RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Justice for the Poor and Understanding Processes of Change in Local Governance

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Purpose and Summary

This short paper is meant to serve as an addendum to the series of working papers produced by The World Bank’s Justice for the Poor and Understanding Processes of Change in Local Governance (J4P/LG) project in Sierra Leone. It provides additional detail on the research methodology used by the J4P/LG team.

Research took place in 2006-2007 in a range of rural and peri-urban areas throughout Sierra Leone, which were selected to reflect Sierra Leone’s geographic, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity. (Very little research was conducted in the larger urban areas.) The research program was implemented in partnership with the Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) and Timap for Justice, and was carried out by a team of local researchers, who had received intensive training in qualitative research methods at the outset of the project and who worked under close supervision and support from international Justice for the Poor members.

Research was primarily qualitative in nature, using anthropological and ethnographic techniques, particularly in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The team did not conduct formally-constituted focus group discussions, but the nature of communal village life meant that individual interviews sometimes developed into group discussions. The main four research sites were in the Bombali (Northern Province), Moyamba and Bo (Southern Province) and Western Area Rural districts; in addition, team members spent time in another five of Sierra Leone’s thirteen districts (for a total of nine) during either the preliminary scoping research, core qualitative research, or in the administration of a study of local customary law courts. In total, original qualitative research contributing to this paper totaled approximately 83 distinct person-weeks of time. Core research covered approximately 31 villages in four chiefdoms, and involved at least 460 interviews with 360 individuals. Other related research, particularly the preliminary scoping research, involved dozens of additional interviews in a wide range of locations.

Team Composition and Training

For the purpose of this project, the World Bank and CGG hired and trained seven researchers in qualitative methods. All were Sierra Leonean nationals, and all but one had received first degrees from one of Sierra Leone’s national universities, several with honors. (The other earned his degree from a Liberian university.) Two of the seven were women.¹ All were fluent in both English and Krio, an English-based creole language that serves as the lingua franca of Sierra Leone. In addition, four of the seven spoke Mende, and three spoke Temne (the two most commonly-spoken languages in Sierra Leone after Krio and English). One of the Temne speakers also speaks fluent Fullah, a minority language.

¹ Recruiting efforts specifically targeted women, and explicit preference was given for gender balance during the hiring process. Unfortunately, due to a lack of qualified applicants, the resulting team was still predominantly male.
Training consisted of classroom training and intensive practical training in field work. CGG and the World Bank’s J4P/LG team jointly planned and executed the training, which built on field guides developed by the Indonesia Justice for the Poor program. Additional topics covered included background information on governance and justice in Sierra Leone, as well as techniques for qualitative research. Classroom training included guest lectures from experts at local universities, civil society organizations, government institutions, and justice reform and decentralization projects.

Team members were supervised by The World Bank’s J4P/LG Freetown-based coordinator, and by a research coordinator from CGG. In addition, two visiting anthropologists provided oversight and support during training and certain periods of field work. Tanja Hohe, the Justice for the Poor coordinator in Kenya, joined the team for training and practical field exercises in November-December 2006 and again in January-February 2007. John Combe, a PhD candidate from the University of Muenster (and a Sierra Leonean national whose own research also focuses on governance issues in rural Sierra Leone) joined the team from March to June 2007.

For more information about the training process and the benefits of working with local researchers, see “Working with Local Researchers,” a Justice for the Poor briefing note.

Timing and Scope of Field Work

In total, original qualitative research contributing to this report totaled approximately 83 distinct person-weeks of time in research sites around Sierra Leone. This combines the work of 7 research team members, a research coordinator from CGG, a coordinator for J4P/SL, and visiting J4P team members.

Core field work for this report was conducted between November 2006 and July 2007. The team varied in size over this period, with 7 researchers (not counting supervisors) involved from November to April, and 5 thereafter. Anywhere between 0 and 3 supervisors were with the team in the field at any given time, with additional supervision and support always available from Freetown.

The program coordinator also conducted preliminary scoping research between May and October 2006, sometimes accompanied by a research assistant who later became part of the research team. This scoping research included at least 4 separate trips to different parts of the country.

Finally, the report draws upon a separate but related research effort by the same research team: a survey of local courts, piloted in February and March 2007 and conducted in October 2007 (in cooperation with and funded by the Justice Sector Development Program, managed by the British Council). During this time, team members not only conducted pre-prepared surveys of local court clerks and local court records, but also kept field notes on findings that fell outside of the purview of those surveys.

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4 Total estimated days of field time for all researchers and supervisors is 583. This does not include research conducted in Freetown. It also does not include the final administration of the local court survey in October 2007, but does including the survey pilot Feb 28-Mar 5 2007.
Primary Research Sites

Criteria for the selection of research sites was set out in the initial concept note, which also identified five districts as likely research locations: the Western Area Rural, Kono, Bombali, Bo, and Moyamba. All but Kono were ultimately included; Kono was excluded for a number of reasons, primarily due to the team composition. The J4P/LG team still considers Kono an important site for investigating these research questions, and would urge its consideration for any future research.

A district is a very large administrative unit, far too large to conduct any meaningful qualitative research. The team therefore chose a small number of communities within a single chiefdom in which to actually conduct the research, in order to allow the kind of intensive, long-term study required for this kind of work. However, it is important to note that the team was still covering a much larger area and in a much shorter amount of time than would a typical ethnographic researcher. This was necessitated by the demands of the project timeline and by the desire to have meaningful results to feed into ongoing policy debates.

The within-district sites were each chosen using somewhat different criteria and processes, so these criteria are outlined below along with a brief description of each site. The names of specific chiefdoms and communities, as well as other identifying characteristics, are excluded to protect the anonymity of respondents.

Overall, consistent with the concept note, the emphasis was on diversity in the collection of research locations: sites from each of Sierra Leone’s major regions, and representing a mix of ethnicities; sites which are more and less poor, and more and less remote; sites with different forms of dominant economic activity. Sites were also selected in part because they were believed to have some minimum frequency of the types of grievances (particularly involving authorities) and/or because they overlapped with particular interventions of interest to researchers.

1) Western Area Rural – This was the first site chosen, and served as both the training site and the first research location, though follow-up research was conducted later once the team had improved in skill. The site was chosen in part for its proximity to Freetown, in order to facilitate training and ongoing supervision. It was also chosen purposively because of the existence of several high-profile and complex grievances involving authorities, as judged by the CGG field staff in the area.

The site is a densely-populated, peri-urban fishing community on the peninsula. It has a multi-ethnic population, including many recent migrants from the country’s interior. Like all communities in the Western Area, it has no chieftaincy system, but does have a collection of tribal headman representing the different ethnic groups in the area, as well as an elected town headman, local councilor, and other formal and informal local authorities.

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5 Justice for the Poor and Understanding Processes of Change in Local Governance - Sierra Leone Concept Note. December 2006.
6 Given the complexity and volatility of many of the conflicts common in Kono – particularly those related to mineral resources – it was deemed preferable to wait until the team was more experienced. Language was also a potential barrier, as none of the team members spoke Kono.
2) **Bo District** – This is the second site selected, and was chosen in part for linguistic, ethnic, and regional diversity. (It is a Mende-dominated area in the south, while the Western Area Rural site is Temne-dominated.) It is also much more ethnically homogenous and rural than the first site, though not too far from the district (and provincial) headquarter town of Bo, and its economy is primarily agricultural with some mining presence.

The site is an amalgamated chiefdom, and is therefore relatively large. Research focused on the chiefdom headquarter town, and then followed specific grievances to other communities which were involved in some way. Researchers also made a deliberate effort to include some smaller and more isolated communities outside of the chiefdom headquarters, including several that could not be reached by motorized vehicle.

3) **Moyamba District** – This site was selected for the second round of field work, beginning in April 2007, and resulted from a somewhat more formalized selection process. Researchers first traveled to the district headquarter town, where they interviewed stakeholders from government and civil society. On the basis of these interviews, as well as other data sources, the research team and coordinators selected chiefdoms that fit selection criteria.

The chosen chiefdom was one of the district’s poorest and most remote, and had also emerged in recent research sponsored by the Justice Sector Development Programme (JSDP) as having some of the gravest problems related to women’s access to justice. It was difficult to reach at the best of times, and the road was nearly impassable during the rainy season. The chiefdom headquarter town was again a focus of research. The team then chose several additional communities on which to focus.

4) **Bombali District** – This site was also selected for the second round of field work, on the basis of interviews in the district headquarter, as well as other sources of data on the chiefdom. The research team then visited two candidate chiefdoms: one was extremely poor and remote, while the other was wealthier and situated closer to the district headquarters. The latter also overlapped with two of the interventions of interest to the research team, and was known to have some autocratic local authorities and some high-profile disputes and divisions over politics and other issues. For these reasons, and because the more remote chiefdom posed some difficult logistical challenges for the team (an enormous area with large distances between villages, and the dominance of a minority language spoken by none of the team members), the latter chiefdom was ultimately selected. However, some data from the shorter visit to the more remote chiefdom is also included.

The selected chiefdom was an amalgamated chiefdom, with continuing divisions and relative autonomy between the two halves. Both major towns were therefore selected as primary research sites within the chiefdom. In addition, team members conducted research in a number of smaller and more remote villages.

In addition to these primary research sites, the team was able to visit 9 of Sierra Leone’s 13 districts during either the preliminary scoping research or the local court survey (pilot or final administration). These included, in addition to the four districts named above, Kailahun, Koinadugu, Kono, Pujehun, and Tonkolili.
**Research Questions**

As outlined in its concept note, this project set out to answer a long list of research questions:

1. Who are the main authorities or power holders in the communities? Where do they derive their authority and legitimacy?

2. What are prevailing social norms and governance rules regarding how collective decisions are made, how public resources are mobilized and utilized, and how authority is exercised? Do different groups have noticeably different attitudes towards and perception of authorities, and different degrees of participation in collective action?

3. What kinds of systems and mechanisms are utilized to resolve and manage grievances and to lodge claims against state or non-state authorities, and why? Are certain groups or communities more likely to pursue justice? If so, why?

4. What trajectories do the grievances follow, and why? What are the outcomes of these processes, and what factors influence the results?

5. How do the mechanisms employed, the trajectories, and the outcomes differ with respect to:
   a. the characteristics of individuals and communities involved (and why)?
   b. the characteristics of particular grievances (and why)?

6. What barriers to effective justice and governance exist, and which individuals, groups, and communities are most affected? How are these barriers overcome, or how could they be overcome? Which groups have a vested interest in maintaining the barriers?

7. How are the answers to all of these questions changing over time? How and why does local-level justice and governance improve or deteriorate?

8. What is the impact of external justice and governance interventions? Do they affect people’s attitudes towards authorities, their participation in public affairs, and their perception of influence? Do they trigger change in what people demand and obtain in relation to justice and governance? Do they result in more just outcomes? Are their effects sustainable beyond the end of the intervention?

To that end, the planned qualitative research would both “map local power structures and sources of authority and legitimacy” and “track how people attempt to resolve disputes or claims.” The concept note proposed two categories of grievances on which research would focus: first, grievances involving land and natural resources; and second, grievances involving local authorities (including claims either to or against local authorities, broadly defined.)

As research and training progressed, however, it became clear that this research agenda was somewhat ambitious given the time and capacity constraints. The team therefore focused on the second category of grievances – those involving local authorities – and narrowed the research questions somewhat. In particular, question 8 was addressed only superficially, and several other questions were addressed only in part. Future research – whether by The World Bank or others – could usefully follow up on those areas not covered exhaustively in this project.
Research Methods and Tools

The research team aimed for a high standard of excellence and rigor in its research methods. Although team members were new to these techniques, they were closely supervised and their skills increased dramatically through the course of research. The team’s commitment to excellence set this research apart from other research conducted under the flag of “qualitative research”. This was not a superficial set of quick-fix focus group discussions and key informant interviews, but careful in-depth research in the anthropological tradition, paired with equally careful analysis.

The cornerstone of field research was the in-depth, semi-structured interview. Interviews were usually conducted by pairs of researchers, and sometimes with the presence and participation of a supervisor. Researchers were given a question guide (and more specific addendum guides for follow-up research) to help direct their interviews. They did not follow this guide step-by-step while interviewing, but instead selected questions that were relevant for each interview, modifying them as necessary. They also followed up on lines of discussion introduced by the respondent. Thus the main questions in the guide should have been answered for each site but not by every respondent, and not necessarily in the exact form used in the question guide.

The team spoke extensively in training and while conducting field work about the challenges of translation, and definitions were agreed for important terms to help ensure consistency across the team. Most translation was done on the spot during the interview, from English to either Krio, Mende, Tenne, Fullah, or some combination thereof. (In a few cases, an intermediary then translated the questions again into another language spoken by the respondent but not spoken by researchers. This was relatively rare, however.) Respondents’ responses were then translated back into English during the transcription to data formats, retaining as many direct quotations as possible in the original language, though this latter task was somewhat complicated by the fact that none of the non-English languages are widely read or written.

Although the team did not conduct formally-constituted focus group discussions, the nature of communal village life meant that individual interviews sometimes developed into group discussions. This happened with all categories of respondents: elders (and, sometimes, non-elders) gathered around a chief’s house or court barré joined interviews with chiefs; co-wives and female neighbors joined interviews with women; young men in an ataya base joined interviews with youth leaders or other youths. Researchers were careful to limit the numbers, particularly when topics were sensitive, and took note when it seemed that respondents were reacting to the presence of others (e.g., by stopping a story or withholding certain comments). Such factors were also taken into account in analysis. Though sometimes more challenging to conduct, group discussions were also often quite valuable.

In addition to conducting interviews, researchers were encouraged to engage in active observation (e.g., participant observation) and to include these observations in their field notes wherever possible. This was particularly true for the second phase of research, for which visiting researcher John Combey emphasized observation techniques and a new data recording format was introduced specifically for observation. (See below.)

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7 A tea shop and popular gathering place, particularly for young men.
Respondents were selected in a non-random, purposive manner. Researchers interviewed as many as possible of the local authorities, including chiefdom authorities, police representatives, local councilors, youth and women leaders, religious leaders, civil society and non-governmental organizations, project or development committee members, etc. They also sought out key stakeholders such as teachers, nurses or other health workers, etc.

Researchers also spoke to the individuals involved with specific cases (grievances). Finally, they targeted “normal community members”, particularly those from groups that were underrepresented among local authorities. Team members were encouraged to actively seek respondents from the following groups: women, youths, strangers, and the poor and marginalized.

Careful data collection was vital, given the size of the team and the need to later organize and analyze findings. As a result there were several steps to the data recording process. Researchers kept their own field notebooks, which were with them at all times, and in which they would jot notes from interviews and observations. Each night (or soon thereafter) they transcribed that day’s interviews into structured data formats, which captured specific information about the respondent (demographic profile, position in community, etc.); about the interview, if appropriate (where conducted, who else was present, etc.); and about specific case studies, if any. The form also provided for a detailed interview transcript.

Field notes could be kept in any language(s) that the individual researcher chose, but forms and transcripts were recorded in English, with the exception of direct quotes, which were recorded both in the original language and in translated form for the benefit of non-speakers. For the second phase of research, a review was added in which the second researcher (when interviews were conducted in pairs) reviewed the transcript compiled by their partner and added any additional or alternative information from their own notes.

Finally, researchers prepared their own preliminary analytic papers and case study write-ups as the weeks progressed. These were later integrated into the final analysis and report writing. Several team members continued to provide written and verbal input up to the final stages of paper revision.