

Transcript Sierra Leone – 2002 – Hassan Sesay:

My name is Hasan Sesay. I worked with the National Electoral Commission (NEC) of Sierra Leone as an elections officer in charge of Kono District during the May 2002 post-conflict general elections. Let me start by congratulating Georgetown University and International IDEA for this laudable initiative and effort in collecting these diverse experiences and stories of democracy. It is my hope that my story will add to this collection.

As many of you may be aware, Sierra Leone had gone through a brutal civil war for 11 years, which ended with the signing of the Lome Peace Accord in 1999. A key provision in the Lome Peace Accord was the holding of elections. Hence the May 2002 elections were a significant moment in the consolidation of peace in Sierra Leone. In fact, many people saw the elections as a referendum on the peace process and a transition to democracy. Because Sierra Leone was emerging from war with a huge population displacement, the country implemented a proportional representation system in which the entire country was considered a single electoral constituency for the Presidential election, while each of the 14 electoral districts served as single constituencies, each electing 8 candidates to Parliament.

Like I mentioned earlier, I worked as an elections officer in charge of Kono District, a strongly contested electoral district often considered an important swing state, a swing district. I would like to share some of the challenges and opportunities I experienced during my work on these elections.

Some of my colleagues and I had been recruited by the NEC in 2001, and we didn't have enough time for extensive training and had to be deployed to the field very shortly after. Our international partners, like the United Nations, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the Commonwealth provided complimentary support to us. They put together a training package, titled Basic Election Administration Training, or BEATs for short, that actually helped introduce us to the basics of Elections administration. I was also fortunate to have had some electoral experience as Chief Electoral Commissioner at the University of Sierra Leone, conducting elections in a highly polarized environment. In part, I believe that's why I got posted to one of the most difficult districts in the country.

Once deployed to our district, we were learning, as we implemented the process, lessons learned sessions after each phase of the process, like voter registration and exhibition, provided opportunities to learn from each other. We also benefited from the expertise of international counterparts who supported us throughout the process. Before being deployed to our districts, we were given guidelines on identifying voter registration centers, including proximity to the people, preference for public buildings, like schools and hospitals, etc. But immediately when I arrived in my district Kono, I quickly realized that some of these criteria will not work due to the devastation in the district. As a result of the war, for instance, most schools and hospitals had been burnt down, and we had to adjust by using private property for our voter registration centers, which in itself had its own challenges. Throughout the process I had to be creative in

finding solutions to the logistical and security challenges we faced during the process and got the backing of headquarters.

When I arrived in Kono District, I remember organizing a meeting the following day with all

potential voter registration staff since we didn't have much time. My driver had parked the vehicle outside while the meeting was going on, and once I came out of the meeting to go back to my office the ex-combatants had placed bicycle spokes underneath all four tires, and immediately when the driver moved the vehicle all 4 tires were gone. This was a harsh welcome to Kono, and I immediately knew things were not going to be easy. I had to find ways to engage with the various stakeholders and get them involved in the process, thereby making them co-responsible for the success of the process. I quickly realized in these early days that inclusivity will enhance confidence in the process, and sometimes we have to try to include even potential spoilers in the process.

The following day I had a meeting with the leaders of a prominent youth group, then the Movement of Concerned Kono Youths, MOCKY for short, to discuss their involvement in the process, and how they could help educate their membership. I also held similar meetings with the commanders of the former rebel group to discuss their inclusion, as well as subsequently met with women's groups. In these meetings, among other things, I encourage them to be supportive of the process, educate their members, and to share with me names and qualifications of some of their members who may be interested in serving as temporary election workers. Throughout constant engagement I was able to get the ex-combatants committed to the process and because these were post-conflict elections it was important for us, as a commission, to build trust with the various stakeholders.

Various mechanisms were adopted in headquarters like the Inter-Party Consultative Group, which served as a platform for dialogue and promoting peaceful elections. I also replicated this mechanism at the district level, bringing together political party representatives, traditional leaders, civil society organizations, including women and youth groups, security forces, and others, to regularly share information with them and coordinate issues around the process. This platform greatly helped in resolving potential disputes, and I was able to clarify any misunderstandings they had about the process.

Traditional leaders play a key role in this platform in diffusing tensions. But, on the other hand, I got some reports during polling of their presence in close proximity to polling stations, which had the potential of intimidating some voters. I personally had to go to some of these locations, and kindly requested the traditional leaders to keep a distance from the voting area. These are very subtle forms of intimidation that may not be picked up by some international observers, but they are real and can be understood by local actors.

There was also the need to be flexible without compromising the integrity of the process. A good example of that was dealing with the voter registration of returnees and internally displaced persons following the end of voter registration. As a commission, we had to establish special

procedures to register them and have them vote. This was a huge challenge for districts, including mine, but we had to do it to give every qualified voter a chance to register and vote. Another flexibility shown by the Commission was to extend the candidate's nomination period to allow the Revolutionary United Front Party (RUF), the former rebel group that had transformed into a political party, as agreed in the Lome Peace Accord, for them to submit their list of candidates. There were many skeptics who believed that the RUF is not fully committed to the electoral process, and this exclusion would have given them reason to return to war. Hence the Commission's decision was welcomed by all international partners, including the UN leadership

and diplomatic community. The lesson from this is that in post-conflict or fragile society we must balance peace and security considerations with a rigid interpretation of electoral rules and procedures

For me voter education was key to the success of the process, and we had to put a lot of effort into that and worked with various civil society groups. I even asked the UN Police (UNPOL), I civilian, police and military, who are based in Kono district to assist in taking with them voter education leaflets to remote parts of the district during their patrols, and they were very kind to support in this. I even recall a situation in which voters were made to believe that the helicopters and planes flying around during polling would be able to see who they voted for. I spent considerable time reassuring voters of the secrecy of the vote, and that no one will know who they voted for. I had to deploy extra voter educators to correct this misinformation prior to the polls.

Polling day arrived on May 14th and overall the event went smoothly, with a few isolated incidents of voter and party agents intimidation, and shortages of materials which we quickly supplied. But the elections were generally peaceful in Kono District, and also across the country, which, in my view, was a victory for the Sierra Leonean people who turned out in large numbers to vote on polling day. The Presidential election was won by the incumbent Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, with over 70% of the votes avoiding a runoff. The ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) also won all 8 parliamentary seats in Kono District. The landslide victory of the incumbent SLPP may have been a reflection of the people's desire for peace, with Kono district where I worked being one of the most affected by the war. Eventually the election results were accepted by the losing parties.

Throughout these elections, in 2002 and the local government elections I conducted in 2004, I gained invaluable experience to prepare me for a career in international electoral assistance. I've always drawn on this experience in advising my counterparts in various countries like Liberia, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Cambodia, and Iraq. I'm able to put myself in their position, and this has resonated with them and helped me build constructive relationships with my counterparts.

My final message is that post-conflict elections are always challenging, but we must demonstrate a willingness to adapt without compromising the integrity of the process. Secondly, efforts must be made to include the various stakeholders and make them co-responsible in

ensuring peaceful elections. Thirdly, we must consistently share information with all stakeholders, and establish adequate coordination mechanisms to resolve any potential disputes. The May 2002 elections, indeed, contributed significantly to the consolidation of peace in Sierra Leone, and I'm pleased to have been a part of their conduct. Thank you.