

**Christiana Thorpe, Chief Commissioner, National Electoral Commission**

Until 2004, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) operated under the auspices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Lomé Peace Accord, which ended the civil war, stipulated that the NEC should become an independent electoral management body.

Independence was granted to the NEC in 2005. A wholesale restructuring of the commission ensued, including the following steps:

1. Staff Capacity Development
2. Infrastructural Development
3. Information Technology System
4. Reform of electoral laws and regulations
5. Boundary Delimitation
6. Voter Registration

International donors have contributed substantially to the restructuring of the new NEC. In 2005-07, 85% of the commission's budget came from international donors. The remaining 15% was financed by the government of Sierra Leone. For the 2012 elections, the government have committed take responsibility for 56% of NEC's budget, with donors making up the remaining 44%. **The aim is for NEC to be a "home affair" fully financed by the government in 2017.**

The NEC's budget for 2010-14 is US\$59.5 million. This includes the costs of a new headquarters and the construction of offices in the 14 districts of Sierra Leone. The NEC, as an independent body, should not be dependent on regional government offices and infrastructure. **The new district offices will help the NEC to decentralise the electoral process in a manner which reinforces its independence.**

The Law Reform Committee has reviewed the legal framework for the elections. A draft document has been submitted to Parliament, and it will be first thing the house discusses when it returns in September. **The NEC wants to consolidate all the laws relating to the electoral process into a single document which can act as a blueprint for all elections in Sierra Leone.**

**Electoral education is a priority for the NEC.** The National Institute for Electoral Administration and Civic Education (NIEACE) has been created to train NEC election staff. NIEACE is a joint initiative of the Human Rights Commission, Commission for Democracy, Political Parties Legislation Commission and NEC. NIEACE runs a certificate programme, equivalent to the first year of education at university. The curriculum was devised over a two year period and has been accredited by the National Council for Technical, Vocational and other Academic Awards (NCTVA). After the 2012 elections, diploma and degree courses in electoral and civic education will be offered.

**Training sessions are taking place in all districts of Sierra Leone.** To date, 2,500 people have been trained. The aim is to train a further 5,000 by 2012. The NEC wants a critical mass of people who understand the electoral process, and who can explain it to citizens. About 70% of Sierra Leone's voters are illiterate. Information about the elections will be disseminated through TV, radio, press conferences and town criers.

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### ***Sierra Leone 2012 elections round table with Dr. Christiana Thorpe***

**Biometric voter registration will be used for the first time, capturing thumb prints and facial features in the run-up to the elections.** The NEC has procured 800 mobile registration kits. The voting population is estimated to be 3.5 million. Registration will be carried out simultaneously throughout the country over a period of 60 days, from 7am to 5pm. Average registration will take 7.5 minutes, with each centre registering 80 people per day, and 4,800 over 60 days. Voter registration will begin in February 2012. The number of sites at which people can register to vote has been increased by 10%.

**Biometric registration will enable the NEC to build a permanent electronic voter register, which will be constantly updated.** Each district will have a permanent registration desk where people can register to vote at the age of 18. The NEC is partnering with paramount chiefs so what when someone dies, they are deleted from the database.

**Credible elections start with credible voter registration.** In the past, Sierra Leone has experienced problems with multiple and ‘ghost’ registrations. An automated voter register will minimise the possibility of this occurring in the future. **“Cheating in elections in Sierra Leone is over. I can tell you that. It is over”.**

### **Linford Andrews, Political Affairs Officer, Commonwealth Secretariat**

**The electoral process in Sierra Leone “has the potential to become a model post-conflict situation”.**

Achievements of the NEC:

- The overall management and conduct of the 2007 elections by NEC – despite some irregularities at some polling stations – was a “job well done”.
- Restructuring of NEC has progressed considerably.
- New biometric voter registration efforts, and the creation of a permanent voter register, should be commended.
- Timelines for 2012 elections are clearly defined and well communicated.

It is vital that donors continue to support capacity building of democratic institutions in Sierra Leone. Mechanisms to hold politicians to account need to be put in place. In 2007, the Commonwealth observer group recommended the introduction of integrity legislation which would oblige ministers, parliamentarians and senior officials to declare their assets, and for political parties to declare all their interests and donations received. This will help inspire confidence in the political system and electoral process.

The newly-independent Sierra Leone Broadcast Corporation and independent radio can play a major role in the NEC’s voter education process. The 2009 joint communiqué, in which political parties condemned the use of violence in elections, is to be welcomed.

In the 2007 national elections there was a slight delay in the announcement of results. Unrest, and violence, in certain parts of the country followed. This – and Kenya’s experience after its 2007 elections – underscores the importance of a clear timeline for the announcement of results that is communicated to the public and adhered to by the NEC.

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*Sierra Leone 2012 elections round table with Dr. Christiana Thorpe*

### **Ade Daramy, Chair, Sierra Leone Diaspora Network**

Three Ps – Process, Parties and the People – are essential for the good conduct of any election.

*Process* – reliable, independent information is key. The electoral process must be communicated to the people. Biometric registration is extremely important, and encouraging. But the timescale to register 3.5 million voters by August 2012 is ambitious.

*Parties* – all political parties must believe in the process. All parties need to make themselves available to the people. They must campaign on real issues, not personalities or tribal identities. They must also be honest about the fact that many of Sierra Leone's ills were prevalent before the civil war.

*People* – there needs to be a massive educational drive, so that people are made aware of their rights and responsibilities. The people of Sierra Leone must be able to hold their government, and politicians, to account. People should be in a position to press prospective candidates for hard facts. Voter education has to begin in schools. But for the adult population, access to information through independent radio and TV is important.

### **Q&A**

The following questions and issues were among those raised by members of the audience:

- To what extent are young people being involved in the electoral process? Which organisations is the NEC working with?
- What arrangements are being made for people to get to polling stations easily, and reduce the cost of doing so? Will the election be held in the rainy season?
- Can the Anti-Corruption Commission do more to prevent election-related corruption?
- Will the Diaspora Voting Act be passed by 2012?
- Voters' choice must be informed. How can political party manifestos be independently translated to voters in languages they understand?
- Has the NEC had difficulties engaging with chiefs in terms of the information they provide to their communities? What measures have NEC taken to ensure that political pressure is not placed on communities through chieftain authorities?
- What role is ECOWAS playing in the preparations for the 2012 elections?
- What punitive measures is the NEC taking to prevent political parties from engaging in violence?
- Can political parties be persuaded to disband the party task forces which have historically been responsible for a lot of election violence?
- What mechanisms are in place for political parties to complain about the electoral process and have disputes independently arbitrated?

In the course of the discussion, **Christiana Thorpe** made the following remarks relating to these issues:

**Youth:** Young people are the ones that the political parties use, abuse and misuse. The NEC is targeting youth by sending electoral candidates to secondary schools to meet prospective first time voters and introduce them to the electoral process. Students are forming peer groups

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to educate those not at school. The NEC is also working with the National Elections Watch, an umbrella body for NGOs (75% are young people), and the newly consulted All Political Parties Youth Association.

**Financing elections:** The president has said that the 2017 elections will be a home affair, fully financed by the government. It is important that Sierra Leone has ownership over its electoral process. But this does not mean that the government will have any leverage over how elections are conducted. It is the government's responsibility to provide for elections.

The Ministry of Lands has allocated land to the NEC for the construction of district offices, so that the NEC is not reliant on government institutions for space.

**The Anti-Corruption Commission:** The NEC is working on a Memorandum of Understanding with the Anti-Corruption Commission. The aim is to understand one another better for the benefit of both organisations.

**Ease of voting:** The NEC has increased the number of polling centres by 10%. Sierra Leoneans should know that voting is a civic responsibility. If they have the time to go to the market every week, or if children can walk three miles every day to school, they can go to a polling station once every five years. It is not much to ask from people.

**Diaspora voting:** I am in favour of diaspora voting. The legal framework will not be ready for 2012. But NEC is working towards this being in place for 2017.

**Voter education and information dissemination:** Civil society needs to play a big role in educating people about their rights. At NEC, we are focusing on the technical and logistical aspects of running the elections smoothly. It is the responsibility of the political parties for them to sell their manifestos. We encourage them to be sincere, and for them to mean what they say. But we can't force them to this.

**Paramount Chiefs:** The Paramount Chieftaincy Act of 2008 created a new relationship between NEC and the paramount chiefs. Their ability to interfere with elections has been curtailed. The present government has made it clear that chiefs should stay out of politics, and chiefs know they have the NEC to be reckoned with. Paramount chiefs are now beginning to behave themselves. They understand their roles and responsibilities.

**Party task forces:** The NEC is only interested in the internal workings of the parties to the extent that they are democratic. We try not to meddle or get involved in the internal mechanics of political parties. We hope that with increased education about the electoral and political process, political parties will realise that they have to change their methodology.

**Regional institutions:** ECOWAS has played an important role in building the capacity of NEC. ECONEC – the Electoral Assistance Unit of ECOWAS – has taken at least two NEC employees to be observers in each election in West Africa. They have also organised training programmes and seminars which we have benefitted from. The unit in ECOWAS that deals with elections should really be commended. I wish they had more money and resources, because it would go very far.

**Election results:** The NEC is planning to establish four regional tele-centres to announce the results - in Freetown, Bo, Makeni and Kenema. The announcement of results is going to be decentralised.

**Violence:** Political parties have historically instigated violence, not the NEC or any other democratic institution. I would turn the question around and ask what punitive measures are the political parties putting in place to ensure their members don't misbehave. The onus is on political parties to implement internal discipline. Violence is an issue of law. The NEC cannot suspend political parties from the elections because people who say they support a political party start misbehaving.

**Electoral disputes:** The NEC is there to ensure that the process is credible. We are the equivalent of a referee in a game. If someone is aggrieved with the results there are mechanisms in place. For presidential elections, for example, political parties or candidates can challenge the decision with the Supreme Court within seven days of the result.

In the course of the discussion, **Ade Daramy** made the following observations relating to:

**Youth:** All political parties have commitments in their manifestos towards youth. But, for the most part, they are full of false promises. Political parties build up hopes, without having anything tangible to offer young people. If political parties cannot meaningfully follow through on their commitments towards young people, they should take them out of their manifestos.

**Diaspora voting:** I am opposed to the Diaspora Voting Act as it stands. There mere fact that someone holds a Sierra Leonean passport does not automatically entitle them to vote at the elections. Members of the diaspora do not have to live with the consequences of their vote, other people do. For all its faults as a totalitarian state, Eritrea has a good system for managing this. If members of the diaspora want to participate in elections, there is a fund that they can pay into which entitles them to vote. No taxation, no representation.