

# Capacity development in ‘harder to reach’ places

Bringing together people, activities and learning to explore work in Sierra Leone and the Somali regions

Conflict and instability - and resulting factors such as the loss of educated and professional people to other countries - can be damaging to national research systems. To learn more about the real needs of researchers in such countries and how INASP’s different capacity development approaches could be best used in these situations, we carried out pilot projects in two such countries, Sierra Leone (from 2013) and Somalia (from 2015). The projects provided support with access, research communication, journal publishing and gender equity in higher education. They revealed the importance of understanding context, strong local champions, partnership and convening, and adaptability.

For over 25 years INASP has worked in various ways to support research and knowledge systems in the Global South. Over recent years, a strong emphasis of this work has been on supporting the



Brainstorming and planning collaborations among the higher education institutions of Sierra Leone

development of skills and expertise within countries.

INASP has tended to work in countries where research and knowledge systems are established, even if not working particularly well. However, countries that are or have recently been disrupted by conflict also

have research needs and people keen to do research. We have seen this in the participation of researchers from conflict-affected countries in the online courses in research writing run by our AuthorAID project (see table on page 2). These numbers also hint at some of the problems encountered in these countries;

Key INASP themes	Sierra Leone	Somalia
Academic publishing	*	
Gender & equity	(*)	*
Higher education & learning	*	*
Information access	*	
Research communication	*	*



### Participants from fragile states on AuthorAID research writing MOOCs from the first five English-language MOOCs

Country	Not completed	Completed	Total	Completion %
Somalia	145	85	230	37%
Sierra Leone	17	10	27	37%
Liberia	12	13	25	52%
South Sudan	2	3	5	60%

the completion rates tend to be lower than the figures for the course overall and anecdotal feedback points to issues such as problems with intermittent internet connectivity. However, the feedback also indicates that the courses are extremely relevant for the researchers and academics in these countries.

Keen to understand more about how to support research and knowledge systems in such countries – and with DFID’s particular focus on fragile states<sup>1</sup> - INASP ran pilot projects in two countries as part of our Strengthening Research and Knowledge Systems (SRKS) programme. We started with Sierra Leone (in the first year of SRKS, 2013) and brought in Somalia (in the third year of SRKS, 2015).

In both countries, we worked with local partners to bring together aspects of INASP’s work in a way that was appropriate to the country and context. In Sierra Leone, this meant supporting and making connections to support research information access, research writing, journal publishing and IT infrastructure. In Somalia, the low numbers of women in the research and higher education sector meant that our partner was keen to focus

on gender equity and how women could be better supported. In both countries, there were strong overlaps with work done through other pilots in the SRKS project, particularly the work with National Research and Education Networks (NRENs)<sup>2</sup> and with gender.<sup>3</sup>

Sierra Leone and Somalia have some similarities and some differences and we recognized that it was important to share learning between the two projects, and more widely INASP’s experiences, while at the same time seeking to understand and respond to the unique contexts in each place. Prior to starting this piece of work, we commissioned country studies of four countries – Sierra Leone,<sup>4</sup> Somalia,<sup>5</sup> Liberia<sup>6</sup> and South Sudan.<sup>7</sup>

The country studies, as well as connections with people with existing knowledge and experience of the countries, guided our selection of the two countries for these pilots. They also guided our approaches within those countries and particularly in partner selection. Because of the difficulty in working intensely within the countries we needed to find partners who demonstrated that the work was important to them and built on existing work.

### Challenges – anticipated and unanticipated

Both countries have faced significant challenges in their recent pasts and there were also significant challenges for INASP to work in these countries. Working in Somalia is hampered by known difficulties in visiting the country, for example the threat of kidnapping exists in some parts of the country and security remains problematic. What we did not anticipate at the start of this work was that Sierra Leone would, for a significant portion of this project, also become impossible to visit due to the Ebola outbreak in 2014.

These challenges could have caused the projects in the two countries to stall. However, in fact they helped to shape the work, strengthening the reliance on local people on the ground and guiding the flexible and adaptive approach taken. To minimize risk and to ensure that both INASP and our partners could learn as our work together progressed, we developed the projects incrementally, with each activity being reviewed and then built on in the next stage of support. This allowed us to understand how the partners would manage the work in their context. It enabled a pace of implementation that meant that activities could be adapted as we and our partners learned more about the needs and capacities. It also meant we could maximize the relatively small budget available for pilot projects.

### Understanding local needs and opportunities

In Sierra Leone, our project started 12 years after the civil war had ended and after significant World



Bank investment in rebuilding basic infrastructure such as roads. We have documented in previous Learning, Reflections and Innovation articles the activities that were carried out so here we will particularly focus on the aspects of the work that share learning with the project in the Somali regions.<sup>8</sup>

We conducted a scoping visit in 2013 to meet as many people as possible and gather information. The aim was to assess whether the ICT and research infrastructure in Sierra Leone made this an appropriate project at this time and to ensure this project was necessary and did not duplicate work that was already being done. It also enabled us to develop a team of partners we could work with during the course of this project and to build awareness of the value of online research literature.

Sierra Leone has a couple of universities that are carrying out research and the active Sierra Leone Agriculture Research Institute. As our budget for pilot projects was not large, the fact that most research institutions are located in Freetown or Njala meant Sierra Leone was a relatively easy country in which to carry out a pilot project without too much time or money spent travelling.

We also knew that a significant number of institutions in the country were registered to use Research4Life (R4L) resources, demonstrating an interest in, and hopefully ability to access, online research literature in English. This readiness was important as we were determined this should not be an “in-and-out” intervention, but one that would meet real needs and would work in depth. This would require commitment on both sides, from within Sierra Leone as much as from INASP over the five years of the project.



Making connections: INASP’s Anne Powell (bottom right) with Thomas Songu (middle, front row), Miriam Conteh-Morgan (middle, second row) and other local partners

Given the existing opportunities of R4L resources, the project was initially shaped around research information access, with INASP providing training and guidance on the use of the materials available through R4L.

### Making connections across the research system

As universities in Sierra Leone closed and travel became impossible due to Ebola, together with our local partners we explored other options for supporting the research and knowledge system in the country. This led to AuthorAID online training materials being adapted for Sierra Leone, including addressing internet connectivity issues with our first use of Moodle’s offline mode of operation for our AuthorAID scientific research writing course.

As travel became possible again, we responded to requests from our partners within the country for support in establishing a national

library consortium and an NREN. With both of these, we played a brokering and networking role for our partners in Sierra Leone, linking them to other individuals and institutions who can support their work.

This included bringing together the new Sierra Leonean library consortium with more established and experienced consortia from Ghana and Kenya and connecting the ICT staff to regional expertise for ICT support (linking the new SLREN into regional networks). There were further opportunities for regional networking when one of our key partners in Sierra Leone, Miriam Conteh-Morgan, spoke as part of a panel of African library consortia at INASP’s Publishers for Development conference in the UK in 2017.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, in response to a desire from Sierra Leone to re-establish the country’s journal publishing activities, a connection was made with INASP’s long-term partner and former project African Journals Online (AJOL). Representatives



from Sierra Leone took part in an AJOL workshop in Ghana.

And there were wider links to be made too. Miriam Conteh-Morgan explained in a recent case study<sup>10</sup> how she and two female colleagues convened a “Women in Academia” group in her university. She explained why:

*“I am at senior management level and there are many times that I go to meetings and I am the only woman around the table. I’m comfortable with that - I grew up with five brothers - but it is very striking that there are only two of us women who are associate professors or professors at my institution.”*

This group is not part of INASP’s Sierra Leone pilot. However, the connections established between INASP and the University of Sierra Leone during this project meant that Miriam and her colleagues were aware of another INASP pilot project in gender. Specifically, in addition to discussing the situation and challenges in their own institution, they also watched a video from University of Dodoma in Tanzania about the Gender Mainstreaming in Higher Education work there and discussed how they might use INASP’s Gender Mainstreaming in Higher Education Toolkit<sup>11</sup> in Sierra Leone.

## Learning about Somali research and knowledge systems

Work in the Somali regions took a similarly responsive and adaptive approach, recognizing that the initial timeframe (to fit within the SRKS programme) would be shorter than in Sierra Leone.

Following the country report, in March 2016 INASP held a roundtable in Nairobi for Somali



Inaugural meeting of the Sierra Leone Academic Libraries Network

academics together with the Rift Valley Institute to discuss research and knowledge systems in the Somali context. This roundtable shared some similarities with the scoping visit to Sierra Leone a couple of years earlier in providing an opportunity to meet some key actors within the Somali research system.

The roundtable brought together members of the Somali research and development community, representatives from the Kenyan research community, and representatives from research funding and supporting organizations. It aimed to improve understanding of research and knowledge systems in the Somali context, and revealed some interesting trends (see box: Main points from Somalia roundtable).

In a similar way to Sierra Leone, at the roundtable, Somali academics were able to meet Kenya counterparts to share experience, contacts and resources. This included the Kenyan library consortium and journal editors. The roundtable revealed that many of the challenges facing the

Somali research and knowledge system were not unique, and the Somali and Kenyan counterparts were able to discuss and learn from each other.

However, the roundtable did reveal a striking feature of the Somali research system – a severe under-representation of women in research and academia. Only one of the Somali participants at the roundtable was female. Sahro Ahmed Koshin is a Somali-Dutch gender and governance specialist with over 10 years of experience in governance and gender issues in conflict zones.

She explained in a recent case study<sup>10</sup> the challenge that was highlighted by the attendance at the meeting:

*“I happened to be firstly, one of the few Somalis there, but also the only Somali woman. I was there as a speaker about SIDRA, so I completely changed my presentation to inquiring why there are very few women. I said: ‘What’s happening, we’re leaving half of the community, half of the population, we’re speaking about*



*Somalis and there aren't many Somalis here, and we're speaking about Somali women, and it's very important to have their input as well in knowledge production."*

Sahro had, at that time, recently returned to Somalia from the Netherlands and her drive to address this challenge was an important feature of the success of this project. It also had an interesting similarity with the project in Sierra Leone where the work was largely driven by two champions, Miriam Conteh Morgan and Thomas Songu, both of whom were returned diaspora from the US.

At the time of the conference, Sahro was working for Somali

Institute for Development Research and Analysis (SIDRA) and so we began to discuss with SIDRA how to support a conversation around gender in higher education in the country.

## Exploring the gender gap in the Somali regions

Following a grant awarded earlier in the year, SIDRA ran an AuthorAID-supported workshop in July 2016. Of the 50 applicants that applied to join the workshop, only seven were female, despite SIDRA taking extra measures to find female applicants. Of the 30 who finally participated in the workshop, only five were

female. The issue of the absence of women in research in Somalia was discussed at the workshop. Participants discussed negative attitudes, a male-dominated sector, the lack of role models for young women and girls, how important decisions are reached without the input and consultation of women, and the absence of female lecturers. SIDRA also discovered that the electronic manner of applying for the training was a barrier for many female students, and so in subsequent workshops reached out to female participants and encouraged them to apply by submitting hand-written applications.

At this first training activity, SIDRA paved the way to gather gender-

### Main points from Somalia roundtable <sup>12</sup>

There is a need for more research in the Somali regions to inform and drive state-building, decision making, change and development. However, there is little local demand and most of the demand is driven by the international community.

- A lack of visions or research agendas to frame Somali research needs was also revealed. Some organizations or individual ministries have a research agenda, but difficult to access data. Agendas of the international agencies is scattered and tends to skew research towards their agenda.
- Researchers and research institutions are hired as consultants, which lead to competition between the institutions to win funds. There is also little Somali ownership and much of the research conducted in Somalia ends up in Nairobi.
- Discussions showed the fragility of a research system built on shifting donor funding and the importance of engaging in open dialogue with donors and finding other sources of funding. This highlighted the need for safe spaces for free thinking, critical discussion and collaboration.
- There are no national archives or repositories where data and research outputs can be kept, so the results of prior studies or projects can only be accessed from the individuals or organizations who conducted them.
- Capacity often sits with individuals and outside of institutions. Many universities are established as businesses and research institutes tend to lack funding, fostering competition rather than collaboration.
- There is under representation of women in the system and research is still very male dominated. It is difficult for Somali women to study and to combine a career with family and social and cultural expectations. The Ministry of Education has established a gender unit to consider how to increase the number of girls and women in education.
- Somali culture is traditionally nomadic, based on oral traditions so there is high illiteracy, an absence of a reading culture, and a preference for oral traditions. There is therefore a need for more creative ways to disseminate research, other than the expectation that research has to be communicated in a written form.
- Many of the challenges faced by the Somali regions are not unique, and other countries are facing similar challenges and problems. Bringing people together can enable joint problem solving around those common challenges. There are inequities in the global research and knowledge system that both exclude people and force people to leave their country to study.



sensitive information regarding the political, social, economic and educational limitations women and young girls face in the education sector in the Puntland region of Somalia.

Following this, in November 2016, SIDRA, with INASP support, ran a three-day knowledge exchange event on gender in higher education and research in Puntland. This brought together students, academics, researchers, civil society representatives and government representatives to discuss the gender issues and gaps affecting researchers and research in the Somali region of Puntland and initiated dialogue on how some of these gaps can be addressed and closed. Participants included senior women academic researchers, women bloggers, women writers, activists and civil society.

From the knowledge event, a policy brief<sup>13</sup> was developed with input and recommendations from the event. The initial policy brief was written in English and translated into Somali, and in September 2017 SIDRA held a dissemination event for policymakers and other relevant stakeholders to share the findings and recommendations of the policy brief. Participants included representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Women's Development and Family Affairs, the Ministry

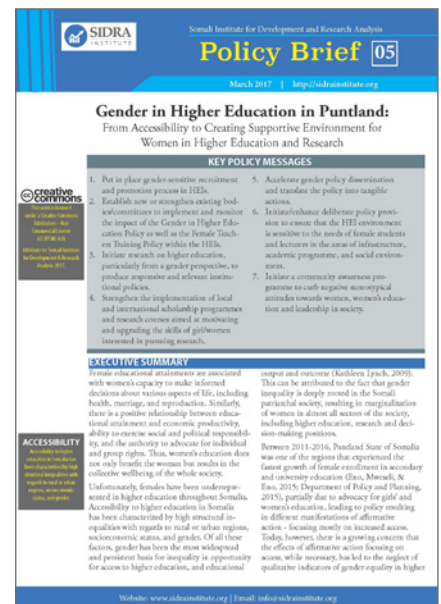
of Labour, Youth and Sports and the Ministry of the Constitution, Democratisation and Federal Affairs. There were also representatives from higher education institutions in Puntland and education sector partners including UNDP, Care Somalia, FAWESOM and the Puntland Women Writers Association.

As a result of the policy dissemination event, SIDRA was invited by the Ministry of Education to present the policy brief at the launch event of the Somalia Higher Education Development Support project (SHEDS) in Nairobi on 12-13 September. It is hoped that SIDRA will be able to support this project by ensuring that gender is included in the project design and implementation in the future.

## Supporting women researchers

The first Knowledge Exchange Event confirmed the many challenges facing female researchers, students and academics in Somalia. The participants shared experiences ranging from a lack of parental support, to difficulties in travelling to school or university unattended, to a lack of voice and decision-making ability in largely male-dominated environments.

The participants recognized that one valuable step to supporting



Following a knowledge exchange event, SIDRA developed a policy paper on gender equity in higher education in Puntland

women in research and academia would be to enable women to provide support to each other. The participants suggested setting up a network that could support women researchers. As a result, SIDRA set up a Community of Practice (COP) for female Somali researchers, creating an online space where they can feel safe to discuss issues, collaborate and share their research and other resources. INASP has provided some advisory support to SIDRA in running this COP. It is still in the initial stages but women have started to sign up and SIDRA has begun sending out introductory information to the members.

## Somalia's gender context, in brief<sup>14</sup>

The Gender Inequality Index for Somalia is 0.766 (with a maximum of 1 denoting complete inequality), placing Somalia at the fourth highest position globally. Extremely high maternal mortality, rape, female genital mutilation and child marriage rates, and violence against women and girls is common, although statistics are difficult to find. Participation and role of women in politics and decision-making spheres is extremely limited, perpetuating narrow gender based roles and inequalities. Issues are not openly discussed. Girls are married early, with 45% of women aged 20 to 24 married before the age of 18.

According to the 2006 Somalia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, the adult literacy rate for women is estimated to be 26% (compared to 36% for men, and 32% overall). Research and higher education are dominated by men, both in conducting research and in teaching and learning.





Sahro Ahmed Koshin (back left) joined other INASP partners in discussing gender equity in higher education at the 2017 AuthorAID meeting in Sri Lanka

The papers presented by the female researchers at the Knowledge Exchange Event have been edited and will be published locally by SIDRA as part of an effort to support women to have their research published and accessible.

In addition to working with INASP, SIDRA has been part of the higher education component of a larger education capacity development project, called Waxbarashaddu Waa Ifitiin (Education is Light), funded by the European Union. Vrije Universiteit (VU) of the Netherlands has been leading the higher education component and working with SIDRA to provide some of the training and capacity development.

In 2016 this project ran a research writing skills workshop for 25 lecturers, of which only one participant was female. Following the INASP-supported Knowledge

Exchange Event, VU agreed with SIDRA to run a second research methods and communication course that would focus on female lecturers.

Towards the end of this training support, INASP supported SIDRA to run a second Knowledge Exchange event in August 2017, with a focus on the challenges facing female lecturers, employment and promotion and research and publication. The women lecturers who were part of the VU training shared their experiences at the second knowledge exchange event, and a short video was also made of the event, which SIDRA plans to disseminate widely.<sup>15</sup>

The Knowledge Exchange Events, the COP and the training for women researchers have all helped to initiate a discussion in the Somali context about the experience of women and girls in education and research, and to

mobilize some small initiatives to support women within this challenging environment.

The events and production of the policy paper were very much directed and led by SIDRA, which had a good understanding of the context and the pace at which such discussions could be introduced. INASP supported the process through regular conversations with the SIDRA team over Skype regarding the progress, how the events had been received and what were the feasible next steps. Taking a partner-driven and incremental approach to this work was essential to ensure that the work was culturally-sensitive and framed appropriately for the audience.

## Making connections

As in Sierra Leone, where possible INASP supported SIDRA by linking them to other initiatives and projects which could provide opportunities for collaboration, cooperation and learning.

To facilitate wider sharing of ideas from this work in Puntland, we invited SIDRA to participate in a gender roundtable meeting that was held as a side-meeting to the AuthorAID partner meeting in Sri Lanka in December 2017. Sahro Ahmed Koshin attended as the lead for the gender work within SIDRA. The one-day roundtable allowed INASP partners – including those from Tanzania and Ghana as well as Somalia and our hosts for this meeting in Sri Lanka - to meet together and to share experience and learning about gender in higher education.

We also linked Sahro to a like-minded Kenyan woman, Mary Murimi, who is currently a Professor in Nutritional Sciences at Texas Tech University in the US. Mary has been supporting Jijgiga University in the Somali region of Ethiopia to develop a women's



leadership programme, after having attended a conference on breast feeding and nutrition at the university that was only attended by male academics. Sahro was able to travel to Jijgiga University in December 2017 to support Mary to run a one-day women's leadership workshop. Both Mary and Sahro benefited greatly from the experience and were inspired by each other's work and life stories.

We have supported SIDRA to develop skills and contacts for other aspects of its work too. The training courses with Vrije Universiteit have involved online training utilizing the INASP AuthorAID research writing course run on the INASP Moodle. INASP has also supported the development of the course content, by providing a module on An Overview of the Publishing Landscape, written by one of the AuthorAID team members. Some SIDRA staff members were also invited to be "guest facilitators" on our research writing MOOCs, to enable them to experience online facilitation before they began the online training with VU.

SIDRA has, like our partners in Sierra Leone, also been keen to build up the region's publishing activities and has been researching the feasibility of establishing a research and development journal. We were able to provide support to the SIDRA team in this work by providing feedback on their draft ideas, introducing them to the Journal Publishing and Practices and Standards (JPPS)<sup>16</sup> framework, and putting them in touch with the African Journals Online (AJOL) team.

Connecting SIDRA to other partners we work with, and supporting the organization to take part in existing initiatives, has been cost-effective in terms of staff time and resources, and has

enabled the team in Somalia to develop relationships with others with similar or complementary interests and skills. This has helped the organization to expand and develop its own work beyond the partnership with INASP.

## Reflections

The pilot projects in the two countries happened in different ways and met different challenges. However, some common themes emerged that are important to consider in future work. In particular, although our interventions in both Somalia and Sierra Leone have been modest, they have allowed opportunities for INASP and our in-country partners to work with others to cascade and continue the work.

We have linked to other institutions supporting work in these contexts, which has enabled more comprehensive support and assistance. In Sierra Leone, the University of Bath in the UK partnered with us on face-to-face writing courses, while in Somalia the courses on research methods and communication that SIDRA has been working with Vrije Universiteit on have been supported by our materials and Moodle.

In Sierra Leone, the project benefitted from working in the two lead universities which could cascade learning and activities to other institutions in the country where possible. Working in depth with two universities while developing approaches that can be rolled out to others enabled us to be nimble and responsive, and to keep the project moving through the Ebola crisis. Similarly, in Somalia, SIDRA has used and championed INASP's gender work and has the potential to cascade this by supporting the gender aspects of the Somalia Higher Education Development Support project (SHEDS).

## Looking ahead

These two pilot projects enabled us to explore, with partners, ways to respond to local contexts and needs to support national research and knowledge systems. The pilots resulted in some notable successes, especially in the building of longer-term relationships as the basis for future work. They also highlighted many opportunities and needs for further work.

In Somalia it is anticipated that some of this work will continue within a new programme, Strong and Equitable Research and Knowledge Systems (SERKS), which we are just starting with initial funding from Sida and which we are hoping to attract further funding to. Depending on the priorities defined with partners during the inception phase of this programme, continuing work in Somalia could include working with institutional partners to implement recommendations from the SIDRA gender policy, or to build on the women's leadership work initiated in the Somali region of Ethiopia. SIDRA is also keen to explore the need to better mainstream gender within public institutions and has recently completed a study examining the progress of three Puntland institutions in this regard.<sup>17</sup> SIDRA is also keen to continue convening stakeholders in the region to discuss gender issues through the knowledge exchange events.

INASP is continuing to work with Sierra Leone – and with many of the same partners – as part of a new DFID-funded stream of work on quality assurance of higher education, where INASP will be developing tools to support critical thinking in higher education. The partnership arose from the good connections built during this pilot project. However, this new work is in a different area from the pilot





and we are also keen to explore opportunities to build on the areas of the pilot that would benefit from further work. For example, the European Union has provided significant investment into fibre optic cabling in Sierra Leone and also much of the funding required to continue the work of the

newly formed SLREN so there are opportunities to provide further support there.

We are interested to explore further options for further work in both these countries and others where the lessons from these pilots can be shared.

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#### Lessons learnt:

This pilot project revealed some important common themes for success in working in a new country, particularly one in a fragile or conflict situation:

- The importance of understanding country context at the start
- The role of in-country champions, who are often returned diaspora
- The importance of strong partnerships and working with others that already have connections in a country, for example, the Rift Valley Institute in the case of Somalia
- Opportunities to increase effectiveness and reach by making connections with other INASP work
- The importance of sharing experiences and learning from other countries, for example the new library consortium in Sierra Leone had mentoring from longer-established consortia in the region
- The need for adaptability and iterative approaches - in both countries we did things quite incrementally because of the risks involved and this enabled us to adapt to meet evolving needs
- The importance of readiness in terms of partner institutions who have clear ideas about what is required and the motivation to get it done
- The role of technology - strong social media and online presence played an important role in the Somalia work, while in Sierra Leone online - and an offline version - courses provided continuity when face-to-face work was not possible.

