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# Beyond the state: The role of traditional leaders in COVID-19

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COVID-19 Series: Learning and recommendations  
from Kono, Sierra Leone

Kevin Grieco

September 2020



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This five-year (2018–2023) operational research programme is 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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## Contacts

This report was authored by Kevin Grieco, a consultant on the Maintains Programme. For any questions or queries regarding this report please contact the Maintains Team using the below email.



[maintains@opml.co.uk](mailto:maintains@opml.co.uk)



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## Executive summary

Sierra Leone reported its first positive COVID-19 case on 30 March 2020; as at 23 September 2020, there were 2,183 reported cases. The Government of Sierra Leone has adopted a 'light-touch' policy, eschewing heavily restrictive social distancing policies that the government would be unable to enforce, and which might impose serious economic burdens on the society. A range of guidelines have been outlined by the government, including the wearing of facemasks, regular handwashing, curfew, and an inter-district travel ban, among several others.

This rapid study explores the role of traditional leaders in COVID-19 response efforts in Kono District, Sierra Leone. Traditional leaders form a key part of Sierra Leone's governance infrastructure and throughout the pandemic there has been much discussion regarding the kind of role traditional leaders are playing, and how they are incorporated in the response.

In the early stages, the central government led the formulation and implementation of response policy. However, as the virus spread outside of the capital, responsibilities for fighting COVID-19 were delegated to district-level actors. These district-level actors lack governance presence in rural areas and have relied on traditional leaders and other non-governmental actors to a) issue and enforce COVID-19-related safety measures, and b) conduct sensitisation about COVID-19. This study explored how this happened in practice.

This research found that the government has sufficient coordination capacity such that it was able to formulate COVID-19 policy goals at a district level that are in line with national policies and response efforts, but it has not been able to implement these. Community Health Workers (CHWs) have been trained on response activities, such as case investigation, surveillance, and contact tracing, while traditional leaders have been key to implementing community sensitisation and border control, as their existing governance structure provides the infrastructure required for this. These activities have been undertaken by traditional leaders, despite being under-resourced and receiving little technical or financial support when COVID-19 first emerged. The inclusion of traditional leaders in district-level decision-making has played out along starkly gendered lines: Chiefs and Youth Leaders in Kono are male and have been included; Mammy Queens are female and have not been included.

While the COVID-19 response has occasionally noted the importance of enlisting traditional authorities, coordination between traditional leaders and district-level response remains *ad hoc*. Thus, the primary recommendation of this report is that the Government of Sierra Leone should develop mechanisms to institutionalise traditional leaders in existing response mechanisms. This includes the development of an explicit policy to engage with traditional leaders *as institutions* rather than *as individuals*, providing greater resources, and strengthening administrative capacities to support accounting.

The secondary recommendation is that this needs to be done in an inclusive way. An explicit acknowledgement is needed that different traditional leaders engage with different social groups, to underscore the importance of inclusion of all traditional leaders. A particular rebalancing is required to enable Mammy Queens to be included in district-level decision-making, as well as expanding the role of Youth Leaders. The current ambiguities

surrounding district-level Mammy Queen leadership complicate the integration of Mammy Queens into district-level decision-making. Support from central government to establish a recognised and supported district Mammy Queen position should be seriously considered.<sup>1</sup>

The study was conducted between July and September and is based on qualitative key informant interviews with actors involved in local COVID-19 response efforts. Given the rapid nature of this study, additional research is needed to further explore the roles of different actors in the response efforts in Kono, as well as in other districts.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to recognise that any proposal for central government to offer recognition and resources opens up additional possibilities of 'capture'.

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## List of abbreviations

CHW	Community Health Worker
DHMT	District Health Management Team
DISEC	District Security Coordination Team
DMO	District Medical Officer
EOC	Emergency Operations Committee
FCDO	Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
Maintains	Maintaining Essential Services After Natural Disasters
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ONS	Office of National Security
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WHH	Welthunger Hilfe

# 1 Introduction

This report explores the role of traditional leaders in COVID-19 response efforts in Kono District, Sierra Leone. Traditional leaders form a key part of Sierra Leone's governance infrastructure and throughout the pandemic there has been much discussion regarding the kind of role traditional leaders are playing, and how they are incorporated in the response. This report aims to shed light on this issue and suggests areas for further research and consideration.

Section 1 of the report provides a snapshot of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone and outlines the objective and methodology of this rapid study. Section 2 provides some background on governance and traditional political institutions in Sierra Leone. Section 3 details the government response, starting with a brief description of the emergence of COVID-19 in the provinces and associated policy,<sup>2</sup> and consideration of whether the state has displayed an acceptable level of *coordination capacity* during the response. Section 4 looks at whether the state has had insufficient capacity to ensure compliance with its COVID-19 policy goals and how far it has had to rely on traditional leaders to obtain compliance with the state's goals. Section 5 analyses various aspects of the response. In particular, we consider key actors' perceptions of the gendered impacts of COVID-19, the legacy of Ebola in institutionalising emergency response, and the barriers that traditional leaders (in particular Mammy Queens and Youth Leaders) face in supporting the development of district level response policies. Section 6 concludes with recommendations.

## 1.1 COVID-19 in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone reported its first positive COVID-19 case on 30 March 2020.<sup>3</sup> As at 23 September 2020, 2,183 total cases had been reported in Sierra Leone. 1,287 of these cases had been confirmed in Western Area. The remaining 896 cases had been confirmed in the provinces. As at 23 September, a total of 73 cases had been recorded in Kono District.

On 30 March 2020, President Bio appointed Brigadier (Retired) Kellie Hassan Conteh, Minister of Defence, as Interim National Coordinator for the COVID-19 Presidential Task Force. The national government had been preparing for this moment. Two days prior to the reported index case, Response Pillar Leads were delineated and announced in an Emergency Operating Centre (EOC) meeting by the Minister of Health and Sanitation, Prof. Alpha Wurie. National response efforts are being coordinated at the EOC, which was also used to coordinate the response to the Ebola outbreak.

While Western Area was the first affected area and has borne the brunt of the nation's reported cases, the virus quickly spread outside of Western Area and to the rest of the country.<sup>4</sup> Cases were first reported outside of Western Area in Port Loko District, the district that contains Lungi International Airport. On 3 April, neighbouring Kambia District was subject to an 8 pm to 7 am curfew, likely imposed as a measure to cut the spread of the

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<sup>2</sup> Sierra Leone has large administrative units called 'provinces'. However, in this report, we use the term in its common metaphorical sense of places 'outside the capital city'.

<sup>3</sup> <https://covid19.sl/article/sierra-leones-president-julius-maada-bio-confirms-first-case-covid-19-announces-new>

<sup>4</sup> In a separate report in this series, we describe and analyse the national government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak. See Maintains [Rapid Country Study: Sierra Leone](#).

virus. On 8 April, the government took further actions to attempt to control the spread of the virus throughout the country, introducing a ban on non-essential inter-district travel. Despite these measures, the first case was announced in Kenema District—home to the populous Kenema city and far from Freetown—on 16 April, confirming that COVID-19 had now penetrated deep into the provinces. On 24 April the central government reported that it had appointed District Coordinators for the COVID-19 response ‘as a way of intensifying the fight against Coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) at district level’ (see Annex B).

The Government of Sierra Leone has adopted a ‘light-touch’ policy, eschewing heavily restrictive social distancing policies that it would be unable to enforce, and which might impose serious economic burdens on the society. A range of guidelines have been outlined by the government, including the wearing of facemasks, regular handwashing, curfew, and an inter-district travel ban, among several others. These policies have been shared and disseminated across the country through various forms of communication.

However, as local government and sub-national ministries in Sierra Leone lack a strong governance relationship with local populations, in rural parts of the country there has been a reliance on traditional leaders and other non-governmental actors to a) issue and enforce COVID-19-related safety measures, and b) conduct sensitisation about COVID-19. While the COVID-19 response has occasionally noted the importance of enlisting traditional authorities, attempts by government actors to implement COVID-19 policy through traditional leaders remains *ad hoc*.

For more information on Sierra Leone’s response to COVID-19 please see the Maintains Rapid Response Report [here](#).

## 1.2 Objectives and methodology

The objective of this rapid scoping study is to provide a descriptive account of district-level coordination and implementation of policy relating to COVID-19, based on qualitative key informant interviews with district-level government actors, traditional leaders, and health professionals who are expected to implement policy at a community level. The research highlights the extent to which traditional leaders are complementing government efforts to coordinate district-level response. In addition, it considers how traditional leaders are involved in the implementation of emergency response policies at a community level.

Outside of Western Area (which contains Freetown and its peri-urban surroundings), Sierra Leone is divided into 190 Chiefdoms, each headed by a Paramount Chief, the most important political actor (and traditional leader) in the Chiefdom. Chiefdoms are further divided into *sections*, (there are over 1,000 sections in Sierra Leone), each headed by a ‘Section Chief’. Each section consists of a number of towns and villages, which have a ‘Town Chief’, who reports to the Section Chief, who in turn reports to the Paramount Chief.

Chiefs do not govern alone but do so in collaboration with other important traditional leaders in the Chiefdom. The Chiefdom administration appoints women’s leaders (‘Mammy Queens’), at both Chiefdom and section level; Youth Leaders have a similar structure but are elected locally. This study focuses on Chiefs, Mammy Queens, and Youth Leaders. It also discusses some of the activities undertaken by other local actors, including non-

governmental organisations (NGOs) and the District Health Management Teams (DHMT), but it does not elaborate on them in detail.

This report does not address the role of religious leaders. It is well established that these actors played an important role during Ebola but, based on the interviews, they appear to have played a less active role in the fight against COVID-19. However, this requires further validation, and exploration of why this may have been the case.<sup>5</sup>

Given the nature of this work—a rapid scoping study—we focused on the response in one district: Kono. The reason for selecting Kono was threefold. First, Kono is a border district, sharing a border with Guinea. This is relevant because one of the first reported areas of collaboration between state and non-state actors in the COVID-19 response was the support provided by Chiefs in monitoring border points with Guinea. Second, Kono is the most competitive district in terms of national politics, and is not dominated by either one of the two major political parties. This is important because it implies that it is less partisan in relation to the national government than other states. Studying response efforts in districts where people are either strongly in support of or opposed to the current government may give a biased understanding of the response. Third, the district is geographically distant from central government, and at the same time the local government has little presence outside of the district headquarters, Koidu. Therefore, Kono represents an important contextual aspect of this study: decentralised governance in places where both central and local governance actors have minimal presence.

As indicated above, this report is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with key actors in Kono District, Sierra Leone, in July 2020. All interviews were conducted by either the author, or by a research assistant based in Kono. With the exception of the interview with the Secretary of the District Mammy Queen, all interviews were conducted in person. For a list of people interviewed, please see Annex A. Several challenges were encountered in conducting the interviews, including the bad road network in Kono, which makes travel to some areas especially difficult during the rainy season, the poor network coverage, and issues with the availability of key people due to their involvement in the COVID-19 response.

This scoping study was intended to form the first stage of a two-stage study. The second stage aimed to analyse the effectiveness of COVID-19 response efforts, informed by the findings from the first stage. Due to funding constraints, the second stage has been put on hold.

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<sup>5</sup> A key informant involved in the response efforts noted: 'During Ebola, the religious leaders were very active...I am not sure the religious leaders were involved very much in the COVID-19 response. However, there were NGOs that were using the religious people to send messages through radio jingles and loud speakers mounted on cars (on a limited scale). At Chiefdom level...the religious leaders were not involved except if they are members of the chiefdom council /development committee.'

**Figure 1: Kono District, Sierra Leone**



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## 2 Governance and traditional leaders in Sierra Leone

The governance structure in contemporary Sierra Leone is a hybrid that grafts traditional political institutions onto the political institutions of the modern state. This hybrid governance arrangement is a legacy of colonisation. The British system of ‘indirect rule’ sought to administer the country’s interior through existing political units. In this sense, many of today’s Chiefdoms are based on indigenous political structures that the British incorporated into colonial rule. However, the British also altered existing political units: for example, by breaking up larger existing kingdoms into smaller Chiefdoms or replacing uncooperative leaders with compliant ones.

Today, Chiefdom governance is overseen by the Ministry of Local Government, with district-level supervision from the Senior District Officer. Paramount Chiefs are elected with non-universal suffrage and the term of office is for life.<sup>6</sup> Paramount Chiefs receive a small stipend from the national government (2.5 million leone, approximately US\$ 256) and have the right by law to certain revenue streams and have legal jurisdiction to handle disputes according to ‘customary law’.

The Paramount Chief and his sub-chiefs do not govern alone but do so with other important traditional leaders.<sup>7</sup> One of these is **Youth Leaders**, who include both male and female members.<sup>8</sup> Youth are organised both within the Chiefdoms and at a district level. The District Youth Council is divided into several committees: the health committee, the sports committee, the agricultural committee, the gender desk, and the physically challenged desk. The Council holds meetings every month, to which Chiefdom Youth Leaders—or Chiefdom ‘chairpersons’—are invited. The District Youth Chair is an elected position and the most recent elections in Kono were held in May 2019.<sup>9</sup>

According to the two Chiefdom Youth Chairmen interviewed, youth leadership extends from the Chiefdom down to the community level.<sup>10</sup> Each section within the Chiefdom has its own representative body, consisting of a chairman and several executives, which may be referred to as the Section Youth Council. Then within the sections, towns have a town chairman.

The District Youth Council Chairman explained his mandate as follows: ‘To advocate on behalf of the youth. And to communicate clearly the challenging issues faced by the youth. And to see how we can partner with other institutions to address these issues...We also

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<sup>6</sup> Only members of the Chiefdom’s Tribal Council vote. While the exact rules may vary by Chiefdom, typically an individual must have paid their Local Tax for 10 years before becoming a member of the Tribal Council and getting the right to vote.

<sup>7</sup> There are 14 Chiefdoms in Kono District. In this report I use ‘his/him’ when referring to Paramount Chiefs. There are (and have historically been) female Paramount Chiefs, although not currently in Kono District. I use ‘his/him’ to call attention to the fact that most Paramount Chiefs are men.

<sup>8</sup> The National Youth Commission Act 2009 defines ‘youth’ as any person between 15 and 35.

<sup>9</sup> The District Youth Chair position is not reserved for a man. However, it is held by a man in Kono. Thus the use of ‘Chairman’.

<sup>10</sup> All Chiefdom Youth Leaders in Kono are male, though there is no rule stipulating that this must be the case. There are some women who fill section-level leadership positions and are therefore part of the Chiefdom executive.

have the mandate to monitor all development activities that have to do with the local councils, and some other projects that are run by NGOs, INGOs'. The District Youth Chairman explained that the Youth Council is devolved to the two councils.

Chiefdoms also have traditional women's leaders, called **Mammy Queens**.<sup>11</sup> Chiefdom Mammy Queens are leaders for all women in the Chiefdom. The Gbense Chiefdom Mammy Queen described her role as follows: 'I deal with the women. If they have problem, the women come to me. If I can't address them, I go to the Paramount Chief.' The Soa Chiefdom Mammy Queen explained that the Mammy Queen's job is to 'protect all of the women of the Chiefdom. Anything that goes bad, it is our job to fix'. At the Chiefdom level, Mammy Queens are chosen through election. Unlike the Paramount Chief, who must be drawn from one of the Chiefdom's 'ruling houses', any woman in the Chiefdom is eligible to stand for Mammy Queen. That said, it seems common for the position of Mammy Queen to stay within one family or a few families, as both Mammy Queens referred to others in their family that had held the position—the Soa Mammy Queen is the fourth in her family to hold the position of Chiefdom Mammy Queen. Section-level Mammy Queens are elected from the villages in the section.

Like Chiefs and Youth Leaders, Mammy Queens have a strong organisational structure from Chiefdom level down to the village level. The Gbense Chiefdom Mammy Queen stated: 'The Chiefdom is big, so each area needs its own chief [Mammy Queen]. There is the Section Mammy Queen and the town Mammy Queen'. The responsibilities of these lower-level Mammy Queens mimic those of the Chiefdom-level Mammy Queen: 'Whatever problem the women have there, they tell the Mammy Queen from the community, the community goes to the section... that is the chain of command'. The Soa Mammy Queen explained the general method for coordinating activities throughout the Chiefdom is through calling the Section Mammy Queens to meet her in the Chiefdom headquarters town.

Compared to Chiefs and Youth Leaders, Mammy Queens have less district-level organisational structure and more ambiguous district-level leadership. Mammy Queens also appear to be less recognised by the government compared to their traditional leader counterparts. In Section 5 we will consider how this might affect the ability of Mammy Queens to participate in the COVID-19 response.

The three sets of traditional leaders considered in this report—1) Paramount Chiefs and sub-chiefs, 2) Mammy Queens, and 3) Youth Leaders—are deeply-rooted political and social structures in rural areas. The description of the above institutions in Kono District applies to other districts in Sierra Leone. While specific aspects of Chiefdom governance may differ 'according to custom', the general institutional set-up is similar.

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<sup>11</sup> This is the English/Krio name. There is a different Kono word for this.

### 3 State response to COVID-19 in Kono District

The focus of this report is the role of traditional leaders in the district-level COVID-19 response. As we will see below in Section 4, traditional leaders operate within the context of the government-led response and act in accordance with government policy. In this section, we contextualise the role played by traditional leaders within the broader government response. We argue that district-level state actors in Kono seem to be able to make and coordinate policy decisions. As evidence of this we found that: a) the actors involved understood and accepted their roles in emergency response; b) there was effective communication between district-level actors involved in the response; and c) there was effective communication between the district response and the national response.

**Finding 1: The government has sufficient coordination capacity such that it has been able to formulate COVID-19 policy goals at a district level that are in line with national policies and response efforts.**

#### 3.1 State response in Kono: Coordination capacity

Figure 2 presents the official district-level response infrastructure. In this rendering, response activities are carried out by either technical or operational pillars and overseen by the nationally appointed District Coordinator, local government, and local ministries.

**Figure 2: District response organogram**

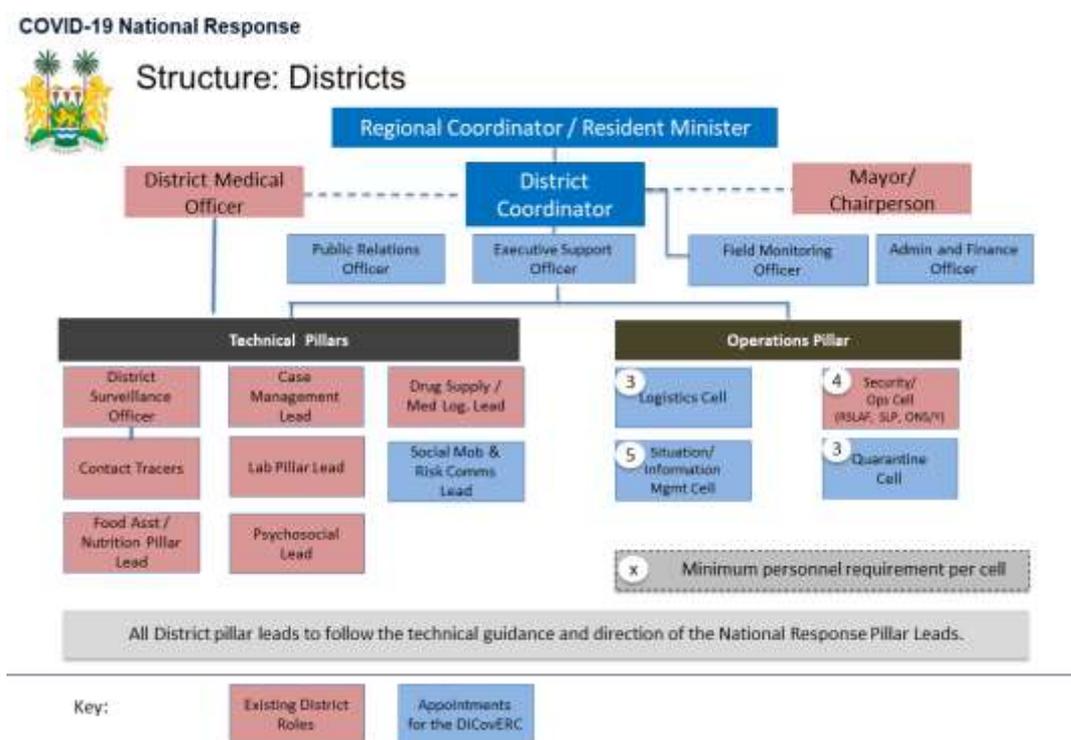


Figure 2 requires some explanation. The left side of the figure, under the heading ‘Technical pillar’, shows existing personnel within the DHMT (with the exception of the blue ‘Social

mob[jilisation]’ appointment from the District Coordinator). On the right side of Figure 2, under the heading ‘Operational pillar’ lie mostly externally appointed personnel, with the exception of existing district personnel from the military, the police, and the Office of National Security.

These actors have demonstrated an ability to coordinate COVID-19 response activities—that is, to develop local goals that the district-level response should achieve to meet the national-level COVID-19 policy objectives. Below, we highlight three components of this coordination capacity.

### **3.1.1 Internalised responsibilities**

In order to coordinate policy, individual actors must first know and take ownership of their roles and responsibilities. In line with its mandate, the DHMT has assumed its role as the leading actor addressing health emergencies at the district level. What is important is that the DHMT seems to have embraced its role as leading the fight against COVID-19. The tools for responding exist within the DHMT structure. The DHMT has disease surveillance infrastructure that exists as part of its day-to-day operations. These activities are carried out by paid staff. When COVID-19 came, it ‘triggered’ the surveillance team to ‘expand’ and extend their structure and activities.

In addition, the Office of National Security (ONS) representative has taken on his role of supporting the coordination of the district response. Again, this is in line with his institutional mandate. According to the ONS representative in Kono, while the DHMT leads on health emergencies, the District Medical Officer (DMO) and ONS serve as the ‘co-incident manager’ for health disasters. The ONS representative reported that there were minor tensions with the DHMT—DHMT officials occasionally complained that the ONS had no experience with health situations, but in general the DHMT was very open about sharing the role and the DMO (the head of the DHMT) was very open from the beginning to joint coordination. What is most important here is that, according to the ONS representative, both he and the DMO understood and agreed upon their joint role. An outcome of this is that, before the arrival of the National Coordinator, a team of district-level actors was meeting twice a day to counter COVID-19.

### **3.1.2 Horizontal coordination**

A second component of coordination capacity is an ability to communicate with other district-level response actors through existing emergency response institutions. The first actions taken to prepare for the virus, well before the onset of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone, appears to have been the joint effort of the DHMT and the District Security Coordination team known as ‘DISEC’. DISEC provided an institutional mechanism for coordinating across district-level actors. This committee, which was created through a 2002 Act of Parliament (the National Security and Central Intelligence Act), is charged with the responsibility of coordinating security in the district. In Kono District, this committee holds a standing meeting every Thursday, chaired by the Senior District Officer and co-chaired by a civil society representative, Mohammed Alpha Jalloh, the director of a local non-governmental organisation, KoCEPO. According to the ONS representative in Kono District, DISEC members include the Senior District Officer (the chairman), the fire force, the correction

centres service (i.e. prisons), the Local Unit Commander (the Sierra Leone Police), the military, a civil society representative (Jalloh, who also chairs the meetings), SLANGO (the Sierra Leone Association of NGOs), the Immigration Officer, the mayor, the District Council Chairman, and the Paramount Chief representative.

### **3.1.3 Centre–local coordination (vertical coordination)**

A third component of coordination capacity—which enables the formulation of policy and goals at a district level—is coordination between the national and local government. Specifically, the central government took steps to find out what actions were being taken at a district level; the nationally appointed District Coordinator recognised that the actions taken by district response actors at the district level before his arrival were in line with national policy.

Early on in the response to COVID-19, the Ministry of Economic Planning came from Freetown to set up a committee to manage the initial response. The committee was limited to 13 members to make it ‘manageable’ and was thus dubbed the ‘13-man committee’. This 13-man committee mostly comprised members already acting on COVID-19 as members of DISEC. In addition to the members of DISEC were added a district youth representative, a member of the press, and a representative from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children’s Affairs.

On 24 April, the National COVID-19 Response Team informed the public that District Coordinators for the COVID-19 response were being appointed in each district. In addition to District Coordinators, several additional positions would be filled to round out the district-level response. The District Coordinator came with a team of five. They set up the ‘command centre’ in a secondary school in Koidu. Central government appears to be cognisant of the early actions taken by district-level actors to combat/prepare for the COVID-19 outbreak. The DHMT Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) officer explained that when central government turned its eyes towards the districts it looked to see ‘what move they [districts] have already taken in this fight against COVID’. The M&E officer noted that the representatives from central government came to meet with district response actors to discuss ‘what we have already done, what we intend doing, what we lack, what we have’.

The ONS lead referred to the District Coordinator as ‘skilled at administration’, and that he was able to understand that things in the district were already working well and he did not change much. The ONS lead said that the District Coordinator saw there was no reason to ‘change a winning team’.

## 4 Traditional leaders and Chiefdom response

A capacity to coordinate COVID-19 response policies and develop goals and objectives is only one piece of the puzzle. Effective emergency response requires capacity to obtain citizens' compliance with the policy goals of the response. In this section we argue that traditional leaders have been critical for obtaining compliance with the government's COVID-19 response policies. Specifically, traditional leaders have: a) largely been responsible for communicating COVID-19 health measures to local communities in the form of Chiefdom bylaws; b) obtained compliance with the government's travel ban by monitoring district and international 'crossing points'.

### 4.1 Traditional leaders and COVID-19 policy implementation

**Finding 2: The DHMT lacks capacity to directly obtain citizens' compliance with government policy goals.**

The Chiefs reported that they did not see DHMT personnel carrying out COVID-19-related activities in Kono District. Paramount Chief Foyoh reiterated several times that he 'didn't see' any DHMT personnel in his Chiefdom (Soa). Paramount Chief Konobudu said that, if the DHMT is planning to carry out activities in the Chiefdoms, 'that has not happened yet'. PC Soloku from Toli said that he had not seen DHMT personnel in his Chiefdom sensitising people. However, he had seen some personnel visiting the health clinics (presumably he is referring to Peripheral Health Units). Chief Soloku noted that if any DHMT personnel were coming to Toli he would have seen them because he had been in Toli for 'nearly three months'. He concluded: 'For national [government] to support the Chiefs in the COVID, it might happen, but it did not happen to my own Chiefdom'. Comments from the Section Chief from Sawa-Fiama section in Soa Chiefdom buttress the idea that DHMT-led activities in the communities were limited during the COVID-19 response. When asked if he had had any interactions with any other stakeholders besides the Paramount Chief, the Section Chief did not mention anyone from the DHMT—only the secretary of a cabinet minister.<sup>12</sup>

The limited appearance of the DHMT, or other response actors, in the Chiefdoms is in line with what the interviewed Paramount Chiefs expected, as it seems the DHMT only has responsibility for dealing with suspected cases. Chief Foyoh noted that 'the only time you can see DHMT in any community is when there is a suspect [suspected case]'. It is of interest that the DHMT relies on the chieftaincy to find out that there is a suspected case. Chiefdom bylaws—discussed in more detail below—require that sick people are reported to the DHMT. If someone is sick and that person is not reported then the Chiefs can levy a fine on the **Town Chief** of that community.

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<sup>12</sup> The Permanent Secretary to the Minister of Trade. The Permanent Secretary is a 'son of the soil' of Sawa-Fiama section and brought the Section Chief veronica buckets for all 32 towns in his section. This action was almost certainly undertaken in a private manner, i.e. the buckets were bought using his private money.

The above description (from the Chiefs) might undersell the role of the DHMT, as the Chiefs did not mention the role of CHWs, who do seem to have played some role in the Chiefdom-level response. According to a DHMT informant, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) organised Chiefdom-level training for 120 CHWs in Kono District. CHWs were trained on response activities, such as case investigation, surveillance, and contact tracing. As less than 15% of total CHWs in Kono District received this training, the CHWs were instructed to go from village to village to carry out the activities they were trained on.<sup>13</sup> Traditional leaders seemed to be aware of the CHWs' activities. The Chiefdom Mammy Queen from Soa noted that CHWs in her Chiefdom were travelling from village to village informing community people about COVID-19. The director of an important local NGO also noted that, 'the CHWs were the first set of people that received training for community outreach, even before the [District EOC] started its operation'. Without a thorough investigation, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness or comprehensiveness of these CHW actions. What is clear is that the DHMT, through the CHWs, undoubtedly played a role in the Chiefdom-level COVID-19 response. It is also true that the government leaned heavily on traditional leaders. That is what we turn to next.

**Finding 3: To obtain compliance, government officials turned to traditional leaders.**

The M&E officer at the DHMT explained that the DHMT's strategy for spreading information about COVID-19 has relied heavily on the use of traditional leaders (or, as he described them, 'community stakeholders'), in addition to radio campaigns. In my interview with the DHMT M&E officer, I summarised his remarks about sensitisation messaging as follows: 'You're saying that your strategy from the DHMT was to be in touch with these, as you called them community stakeholders, and it was their job to pass the message on'. The M&E officer agreed with this summary. The DHMT has had two main strategies for getting messages about COVID-19 to the community level. First, they used the radio. Second, the DHMT has held one-on-one meetings with Paramount Chiefs, and at these meetings the DHMT has communicated the need for Chiefs to pass the information down to the community level.<sup>14</sup> The interviewed Chiefs also viewed themselves as bearing the primary responsibility for implementing COVID-19 response policies in the Chiefdoms. According to the interviewed Paramount Chiefs it is the traditional leaders who are responsible for conducting COVID-19 sensitisation in the communities.

**Finding 4: Traditional leaders have spread information about COVID-19 and have also created and implemented COVID-19 safety measure bylaws, based on national law.**

The sections below describe in more detail the roles of traditional leaders in COVID-19 Chiefdom level-response, starting with Chiefs, as they are the most important Chiefdom-level political actors and they also play the leading role in creating and disseminating bylaws.

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<sup>13</sup> There are over 1,200 villages in Kono and there are over 950 CHWs registered in Kono District, according to 2019 CHW database and 2015 Census.

<sup>14</sup> 'There is need for them to go down to their community members and see how best they can also talk to them about the disease, and see... they can do to reach the to the people below them and see that they understand what they disease is and what they can do to not contract the disease.'

### 4.1.1 Paramount Chiefs

Paramount Chiefs have the legal power to create bylaws that govern behaviour in their Chiefdoms, so long as these laws do not conflict with national laws and they are in accordance with 'custom'. Violation of these bylaws carry punishments, typically fines, that the Chiefs themselves are responsible for levying. Paramount Chief Foyoh stated: 'When you pass a bylaw, then it goes with some disciplines. If you violate this, if you go against it, there are some penalties that you have to pay for it. And people fear that.'

Chiefs have used bylaws during previous health emergencies to enforce public health regulations. Paramount Chief Konbundo argued that it was the Chiefs' 'stringent' enforcement of public health bylaws that played the decisive role in curbing the spread of Ebola. The Chiefs who were interviewed were explicit in pointing out that the bylaws introduced during COVID-19 are a reflection of national policy.<sup>15</sup> Paramount Chief Soloku stated: 'When we [made] the bylaws, we make it in line with what government is asking'. As Paramount Chief Foyoh explained, translating national law into Chiefdom bylaws is a strategy for increasing the awareness of rural populations with laws made in a distant capital: 'you ask anyone about laws from parliament, they won't tell you anything, except these bylaws... so the people are more accustomed to the bylaws than the national laws'. COVID-19 bylaws in Kono District were the outcome of a meeting of the Council of the Paramount Chiefs, which brings together the district's 14 Chiefs.<sup>16</sup> The Chiefs reported that this meeting took place before representatives from Freetown came out to facilitate the beginning of the district COVID-19 response.<sup>17</sup>

Paramount Chiefs begin to spread knowledge of bylaws through the Chiefdom by calling a 'general meeting', specifically noting that Section Chiefs, Mammy Queens, and Youth Leaders are called to this meeting. Once a general meeting has been called, information permeates through the Chiefdom through sub-chiefs and other traditional leaders—i.e. Youth Leaders and Mammy Queens. In addition, Paramount Chiefs can make in-person visits. For example, Paramount Chief Foyoh stated that he visited all of the sections in his Chiefdom.

Both interviewed Section Chiefs in Soa Chiefdom reported that they had been called to a meeting about COVID-19 by the Paramount Chief. The Section Chief of Sawa-Fiama stated: 'Yes. They called us to the Chiefdom HQ town where we went for sensitisation. So we can [return to our section] and impart that [knowledge] onto the people [of the section]'. The Section Chief from Mongor stated: 'They called us to a meeting to advise us about this [COVID-19]'. The Section Chief from Mongor went on to explain that the Paramount Chief gave printed copies ('papers') containing Chiefdom COVID-19 bylaws to the Section Chiefs, instructing the Section Chiefs to tell their people about them. The Section Chief then called together Town Chiefs, Mammy Queens, and Youth Leaders in his section to give the paper to them and to explain the laws.

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<sup>15</sup> Chief bylaws were the reiteration of national COVID-19 policy, imposing social distancing, limiting markets, encouraging handwashing and the use of facemasks, etc.

<sup>16</sup> 'when disease is declared by government... chiefs sat together and stipulated bylaws. Our mission was to prevent disease from coming to Kono'.

<sup>17</sup> This meeting took place before the formation of the 13-man committee, which was prompted by the visit from central government. Exactly how the 13-man committee came together needs to be explored more fully.

Both Section Chiefs reported that they have passed on the information that they have received from the Paramount Chief throughout the section and that they did this by calling section-level meetings. The Section Chief of Sawa-Fiama said: 'I called meetings for all the Town Chiefs, the chairladies. We impart to them [knowledge about COVID-19]. Then they go and impart this to the people in the villages.' He continued: 'Sensitising the people, that has been our daily work. Social distance. Not to meet. Wash hand.' When asked if he had communicated any information about COVID-19 to the people of his section, the Section Chief of Mongor responded: 'Yes! We called a meeting, and we tell them... We tell them that this thing is real. Everybody needs to slow down. Don't touch, don't greet. Need to wash hands. Need to have a face mask... We passed the message with a meeting.'

It is important to note that both Sections Chiefs expressed familiarity with COVID-19-related bylaws. 'They advised us about the laws', the Section Chief from Mongor stated. He proceeded to recall the laws that he had been advised on:

*'One. We should not touch. Two. You need a face mask. Three, always wash hands with soap and water, because this disease people get from the hands. So, if you wash hands with soap and water all the time, you'll be safe. Then, they even say that if you see anyone sneeze very heavily tell that person to go to the hospital. If a person is in pain, or their body aches, tell them to go to the hospital.'*<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Youth

Youth have played a role both in sensitisation and in the security mounted at district/Chiefdom crossing checkpoints. Similar to the Chiefs, the district's Youth Leaders took actions that pre-empted the arrival of the first case of COVID-19 in Kono District. 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. The concept for the meeting was that 'prevention is better than cure'.

The District Youth Chairman worked with the Chiefdom Youth Chairman to set up a 'Chiefdom task force' in each Chiefdom to combat COVID-19. This happened before the setting up of district EOCs.

The District Youth Chairman asked that each Chiefdom Youth Chairman put forward 20 people to be part of the task force. However, the Gbense Chiefdom Youth Chairman stated that he decided Gbense would need more and increased the size of the Chiefdom task force to 60 people (Gbense is one of the two Chiefdoms that contains the district headquarters, Koidu).

The District Youth Chairman called additional meetings (using funds from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) to train Chiefdom Tasks forces on conducting sensitisation concerning Chiefdom bylaws. This training was carried out in combination with other district-level stakeholders. Chiefdom Youth Chairmen corroborated that they were

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<sup>18</sup> Section Chief Mongor interview. It is interesting to note here that these symptoms are not really up to date. For example, there is no mention of loss of smell or taste, a symptom that was not connected to COVID-19 in the early days. This suggests that information about symptoms has not been consistently communicated to the community level.

called to and attended meetings with the District Youth Chairman concerning COVID-10. Through their organised structure, the Chiefdom youth primarily carried out two important response activities: community sensitisation and 'crossing point' security support.

Above we noted that district-level meetings involved the attendance of Chiefdom Youth Leaders. Chiefdom Youth Leaders have thereafter worked to spread important information about the virus down to the community level. To penetrate communities, Chiefdom Youth Leaders have relied on sub-Chiefdom leaders, called Section Youth Chairmen. These Section Chairmen are responsible for reaching out to Youth Leaders at the town and village level. In this way, Youth Leaders have utilised their expansive and deep organisational structure to communicate important information about the disease to people living in the villages.

The Gbense Chiefdom Youth Leader explained how information and bylaws about COVID-19 spread through the Chiefdom: 'I called all my sectional chairmen. We told them the problem has come, the pandemic has come into the country. The danger, the risk of COVID-19—they are aware. We established the task force at the Chiefdom level. Then the sub-leaders established the task force in the various towns. That is how we communicated the issue of COVID-19 to the sub-chairman and the community people.'

The Soa Youth Chairman told a similar story. He said that as he heard of the virus, he travelled to each of the sections in his Chiefdom. The Soa Chiefdom Youth Chairman told the youth of his Chiefdom that this was not a sickness to be taken lightly. He said that he spread this message orally, visiting each of the sections in his Chiefdom, and holding meetings in person. He also discussed the specific measures to be taken by people to protect themselves.

Youth also played a major role in supporting the monitoring of 'crossing points' within the Chiefdom. National COVID-19 policy has restricted both international and inter-district travel. Youth have complemented the role being carried out by district security personnel. Members of the Chiefdom Youth Task Forces have been stationed at border crossing points in the five Chiefdoms in the district (Mafindor, Gbane Kandor, Lei, Toli, and Soa) that border Guinea. The District Youth Chairman explained that this is necessary as they cannot rely solely on security personnel in Kono District, saying: 'we need to provide security for ourselves'. The District Youth Councillor also claimed that he played a role in the successful appeals made to local mining companies to provide support for security. Koidu Limited, a mining company, has built 10 border crossing point structures.

### **4.1.3 Mammy Queens**

Mammy Queens have also been involved in Chiefdom-level sensitisation. Both Chiefdom-level Mammy Queens who were interviewed were initially informed about COVID-19 through meetings called by their respective Paramount Chiefs. Both Mammy Queens reported that these meetings were for Chiefdom elders, such as Section Chiefs, the Chiefdom speaker, and religious leaders. It seems likely that these are the same meetings that Youth Leaders

reported attending.<sup>19</sup> At these meetings Mammy Queens were instructed to spread the information they had received to their women in the Chiefdom.

The Chiefdom Mammy Queens then went about communicating this information to the section level. The Soa Mammy Queen said that she called the Section Mammy Queens to a meeting in the Chiefdom HQ and communicated information and best practices concerning COVID-19. Similarly, the Gbense Mammy Queen called section-level Mammy Queens to Koidu, which is both the Chiefdom and district HQ. As Koidu is the major city in the district, Koidu Town itself is divided into subsections and each subsection has a Mammy Queen. These subsection leaders were also invited.

Just because sub-leaders (e.g. section-level Mammy Queens) are called to a meeting does not necessarily mean that they can attend. As the Gbense Mammy Queen noted: it is not easy for everyone who is invited to come to a meeting. Sub-leaders will often say that they need to work and 'find food' before coming to a meeting. We can assume this is even more likely when sub-leaders must pay for transportation costs themselves. This might help explain why the section-level Mammy Queen interviewed in Soa reported that she did not communicate directly with the Chiefdom Mammy Queen about COVID-19, but that she received a message from the Chiefdom Mammy Queen through the Section Chief: *'I only had a discussion with the Section Chief. The [Chiefdom] Mammy Queen sent a message to him, and he delivered it to me'*. The section-level Mammy Queen stated that she did relay information about COVID-19 to the members of her section. Specifically, she told people, *'That we should be using face mask, and I passed on the message to my people'*. She did this by calling meetings: *'I called a meeting through the help of the Section Chief. And the message was disseminated; everyone to use face mask in public places.'*

Both of the interviewed Chiefdom Mammy Queens said that they thought the women of the Chiefdom were more likely to listen to them than to other Chiefdom authorities. The Gbense Chiefdom Mammy Queen emphasised relationships formed during cultural and social events: *'women listen to the Mammy Queens more than the other authorities...when we meet at our secret society bushes or when we meet during marriage ceremonies, we discuss. And the women will say this is what our Mammy Queen have said'*. She also emphasised that *'making your people love you'* and *'being transparent'* are important ways to get the women of the Chiefdom to listen to you as Chiefdom Mammy Queen. The Soa Mammy Queen agreed that Mammy Queens are more effective than other traditional leaders in communicating with women in the Chiefdom. *'If I call my people, my women, and explain to them what they have to do and what they don't have to do, when they go back to their community, they follow what I tell them.'*

**Finding 5: The governance structure of traditional leaders provides the infrastructure for transmitting knowledge about bylaws related to COVID-19 to communities throughout the Chiefdom.**

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<sup>19</sup> Neither Mammy Queen mentioned religious leaders at first, but when prompted both said that religious leaders had been in attendance.

## 5 Discussion and analysis

### 5.1 Resources for traditional leaders in the Chiefdom response

**Finding 6: Little to no resources have been made available by government to traditional leaders for undertaking sensitisation and security activities**

Above, we noted that the M&E officer described the reliance of the DHMT on traditional leaders for spreading sensitisation messages. In my interview with the DHMT M&E officer I followed up on this point by asking how traditional leaders were expected to undertake that kind of sensitisation. The officer replied:

*'Initially, there was no funds. Really, like I am saying, there was no fund from DHMT... we made it clear and everyone to understand that there are no funds... It wasn't until lately that we were asked to put forward a few budgets for this nature.'*<sup>20</sup>

This is not to say that the DHMT had no funds available. When I asked the M&E officer how the DHMT managed to undertake activities before transfers arrived from central government (which came months after the first reported case) the M&E officer first noted that DHMT staff were salaried and did not need additional funds. For unplanned activities he pointed to existing programmes of international partners. Costs such as airtime for radio sensitisation, fuel for bikes, and top-up for conversations with other district stakeholders were met through re-purposing donor funds, such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) Saving Lives in Sierra Leone programme.

Chiefs were also at pains to point out that they have not received government funds to implement these sensitisation activities. According to Paramount Chief Foyoh, the Chiefs have 'distributed bylaws to the Chiefdoms' without any financial support from anyone. Chief Soloku noted that 'implementation is at our own expense'. According to Paramount Chief Soloku, the Chiefs have contributed 40 million leones (~US\$ 4,000) to assist the COVID-19 response in Kono. While the Chiefs have bought veronica buckets for handwashing in their Chiefdoms, they claimed they have not received any supplies from the 'COVID centre'. The Chiefs did mention some assistance by NGOs. They say that Welthunger Hilfe (WHH) bought soap.

In interviews with the Section Chiefs, it was asked what resources they had for undertaking sensitisation activities. The Section Chief from Sawa-Fiama noted: 'They [government or Chiefdom authorities] did not give a special fund for that'.

District youth have also received little resource support from the government. Chiefdom Youth Leaders explained that sensitisation activities have been carried out through their own funds. The Soa Youth Chairman stated that he had been spending his own resources on these activities, with help from his friends. The Gbense Youth Chairman said: 'I never got

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<sup>20</sup> On this point, the M&E officer added the following: when all of the actors of the EOC got together and identified 'gaps' in the response, it was up to the members of the EOC to try to muster the resources they had available to address those gaps. No resources have been forthcoming from the DHMT for sensitisation activities that are carried out by the Chiefs/other traditional leaders.

help from anybody. If anybody calls me for a transport refund it comes from me, from my pocket. And if I don't give from my pocket, they have to pay for themselves to come to the meeting and pay for themselves to go home. We/I haven't gotten support from anybody.' The Gbense chairman reiterated this message at the conclusion of the interview, noting that the field supervisor for the government response had been to the field and seen the youth manning security checkpoints, but the youth had received nothing for this.

The Gbense Mammy Queen stated that she got a transport allowance to attend the original meeting called by the Paramount Chief. She did not get any money to carry out other activities, such as sensitisation. The Soa Mammy Queen bluntly agreed that she had received no financial support, saying 'Fund? No'.

As noted above (Section 4.1.3) it is difficult to get sub-leaders (i.e. Section Mammy Queens) to attend meetings if transport allowances are not available, as transportation is expensive. The Soa Mammy Queen noted: 'If you have money, you can call your people together and tell them what they need to do. But if there is no money, it is hard to get people to come.'

There does, however, appear to have been some form of external support. Some external/non-governmental resources were made available to support the youth sensitisation activities. Above, we noted that UNDP supported with resources that enable training and sensitisation activities. The Soa Youth Chairman had communicated directly with his representative MP. The Chiefdom Youth Chairman explained his situation to the MP. He said that the Chiefdom youth were supporting activities, specifically security throughout the Chiefdom, but support in terms of food and/or money was not forthcoming. He complained that it was rainy season but there was no rain gear. They conducted security at night, but there were no torchlights to see with. The MP responded by giving 10 25 kilo bags of rice, which were contributed directly to the youth. The Soa Chiefdom Mammy Queen reported that several NGOs (World Vision, Partners in Health, and 'another donor') came to the Soa Chiefdom HQ for training about COVID-19.<sup>21</sup>

## 5.2 Inclusiveness of district-level coordination

In Section 3, we argued that the government has displayed a good capacity to coordinate the emergency response to COVID-19 at the district level. In this sense, the response has been institutionalised—the set of district-level actors who are involved know their roles, and have mechanisms for coordinating with each other and for coordinating with central government. While institutionalisation is necessary for avoiding a totally *ad hoc* response, it also creates barriers for entry for other actors. In different ways, Mammy Queens and the District Youth Council Chairman perceived themselves as being on the outside and looking in on response efforts.

**Finding 7: Youth Leaders seem to have been only peripherally involved in the coordination of the district-level COVID-19 response.**

Youth Leaders seem to have been only tangentially involved in coordinating the response to COVID-19 at the district level. The District Youth Leader reported feeling side-lined by the

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<sup>21</sup> World Vision may also have been buying and distributing veronica buckets in the Chiefdoms.

District Response Coordinator, who has not given youth a desk at the response command centre. 'We are challenged', is how the District Coordinator described the integration of youth in the response coordination. The District Youth Coordinator argued that, given that the Minister of Youth Affairs is working with the head of EOC in Freetown, this is a clear indication that the President wants the youth minister to give support to the fight against COVID-19. The Youth Chairman told the District Coordinator that the COVID-19 command centre needed to have a youth representative. The District Coordinator pushed against that and said that he did not have that mandate from Freetown. However, this policy was later changed and the District Youth Council was eventually 'given a desk' at the district COVID-19 response centre, and allowed to place one representative permanently at the centre. This was an important development and showed that the government made changes to increase the integration of (some) traditional leaders in the response.

**Finding 8: Mammy Queens have not been involved in the coordination of the district-level COVID-19 response, possibly because district-level leadership is less institutionalised.**

Mammy Queens seem not to have been involved in coordinating the response at the district level.<sup>22</sup> For example, the Soa Chiefdom Mammy Queen reported that she has never been asked to attend a meeting in the district HQ, Koidu. This stands in contrast to Chiefs and youth, who have representatives fully (in the case of Chiefs) or partially (in the case of youth) involved in district-level coordination.

One possible reason for the non-inclusion of Mammy Queens in district-level coordination is that Mammy Queens lack clear and organised district-level leadership. Chieftaincy and youth organisation are clearly organised under government ministries—the Ministry of Local Government and the Ministry of Youth Affairs, respectively. Central government oversees elections conducted for District Youth Chair, while elections for Paramount Chieftaincy are organised and overseen by the National Election Commission. It is less clear how Mammy Queens fit into the legal and administrative landscape of Sierra Leone; there is no government ministry supporting district-level organisation of the district's Mammy Queens.

Possibly as a consequence, there are competing claims for district Mammy Queen, at least in Kono District. We interviewed the secretary of one woman claiming to be the district Mammy Queen. However, this claim is disputed—the wives of several of the district's Paramount Chiefs have also organised and together claim to be the 'district Mammy Queens'.

It is possible that this informal and ambiguous leadership structure makes it more difficult to include Mammy Queens in district-level coordination. Even if district-level actors did want to incorporate Mammy Queens more directly in emergency response coordination, with whom should they communicate?

It is also possible that the lack of institutionalisation of Mammy Queens stems from structural gender inequality, whereby women's roles are not valued by those in power (both in colonial

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<sup>22</sup> One key informant noted: 'The Mammy Queens were marginalised by the DICOVERC, I did not see much of their involvement both at Chiefdom and district level. The assumption is that they form part of the women group people are working with, they were not treated separately.'

times and now), who are almost entirely men—and the ambiguous leadership structure provides a rationale for their marginalisation in the response.

Given the lack of a district-level representative, it is important to recognise the way in which Mammy Queens are reliant on other traditional leaders. As we saw in Section 4, district-level organisation of Paramount Chiefs and youth allow these institutions to engage directly with district response efforts and channel information directly back to Chiefdom-level structures. In contrast, Chiefdom-level Mammy Queens receive information from Paramount Chiefs.

### 5.3 Gender: coordination and consequences

**Finding 9: Traditional leaders are split in their perceptions about the potential gendered consequences of COVID-19.**

Several of the interviewed traditional leaders had interesting thoughts on how COVID-19 might affect men and women differently. The Sawa-Fiama Section Mammy Queen (Soa Chiefdom) identified school children spending more time in the villages as a central social impact of COVID-19.<sup>23</sup> This, said the Section Mammy Queen, might lead to social problems:

*‘Government said, all parents should send their children to school and we did. We are working hard to pay their fees for them to be educated. But [COVID-19] has made our children not going to school. They are all here with us in the village. And staying home without going to school will lead to many problems: early marriage, teenage pregnancy and weaken their academic prowess.’*

The Section Chief from Mongor pointed to the economic impacts of the inter-district travel ban that might particularly impact women.

*‘Women grow certain types of crops that they bring to Koidu [the district capital], which people come from Freetown to buy. However, with the inter-district travel ban, this is no longer possible. These crops even spoil because people don’t want to buy them at the price they’re being sold.’*

This Section Chief also pointed to what he called ‘the food issue’ and noted that the price of rice had risen with COVID-19 (we might speculate that this is a product of the travel ban and border closure). What is interesting is that the Section Chief categorised rising rice prices as a ‘women’s problem’. This suggests that responsibility for providing food falls more heavily on women during a crisis. While this is anecdotal, it merits further investigation.

Not all traditional leaders were convinced that COVID-19 would affect men and women differently. The Chiefdom Mammy Queen from Gbense said: *‘Women and men: do we not have the same blood? Do we not have the same body? I can’t say with certainty if it affects men or women differently. But I would say that it affects everybody the same.’*

The Soa Chiefdom Mammy Queens expressed much the same sentiment, saying: *‘Well, Corona is Corona. It’s not different for anyone.’*

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<sup>23</sup> The Section Chief from Sawa-Fiama also noted that COVID-19 has kept children from going to school.

**Finding 10: While male traditional leaders have been involved in district-level COVID-19 response decision-making, women traditional leaders have not been.**

A recent report from CARE International finds that women are systematically underrepresented on national-level committees in regard to responding to COVID-19, with women having only 24% of positions.<sup>24</sup> There seems to be mirrored at district level across countries: for example, in Uganda, women made up 22.5% of members of four district-level COVID-19 task forces, and men held the most influential positions. While the CARE study did not cover Sierra Leone, the situation in Sierra Leone seems likely to be similar. And while the sub-national governments rely heavily on traditional leaders, the involvement of traditional leaders occurs along starkly gendered lines.

In Section 5.2, we described how Mammy Queens have lacked district-level representation in the COVID-19 response. The lack of a district-level representative limits women's perspective in decision-making. Contrast this with those traditional leaders who are involved in decision-making. All of the district's 14 Paramount Chiefs and 14 Chiefdom Youth Leaders are men. Without Mammy Queen representatives in district-level decision-making the voice of 'traditional leaders' is actually the voice of men.

The lack of women in decision-making bodies means that these entities are less likely to consider women's and men's different experiences when shaping responses. The lack of gender parity in COVID-19 decision-making bodies reflects wider societal inequalities that constrain women's participation and leadership.

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<sup>24</sup> [https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE\\_COVID-19-womens-leadership-report\\_June-2020.pdf](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_COVID-19-womens-leadership-report_June-2020.pdf)

## 6 Recommendations

This rapid study has explored the role of traditional leaders in COVID-19 response efforts in Kono District, Sierra Leone. It has found that traditional leaders play an important role in district-level decision-making and in Chiefdom-level policy implementation: for example, in COVID-19 sensitisation and border control. This report has documented how traditional leaders have used existing institutional structures to accomplish these activities. These activities have been undertaken by traditional leaders despite receiving minimal training and minimal financial support.

However, not all traditional leaders have played an equal role in district-level decision-making. Chiefs have played the most important role. Youth, while included from the beginning, have played a somewhat marginal role, though this role has expanded over time, as they have been given a 'desk' at the response centre. Mammy Queens have been excluded from district-level decision-making. Irrespective of cause, the inclusion of traditional leaders in district-level decision-making has played out along starkly gendered lines: Chiefs and Youth Leaders are male and have been included; Mammy Queens are female and have not been included.

The primary recommendation is therefore twofold. The Government of Sierra Leone should: 1) institutionalise the role of traditional leaders in emergency response; and 2) do so in an inclusive way.

### 1. Institutionalising the role of traditional leaders in emergency response

- **1a.** Institutionalising the role of traditional leaders in emergency response requires developing plans for engaging traditional leaders *as institutions* rather than *as individuals*. It has become common place for policy documents to pay lip service to 'obtaining buy-in from community stakeholders/traditional leaders'. This paints a picture of traditional leaders as influential individuals in communities. This report has shown that traditional leaders are influential individuals *who sit atop functioning and well-defined Chiefdom-level institutions, with a long history of transmitting information and implementing Chiefdom governance decisions*. Government emergency response policy needs to outline how government will engage and empower these institutions.
- **1b.** Governance requires resources. In this report we have described how traditional leaders have been asked to carry out response activities with little to no resources support from government. As traditional leaders have a crucial role to play in ensuring community understanding and compliance with government policies, the government should undertake to provide greater resources to traditional leaders to conduct necessary activities during health emergencies.
- **1c.** While traditional leaders often have years of leadership experience, they may not have the necessary administrative skills to handle modern administrative practices, such as transparent financial accounting. The administrative capacities/infrastructure of traditional political institutions should be further developed if traditional leaders are going to play a more significant role in emergency response.

### 2. Inclusive institutionalisation

- **2a.** In attempting to institutionalise the role of traditional leaders in emergency response the Government of Sierra Leone can take a step towards inclusivity by acknowledging in emergency response policy that there are different types of traditional leaders, with different target groups (or constituencies). While Paramount Chiefs claim jurisdiction over all people in their Chieftom, this report has outlined how Youth Leaders and Mammy Queens claim ‘special relationships’ with targeted sub-groups—young people and women, respectively. By acknowledging in key policies and strategies that different traditional leaders are attached to different social groups, the motivation for including all types of traditional leaders becomes clearer.
- **2b.** We have found that Mammy Queens are excluded from district-level decision-making and Youth Leaders participate on the margins. An ‘inclusive institutionalisation’ would include Mammy Queens in decision-making during emergency response and would consider expanding the role of Youth Leaders.
- **2c.** One reason why Mammy Queens might not be included in district-level decision-making is because Mammy Queens lack unambiguous district-level leadership and the support of a central ministry. Government policy could alleviate this ambiguity by supporting, organising, and acknowledging and supporting a district-level Mammy Queen position, and government could consider how Mammy Queens could be supported via a central ministry. However, it is important to recognise that any proposal for central government to offer recognition and resources opens up additional possibilities of ‘capture’.

## 6.1 Recommendations for additional research

- **3a.** While women are legally allowed to stand for the positions of Paramount Chief and Chieftom Youth Leaders in Kono District, these 28 positions across the 14 Chieftoms are filled by men.<sup>25</sup> In this report we assume current norms and thinking on gender which suggest that incorporating Mammy Queens into district-level decision-making may enable a gender-sensitive approach, reflecting the impacts, priorities, and needs of women in a way that does not currently exist, and thus attempting to address the current male bias. It might also improve communication with women in the district. However, incorporating Mammy Queens into district-level decision-making may also have broader social impacts. For example, the increased involvement of Mammy Queens in district decision-making in emergency response may lead to their increased involvement in other policy domains, or it might alter norms of female deference in politics. The rebalancing of roles may start to address broader structural inequalities in relation to how women’s needs and perspectives are perceived in other domains. Future research should explore these potential impacts and explicitly consider the case for greater institutionalised support for Mammy Queens via a central ministry.
- **3b.** The source of authority of traditional political institutions remains largely a black box—while scholars and practitioners tend to agree that traditional political institutions are able to obtain the compliance of local populations, the extent to which traditional leaders rely on coercion versus consent remains an open debate. Yet the normative

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<sup>25</sup> While the law does not prohibit women running for Paramount Chief, the legality of women standing for Paramount Chief election in a given Chieftom is complicated because the law ultimately defers to ‘local customs’, which in some instances have been interpreted as banning women from running for Paramount Chief.

implications of supporting coercive rather than consent-based political institutions are starkly different. Therefore, the source of authority of traditional leaders is a subject that requires additional and immediate research.

- **3c:** Conducting stage two of this study to analyse the effectiveness of the response would further shed light on the importance of traditional leaders. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the response will be measured by how response efforts impact community members' beliefs and behaviours regarding COVID-19. Central to the analysis is therefore explaining variations in community members' beliefs and behaviours by their interactions and communications with different actors involved in the response, namely: a) traditional leaders; b) health professionals (CHWs and members of 'pillar response'; and c) religious leaders.

## References

Care International (2020) 'Where Are The Women? The Conspicuous Absence of Women in COVID-19 Response Teams and Plans, and Why We Need Them, #Place of Women in Crisis'. URL:

[https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE\\_COVID-19-womens-leadership-report\\_June-2020.pdf](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_COVID-19-womens-leadership-report_June-2020.pdf) [Date accessed: 22 September 2020]

Grieco. K., and Yusuf. Y., (2020) 'COVID-19 Series: Working Paper - Sierra Leone 'COVID-19 Series. Oxford Policy Management, Oxford.

## Annex A Interview list

Name	Position	Interviewer
<b>Foyoh</b>	Paramount Chief, Soa	Grieco
<b>Konobundo</b>	Paramount Chief, Goroma-Kono	Grieco
<b>Soloku</b>	Paramount Chief, Toli	Grieco
<b>Tamba Martin Tenga Kanawa</b>	Section Chief, Sawa-Fiama section (Soa)	Moitenga
<b>Dennis</b>	Section Chief, Mongor	Moitenga
<b>Sahr Fallah</b>	Chairman Kono District Youth Council	Grieco
<b>Sah Peter Foyor</b>	Chiefdom Youth Chairman, Soa	Moitenga
<b>Aiah Joseph M'bayoh</b>	Chiefdom Youth Chairman, Gbense	Moitenga
<b>David Yopoi</b>	District Monitoring and Evaluating Office 1, Kono DHMT	Grieco
<b>Ronald</b>	ONS, Kono District	Grieco
<b>Hawa Kumba Madiana Kaimachiande</b>	Assistant to the district Mammy Queen	Grieco
<b>Sia Kanawa</b>	Sawa-Fiama Section Mammy Queen	Moitenga
<b>Alpha Jalloh</b>	Director, KoCEPO	Grieco
<b>Fanta Aminata Sinnah</b>	Chiefdom Mammy Queen, Gbense Chiefdom	Moitenga
<b>Margaret Gbainda</b>	Chiefdom Mammy Queen, Soa Chiefdom	Moitenga

## Annex B Public Notice District Level Response



**SIERRA LEONE GOVERNMENT**  
COVID-19 NATIONAL RESPONSE  
EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTRE (EOC)  
WILKINSON ROAD, FREETOWN

### **PUBLIC NOTICE**

**Freetown 24<sup>th</sup> April 2020 Time: 2:30PM**

As a way of intensifying the fight against Coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) at district level, the COVID-19 National Response Team would like to inform the general public that the following people have been appointed as District Coordinators for the COVID-19 Response with immediate effect.

- |                                |                      |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Umaru Vandi                 | - Kenema District    |
| 2. Morie Feika                 | - Kailahun District  |
| 3. Samuel Sam                  | - Kono District      |
| 4. David Fortune               | - Bo District        |
| 5. Joseph Moigboi Kamara       | - Bonthe District    |
| 6. Joseph Kendor               | - Moyamba District   |
| 7. Mohamed Kpana Gbato Kemorai | - Pujehun District   |
| 8. Mohamed Moganbo Siaffa      | - Bombali District   |
| 9. Alusine Abdulai Sesay       | - Tonkolili District |
| 10. Foday Sidike Kallon        | - Karene District    |
| 11. Mohamed Mustapha Dumbuya   | - Kambia District    |
| 12. Moses Erik Kamara          | - Port Loko District |
| 13. Abdulai Barrie             | - Koinadugu District |
| 14. Victor S.O Davies          | - Western Area Rural |
| 15. Miatta French              | - Western Area Urban |
| 16. Lansana Mamadi Kondeh      | - Falaba District    |

For more information, visit our websites [www.mic.gov.sl](http://www.mic.gov.sl) and [www.dhse.gov.sl](http://www.dhse.gov.sl) or call +232-76-622-914/0 76-602-460

-END-



Solomon Jamiru Esq

**Spokesperson**