



The Roles and Responsibilities Of Members of Parliament (MPs)

The role of Parliament in Sierra Leone's democracy

The Parliament of Sierra Leone is the legislative branch of government. As is the case with every legislature, Sierra Leone's Parliament is one institution where the needs and interests of citizens are expressed and addressed through debate on public policy. It provides a unique opportunity for the voices of Sierra Leoneans, particularly those most affected by government policies, to be heard in the policymaking process. The Parliament of Sierra Leone is therefore key to reinforcing democracy and making public policies effective.

The Parliament is expected to fulfill **three** main functions:

- *represent citizens*, bringing their needs, goals, problems, and concerns to the policymaking process;
- *make laws* that govern the nation; and
- *exercise oversight*, insuring that legislation and government policies are implemented effectively, according to the original intent, and within the parameters of the rule of law.



Being an MP

Sierra Leonean Members of Parliament play a critical role in strengthening the country's democracy. However, competing demands can make an MP's life and work a perpetual balancing act trying to reconcile demands from one's political party, from executive branch agencies, from constituents, and family. MPs are never off duty as they are either visiting their constituencies, participating in committee meetings or plenary debates in the parliamentary building, or traveling abroad to represent the parliament and the country.

REPRESENTATION AND CONSTITUENCY RELATIONS

The Constitution of Sierra Leone states that "all Members of Parliament shall regard themselves as representatives of the people of Sierra Leone and desist from any conduct which they seek improperly to enrich themselves or alienate themselves from the people," Article 97(b).

Regular contact with constituents enables the MP to easily identify their needs and elicit their input on policy debates. Frequent interactions between MPs and citizens also facilitates information sharing that could make government more accountable to the people. MPs can also help achieve this outcome by informing citizens about legislative actions, ensuring that citizen voices are reflected in budgets and public policy, and assisting constituents to gain access to governmental services. MPs help improve constituency relations by making regular visits to constituencies, particularly while Parliament is on recess and, in some cases, establishing offices in their constituencies.



LAWMAKING or LEGISLATING

Parliament is the supreme legislative authority in Sierra Leone, as defined by Part V of the 1991 Constitution. Bills become law once they are enacted by Parliament and signed by the President. The constitution determines the lawmaking role of parliament, and the standing orders lay out the internal process within parliament. Parliamentarians are responsible for enacting laws to insure that the country's democracy operates openly and freely. Laws are meant to address the country's problems and should provide for the best possible quality of life for the people. The lawmaking role of MPs includes reviewing and passing the country's annual budget. Funds allocated in the budget directly affect citizens through the government policies and programs adopted. To exercise their legislative powers, Members of Parliament can:

- introduce legislation (a private member bill) to address specific issues;
- review, debate, and amend government bills presented by the Executive branch and introduced for debate by the majority caucus.



Ten Tips for Analyzing Legislation

To better analyze legislation, MPs should have a good understanding of the issues to be addressed by a bill. For example, it is helpful to start by determining the problem the bill seeks to resolve and then identify any existing legislation or rules and regulations on similar issue(s). When reviewing a bill, an MP must keep in mind that the new bill will have an impact on existing legislation and practices.

When reviewing a piece of legislation for the first time, the following questions could serve as a guide of things to keep in mind :

- What is the purpose of the bill?
- How and why was the bill developed, and who was involved?
- Are there current laws related to the issue(s) the bill seeks to address? If so, how will passage of new legislation affect the current situation?
- When does the bill go into effect, and how long does it stay in effect?
- How will the bill be implemented?
- Does passage of the bill have any implications for local government?
- What are the arguments “for” and “against” the bill, and who makes them?
- Are there alternative recommendations or suggestions for improving the issue at hand? If yes, how can the MP work to amend the bill?
- What is the funding mechanism for implementation of the bill? Does funding for implementation of the bill divert resources away from other more important governmental responsibilities?
- Has your party taken any positions that may support or conflict with this legislation?



PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT

In a democracy, government actions are subjected to the rule of law which implies respect for laws passed in parliament. It is therefore the parliament's responsibility to ensure that the laws of the land are well executed. Parliamentary oversight entails monitoring the actions and activities of the executive branch of government to ensure transparency and accountability. MPs have a responsibility to conduct oversight over executive branch agencies, including government ministries, to ensure that funds appropriated by the parliament are used legally and efficiently. MPs also have a responsibility to ensure that legislation passed by Parliament is implemented as intended.

Four tools for effective parliamentary oversight:

- right to approve presidential appointments;
- right to question Ministers and other public officers;
- right to establish special committees of inquiry; and
- working with the media and civil society organizations to advocate for greater transparency and accountability in government.



A Gender Perspective of Representation, Legislating and Oversight

The interests and needs of both women and men should be considered fully during the legislative process. Gender representation is more than the number of women in parliament. In exercising their roles and responsibilities, MPs must consider the needs of all people in the constituency - women and men, girls and boys. Both women and men must see their experiences reflected in the political agendas of parties in parliament.

As MPs embrace a broader gender perspective, parliament is more likely to incorporate the interests of both women and men in the decision-making process. It is important to recognize that in contemporary Sierra Leonean society, women are still disadvantaged and do not participate equally as men in policy making, nor do they benefit equally as men.

Helping foster gender equality is an important component of a MPs' role while exercising parliamentary *oversight*. MPs can monitor the implementation of gender-sensitive laws and policies such as national gender policies or regional and international instruments or agreements that eliminate discrimination and promote gender equality. In order to fulfill this important role effectively, MPs must be aware of the national, regional and international legal instruments on gender equality.



Tips to Being a Successful MP

Representation

- As noted in Chapter VI of Sierra Leone’s Constitution, “*all Members of Parliament shall maintain the dignity and image of Parliament both during the sittings in Parliament as well as in their acts and activities outside Parliament (Article 97(a)).*” Once sworn in as a member of parliament, MPs receive the title, “Honorable.” and become responsible for conducting themselves in a manner that befits the title. The public demands a higher standard of conduct of those individuals upon whom they confer such an honor. Every member shares responsibility for the way parliament and its members are viewed by the public.
- Engage the media. The media are the link between the public and their representatives in government, and are thus an integral part of any democracy. Journalists have a responsibility to keep the public informed. MPs should establish regular contacts with journalists to shed more light on the workings of the parliament and to keep the public informed of their position on issues.
- MPs should monitor developments in the country that affect their constituency, and benefit immensely from staying in touch with constituents. Not all constituents will agree with their MPs on every issue and all the time, and you will never be able to please everyone. However, most constituents will respect MPs for thinking through the issues and consulting them before arriving at a decision.



Tips for Making Laws and Exercising Oversight

- To be an effective legislator, an MP must master the rules of the legislative process as stated in the Standing Orders. The Standing Orders is the rule book for the daily running of parliament. Regardless of how long an MP has served, knowledge of the rules of parliament will make a positive difference in an MP's legislative career.
- As an MP cannot be an expert in every issue that comes before parliament, it helps to pursue committee assignments in the areas of specific interest or expertise. Acquaint yourself with experienced MPs across party lines and seek their advice routinely on issues outside your original scope of knowledge. Solicit outside expertise from relevant stakeholders, such as professionals in civil society organizations (CSOs) and academia. As you reinforce your expertise on certain issues, you will become the member colleagues turn to for advice and information.
- Attend sittings of Parliament and committee meetings regularly, and be punctual. Managing your time well will reflect positively on you as an MP. The parliamentary calendar is very strict. For example, if you miss a date to introduce a bill, an amendment or a motion, it could be a whole year before you get another opportunity to do so. As stated in the Constitution [Article 77(e)] and the Standing Orders number 77, if an MP is absent for too long from Parliament without good cause and notification of the Speaker, the MP can lose his or her seat.



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What qualifications must a person meet in order to be elected MP?

Article 75 of the 1991 Constitution stipulates that to qualify to be an MP, a person must meet the following qualifications:

- Be a citizen of Sierra Leone
- Be 21 years of age or older
- Be a registered voter
- Be able to speak and read the English language

If a person meets these criteria, they must then win the majority of votes in an election!

Who sits in Parliament?

The Sierra Leonean parliament is made of 124 Members of Parliament (MPs) who represent 112 electoral constituencies. Each electoral constituency is represented by one MP. Twelve MPs are Paramount Chiefs, who are elected from each of Sierra Leone's districts (excluding Freetown and the Western Area).

What is the current breakdown of party representation in parliament?

Results of the August 2007 parliamentary elections and March 2008 by-elections reflect the following representation in the current legislature:

All People's Congress (APC)	59
Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP)	43
Peoples Movement for Democratic Change	10
Paramount Chiefs	12



Can an MP lose his or her seat in Parliament after being elected?

Yes. The Constitution of Sierra Leone (Article 77) describes reasons for which an MP can be disqualified. For example, if an MP is convicted and sentenced for an offence which involves fraud or dishonesty, if an MP is absent from too many sittings of Parliament, or if an MP changes his or her political party affiliation, she or he could be asked to vacate their seat.

What are committees, and what role do they play?

Parliamentary committees are subsets of the plenary and allow groups of legislators to review policy matters and proposed bills, or conduct oversight more closely in a smaller setting than would be possible by the entire chamber. Article 93 of the 1991 Constitution underscores the importance of committees of parliament, and Standing Orders number 70-76 further define parliamentary committees and how they work.

Some committees are temporary or ad hoc, while others are permanent. Ad hoc committees are formed to review particular bills and are disbanded when their scope of work is completed. Permanent standing committees' jurisdictions mirror the structure of cabinet ministries, and are involved in both legislation and oversight. Some permanent committees focus on oversight (Public Accounts), and others are responsible for rules, management, and housekeeping matters of Parliament. The membership of each committee is appointed at the beginning of the parliamentary session and is mandated to carry out specific duties on thematic issues, such as finance, defense or security, human rights, or foreign affairs.



How does Parliament relate to the President and the Executive Branch of government?

Sierra Leone's Parliament makes up the *Legislative Branch* of government, while the President of Sierra Leone is the head of the *Executive Branch* of government. Parliament has the power to make laws for the peace, security, order, and good governance of Sierra Leone. The Executive Branch is made up of the President, his/her Cabinet, Ministers, Deputy Ministers, and public officers. In a number of specific cases enumerated in the Constitution, the President cannot act without the approval of Parliament.

Is an MP responsible for the development of his/her constituency?

MPs make laws and can influence policies that will take development programs and initiatives to their constituencies, in addition to projects of national interest. An MP is not directly responsible for undertaking development programs in his/her constituency. However, MPs can facilitate, lobby for, and support development initiatives in their constituencies.

Do MPs pay taxes?

Yes. As do other citizens of Sierra Leone, MPs pay taxes.



Since launching its Sierra Leone program in 2001, NDI has worked with Members of Parliament (MPs), political parties, the security sector, and CSOs to strengthen political institutions and civic participation in Sierra Leone. Following the 2007 legislative elections, NDI conducted a program for Members of Parliament and legislative staff to strengthen the capacity of the Parliament of Sierra Leone to serve as a democratic and responsive legislative body. The program focused on MPs and staff gaining a better understanding of the role of parliament, parliamentary processes and functions, parliamentary oversight, constituency outreach, and the principles of accountability and representation. NDI's legislative strengthening program in Sierra Leone is supported by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID).



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