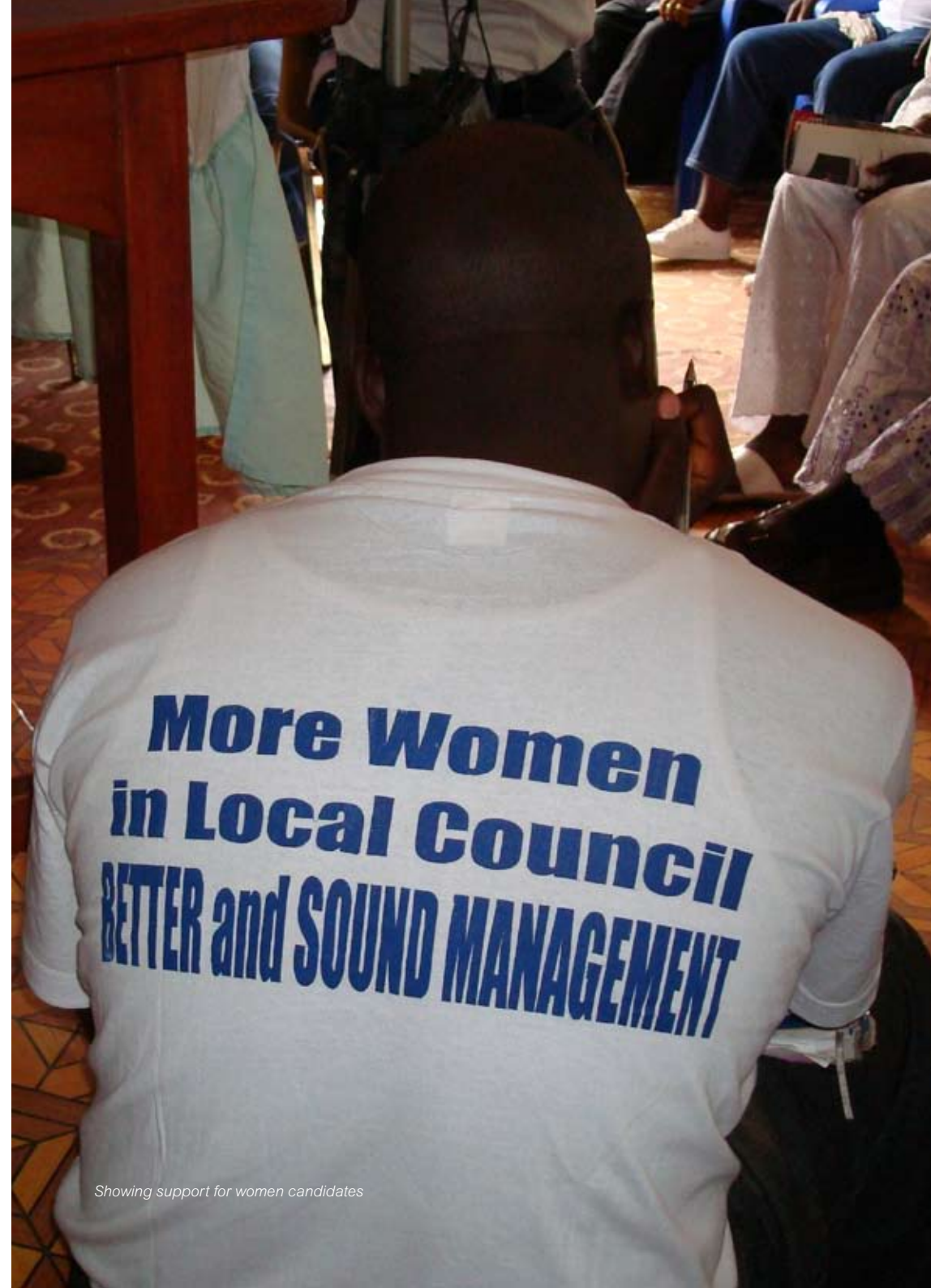


PACER has seen notable success in Koinadugu, which has the reputation for being the most conservative district in Sierra Leone. Koinadugu fielded its first-ever female parliamentary candidate in 2007 and now has six women on the district council. This represents a significant step forward and certainly compares favourably with other non-urban councils.

Meanwhile, there has been a disappointing drop in women's representation in Kailahun, where it had been hoped that the project would build on the gains made in 2004. The district now has only one woman parliamentarian and three councillors. The reasons for this relate largely to changes in the political arena and are explored in more detail later. However, the project has achieved far more than the numbers would suggest.

### Steps to successful mobilisation of women in the 2008 local council elections

- The PACER project started by developing an understanding of the national and local socio-political and cultural contexts.
- The project team identified key power brokers and potential allies: Paramount Chiefs, chiefdom speakers, teachers, religious leaders, traders, party activists and local women's groups.
- These stakeholders helped to identify potential women aspirants and encourage women to stand for election.
- Trainers were trained with PACER-developed materials. They went on to train the group of aspirants through exercises that educated and built confidence and solidarity amongst the women. Activities included role-plays, group activities and games, and self-reflection.
- Aspirants who decided to stand as candidates were supported through the nomination process with further education and training.
- Successful candidates attended workshops that enabled them to build a strong campaign, work on their strengths and recognise their weaknesses and the barriers against them.
- PACER worked with women's groups and other stakeholders to mobilise support for these women candidates. Campaigns often included voter education programmes in the constituencies, and contributed to a sense of solidarity amongst women.



Showing support for women candidates

## Barriers to women's representation

There are three main stages to women achieving equal representation: firstly, women need to aspire to leadership positions; secondly, they must be selected by their parties as candidates; and thirdly, they need to be elected by the voters. Women must negotiate

significant barriers at each of these stages. The very first step is for women to believe in themselves and to see that opportunities are open to them. Even after this belief has been built, it takes considerable courage for women to face up to societal pressures and put themselves forward for leadership positions.



Women candidates at a training event

### The key barriers to women's political representation

**Lack of self-belief and confidence.** Low education levels, a lack of value placed on women's contributions, and a restriction on women's roles in society mean that many simply do not see a place for themselves in decision-making structures.

**Low literacy levels.** Literacy levels in Sierra Leone are low generally but particularly so among rural women. As few as two per cent of women are literate in some of the wards where the PACER project works. This has an impact on women's self-belief and willingness to put themselves forward as potential political candidates, but is also used to justify women's absence from public life.

**Discriminatory attitudes.** Although there has been some shift in attitudes towards women as leaders at grassroots level, discriminatory attitudes remain entrenched in other areas, particularly within political parties and among traditional authorities.

**Violence.** Whether verbal, physical or threatened, violence is a very real fact in many women's lives. Standing out by aspiring to public office often increases this violence.

**Lack of finance.** Without the resources to campaign, a woman has little opportunity to create the vital support amongst voters on a large enough scale to make her a viable contender.

**The electoral system.** The first-past-the-post system decreases the space for women's representation. The combination of strong, male-dominated parties and the party nomination systems makes it hard for women to be selected as party candidates.

These barriers are common to women throughout Sierra Leone. However, additional factors relating to changes in the political landscape seem to have particularly affected women's chances in Kailahun district. The PACER project generated strong interest from women wanting to get involved in public life but the electoral system presented them with considerable barriers to achieving their aims.

**Competition for seats:** In the run-up to the 2008 elections, voter education increased knowledge about the role of district councils, which led to greater belief in the value of district councils and increased interest in holding office. In Kailahun district, this was compounded by a reduction in the number of wards and by unsuccessful would-be (male) parliamentarians leaving Freetown and turning instead to local-level politics. The result was a huge increase in competition for councillor positions and, significantly, many more men seeking election, which resulted in the marginalisation of women.

**Party-dominated politics:** Politics in Kailahun is dominated by the SLPP and

party candidates are more or less guaranteed election. Women therefore needed to become the party's official candidate in their ward – in other words, to be given the party symbol. The SLPP nomination process is carried out via an electoral college, which is male-dominated, heavily influenced by traditional power structures and lacks transparency. The difficulty in getting the party symbol was the single biggest obstacle to women's representation at the 2008 elections – women, in effect, were blocked from even getting to the election stage.

While the SLPP is not necessarily more obstructive to women's participation than other parties, its defeat in the parliamentary elections certainly resulted in many more men seeking nomination at district level in this, the party stronghold. It also put the party on the defensive: according to some people, women were viewed as 'high risk' candidates and the party was not prepared to lose seats by fielding women. Of the 28 SLPP candidates in Kailahun, only two were women.

Eight of the women who were rejected by their parties chose to stand as

## Case study

### Martha Gbow, district council candidate, independent, Kailahun district

Martha has been an active member of the SLPP for many years, and is one of only a few women involved in the district office. She believes she has strong community support – it is community members who financed her attempt to win the party symbol for the 2008 local council elections. She puts her failure to win the symbol down to the perception that women should not be involved in politics, and to the party's preference for a man. She experienced lots of pressure to step down in favour of a male candidate, and finally did so on the eve of the election. She chose to run as an independent because she believes she has the right to participate in politics, regardless of the negative perceptions of women and the damaging allegations made against her.

independent candidates, but in a district where a single party holds so much power, it takes a lot of courage to do so. The women were subject to a lot of personal abuse and intimidation, and were accused of trying to undermine the SLPP. Only one of the eight female independent candidates was elected.

### Women being judged by past

**performance:** The Kailahun district council elected in 2004 is widely perceived to have failed and the elected women seem to have been judged harshly on their inability to deliver in a way that men have not. In truth, the district council faced an uphill battle from the outset. As the new system was put in place, the roles and responsibilities of the council were poorly defined and council members were confused about their duties. Women have been accused of not doing their job properly when in fact the system wasn't functioning and the whole council failed.

However, women's perceived failure was used to justify not selecting more women candidates for the 2008 elections.

### The positive outcomes of the PACER project

Although the primary focus of PACER has been to support women to achieve leadership positions, the effects of its work have been felt far beyond this. The positive outcomes of PACER include:

### Gaining the support of influential men

One of the key factors behind women's success in Koinadugu was the project's ability to gain the support of influential men in the district, including religious and traditional leaders, and former council members. These men are not merely supportive of women taking on leadership roles but speak passionately about their desire to promote women's rights in their district! One man even donated a significant sum of money to

support women candidates of all political parties in their election campaigns.

In Kailahun, PACER also sought to engage the Paramount Chiefs and other key male power holders. They worked together to draw up a list of criteria that viable women candidates should demonstrate and to identify women who possessed such qualities. However, although a handful of men have been supportive of women, many didn't fulfil their promises and support women as

they said they would. Pressure from the SLPP to rally behind male candidates may have caused some men to withdraw their support.

It is curious that the project has had different outcomes in the two districts despite using the same strategies. It seems, though, that having a mixed team of men and women working on the PACER project has maximised its likelihood of engaging a wide range of stakeholders – both men and women.

## What convinces men to advocate for women's rights?

*'I visited the UK and saw that women are active in public life there. If Sierra Leone wants to be as advanced as other countries, we need women leaders too.'*

*'I realised that there is nothing in the religious texts that supports the idea that women should be subservient. In fact, both the Bible and the Qur'an say that women are our equals.'*

*'We can see that there is a more productive relationship between men and women, that there is greater interaction between them, when greater respect is given to women.'*

*'We want to see what difference women will make.'*

*'Women were more vibrant than men during campaigning. I can see that the women councillors have some brilliant ideas.'*

*'I really appreciated PACER's work, the way that they began by holding consultative meetings [with powerful men] and explained to us the importance of women's leadership.'*

*'The training with imams and elders has had a big impact. We can see that the way we conducted our relationships previously was an error. Women aren't our possessions.'*

*'Women and men must be co-partners in development. Women's participation is essential for the development of the whole community.'*

## Building the capacity of women candidates

Women aspirants, candidates and councillors in both districts have said that the support they received from PACER was invaluable and that they couldn't have got as far as they did without it. In some cases, they had been involved in politics previously but still found the training they received useful. In other instances, the women hadn't even considered getting involved in politics before they came into contact with PACER.

Elected women believe that the training equipped them with the skills they needed to campaign effectively and prepared them for meeting with resistance from male counterparts. It boosted their confidence, determination

and energy to cope with difficult situations.

It is notable that Kailahun district had a higher number of female independent candidates than elsewhere in the country. This can be attributed to the PACER project, which motivated and supported women who were unsuccessful in gaining the party symbol. The fact that women were prepared to face up to inevitable difficulties and abuse is testimony both to the support that PACER was able to offer and to the women's determination to bring about change in their communities. None of the eight candidates dropped out of the election process. The two female independent councillors elected in Kailahun and Koinadugu were the first women ever to succeed as independents.

*Men and women join together to support women's representation*



## Case study

### Haja Bintu Mansaray, district councillor, APC, Koinadugu

Haja is a teacher and first got involved in the PACER project out of a general conviction that women's leadership was important, thinking that she could motivate and support other women to stand for election. However, she gradually came to believe that she could do it herself and took the decision to run for a position on local council. She found the process hard, with resistance from the party and from her community, but her determination to work for development drove her on. Now that she is a councillor, she recognises that the expectations are high for women. She feels that more training is needed, and that specific projects should be developed for women in office to allow them to demonstrate their abilities to the community.

## Increasing women's involvement in the public sphere

At the time of the 2004 elections, women generally had little information about the role of the district councils and very little interest in getting involved in the electoral process. Many women did not even realise they had the right to vote. Just four years later, and two years into the PACER project, women in both districts are not only voting but also canvassing support for women candidates and showing enthusiasm to stand for election.

The PACER project directly trained 282 women aspirants for the council elections – 110 in Kailahun and 172 in Koinadugu – and carried out awareness raising at grassroots level on the electoral process and the importance of women's leadership. A combination of these activities has greatly increased women's awareness of their rights and brought many to believe that they can play a role equal to men in public life.

A large number of women trained by PACER remain committed to women's leadership and participation. Even in Kailahun, the experience of the 2008 elections hasn't dampened their enthusiasm. Many of the women who failed to be nominated, or who contested the elections and lost, are willing to stand again in future and have been involved behind the scenes. Some have stood instead for ward committees and hope to use their new role to build support for the next local council elections in 2012.

At the recent ward committee elections, only five of the 53 wards in the two districts failed to meet the legal requirement of having women in half of all elected positions – and several wards have more women than men on the committee. Having legislation in place has made this possible, but so too has the willingness of women to put themselves forward for the positions, and

this is rooted in their belief that women should be involved in decision-making and are capable of doing a good job.

In Koinadugu, even women who didn't participate in the PACER training are being inspired by seeing women leaders in their community and are beginning to aspire to leadership roles themselves. For example, the district has female court members for the first time.

Grassroots women are gradually beginning to change their attitude towards involvement in the public sphere. When PACER began, it was difficult to engage women in community meetings but seeing women leaders in their communities and a growing awareness of their rights has had an effect.

*"We are not allowed to even talk when men are around, because for us it is a taboo. For us women, when the men are talking you are just there to clap... You just give your support; it has always been that way." Rugie Marah, Deputy Chair, Koinadugu District Council*

Women are not just attending public meetings but making meaningful contributions and are no longer afraid to sit at the front of the room. This is an achievement in itself.

#### **Building solidarity between women**

A noticeable difference during the 2008 elections was that women were much more willing to support women candidates. Women candidates sought to

meet with and talk to women, for example by going to the market place, and saw the results at the polls. One woman councillor was supported by women petty traders who stayed away from the market on election day to campaign on her behalf.

Many of the women who were trained by the PACER project but did not put themselves forward as candidates have become strong gender equality advocates. They showed real solidarity with those women who did contest the elections and actively supported them in their election campaigns. In Koinadugu, women even succeeded in joining together across party lines and supported each other with their campaigning!

#### **Bringing a belief in women leaders as a force for change**

Women aspirants, candidates and councillors are often motivated to get involved in politics by their desire to bring development to their communities and in particular to help their fellow women.

*"I want to stand because I want to show our small sisters that what a man can do, a woman can do. And when you are a girl child, you can take the small education you have and stand for bigger positions. I want to give them the zeal to learn and be somebody tomorrow. I want to be a role model for them."*  
*Juliette C Konteh, district council candidate, Koinadugu*



Harriett Turay, 50/50 Group president, at an event in Koinadugu





PACER has built relationships with existing social networks

They have a real determination to be a force for change and to show that they are able to succeed where men have failed. They are also determined to act as positive role models to others.

There is a growing willingness among both men and women to support women who aspire to leadership roles, influenced by a desire for change. It is commonly believed that men are corrupt and self-interested; that they have been unable to deliver so women should be given the opportunity to prove that they can do better. There is a real hunger for

development and a growing belief that women might be the ones who can make it happen. That isn't to say that resistance to women's leadership has been overcome completely, but both women's and men's attitudes are gradually changing.

#### What next for PACER?

Although the outcomes in terms of numbers of elected women were different in Kailahun and Koinadugu, the two districts share many common experiences and are able to point to similar lessons for the future of PACER's work.

#### Support to elected women

While there is growing support for women's leadership, so too are there extremely high expectations of them. Now that women have been given a space in politics, there is pressure on them to prove that they can, in fact, do a better job than men.

*"If we fail the people, they won't forget, but if we come together with determination and work hard, we'll get more women [in council] in the next election."*  
Rugie Marah

This offers both opportunities and threats. In the words of one woman, 'Women elected now are brushing the path for others to follow'. If they are supported to play an effective leadership role, they could bring about a shift in attitudes towards women leaders and open the door for women to be elected in greater numbers in 2012. If, however, they are left to muddle along and work things out for themselves, they are likely to fail. Women have requested accompaniment and ongoing training on a number of issues to be effective councillors. This could be done directly by the PACER staff or by linking elected women in different localities.

One woman elected to the Koinadugu district council this year says that she does feel under pressure to deliver but is committed to doing her best. She particularly feels the need for support to write project proposals, to be able to access funding to implement development projects in her ward. This view has been echoed by some of the

men in the district. They fear that the district council simply doesn't have the resources to meet expectations. They suggest that the women should be supported to apply for and manage donor grants, so that they can demonstrate they have the capacity and integrity to manage money and deliver development projects.

#### Building women's capacity at ward committee level

PACER's ability to achieve its target of increasing the number of women elected to local councils was constrained by significant barriers, particularly in Kailahun. However, it succeeded in generating a lot of energy and enthusiasm among women, who are already talking about working towards the 2012 elections. The ward committee elections were a huge success, with the majority of wards achieving the target of 50 per cent women and several surpassing this.

The ward committees offer a great opportunity to build women's capacity to play an effective role in leadership and to prove that they are able to deliver. In this respect, they are an ideal breeding ground for women candidates for the 2012 elections.

#### Continuous awareness-raising

PACER is beginning to achieve a shift in attitudes towards women as leaders and in women's perceptions of their own capabilities. But change doesn't happen overnight and ongoing sensitisation is needed if the project is to effect lasting change.

Messages about women's rights and their participation in the public sphere need to reach a wider audience and these messages need to be reinforced.

The PACER project has good support from the local media, and radio is an effective way of reaching rural women. In particular, efforts need to be made to ensure that messages reach communities where NGOs are not active.

### **Continued engagement of male activists**

In Kailahun, PACER has found it difficult to engage influential men to support women's leadership. However, PACER has made some progress. The Paramount Chiefs are notoriously difficult to involve in development work and the fact that the project succeeded in bringing them all together in a workshop is a significant achievement. PACER also has the support of the district chairman who, for example, overturned the result of one of the ward committee elections and insisted that it be rerun to meet the requirement of 50 per cent women's representation. The project should continue to engage key male stakeholders in discussions and seek to influence attitudes over time.

Meanwhile, although the project has gained the support of some powerful male advocates in Koinadugu, these men are insistent that sensitisation should continue. They believe that messages need to be constantly reinforced so as to consolidate progress, be sure not to move backwards and engage even more men.

### **Reinforcing solidarity among women**

At the last elections, women candidates were able to mobilise greater support from women – a significant shift from the 2004 elections, when women were just as likely as men to oppose women candidates. Again, this collaboration among women needs to be built on and reinforced for lasting change.

One suggestion is for women's groups to be established at community level and for women to be encouraged to come together to discuss the issues they are facing. Women's groups have the potential to develop future women aspirants, to build women's support for women in political processes and to support elected women to play an effective role.

Women ward councillors have an important role to play in acting as a go-between to enable women's issues to be heard in formal decision-making mechanisms. Grassroots women need, above all, to feel that their issues are being taken seriously if they are to continue to offer women their support.

### **Support for women's livelihoods**

It is clear that a lack of financial resources is a considerable barrier to women's engagement in political processes. However, this is a point that Oxfam and the 50-50 Group have differed on. Oxfam will not give money to political candidates, in order to maintain neutrality, while the 50-50 Group wanted to give each woman competing in the elections a small grant to finance her election campaign.

Women who have been involved in the PACER project understand Oxfam's position and suggest that implementing projects aimed at women's economic empowerment could be an approach that would help level the playing field with men.

### **Advocacy for women's representation**

The ward committee elections provide a good example of how high levels of women's representation can be achieved if there is a supportive legislative environment. Both men and women are convinced that a far higher number of women would have been elected to district councils if they had been able to

get the party symbol. One male journalist believes that if the party system were abolished at district level, women would dominate in public life.

However, any change in the party system is highly unlikely. Therefore, advocacy initiatives at national level should continue to lobby for legislation that will guarantee 30 per cent representation for women at district level. There should also be lobbying aimed directly at the political parties, in order to influence them to adopt more transparent nomination processes and to put in place and enforce quotas for women candidates.

*Building confidence in public speaking*



The Promoting a Culture of Equal Representation (PACER) project is implemented jointly by the 50/50 Group of Sierra Leone and Oxfam GB, and is co-funded by DFID and UNDEF. It contributes to the Government of Sierra Leone's efforts to reduce marginalisation and vulnerability by developing a culture of equal representation and participation of women and men in political life and development processes and initiatives.

The project has been highly participatory. In order to achieve its aims without creating friction with traditional governance systems and culture, PACER has involved all key stakeholders and has worked with existing social networks.

PACER demonstrated tangible success at the 2007 and 2008 elections. It supported seven of the 16 elected women parliamentarians and 291 women local council aspirants in the districts of Kailahun and Koinadugu. Of these, 31 were nominated as candidates and nine were eventually elected.

This booklet highlights the key lessons coming out of the PACER project so far and identifies areas that can be strengthened in future.

All photo credits: Oxfam

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House John Smith Drive,  
Oxford OX4 2JY, United Kingdom.  
Oxfam is a registered charity in England and Wales  
No 202918 and Scotland SCO 039042. Inhouse 4058

