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## Background Paper Describing the State of ICT Statistics Collection and Dissemination in Sierra Leone



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### Introduction

Before 1996, all information and communication technology was purely in the hands of SIERRATEL. SIERRATEL is a merger between two national telecommunication companies. These are the Sierra Leone External Telecom which was the gateway to the outside world and Sierra Leone National Telecommunication Company which provided local telecommunication. During this time ICT was limited to fixed line telephones, broadband telephone, telex, telegraphs and fax.

The mid 1990s saw the use of internet with SIERRATEL as the sole internet service provider for individuals and institutions accessing the internet. In 1996 Datatel emerged using Sierratel's gateway and started providing internet service and digital pay phone service in the capital Freetown. In that same year a Scottish business man, Graham, started a mobile phone company, Mobitel which was analogue in nature.

The start of this decade saw the proliferation of ICT use in the country with many internet service providers, mobile phone networks and broadband internet and Satellite providers.

Currently, there is only one fixed telephone line provider, that is, Sierratel which has limited subscribers and coverage. Five Mobile phone companies with 60% nationwide coverage and hundreds of thousands subscribers are in operation in the country. By April this year, the national telephone company will launch its internet and mobile phone network which has to be nationwide and operate in the most remote areas of the country. Over ten internet service providers are in the country providing services to urban towns mostly. Also, the five mobile phone companies in the country which are part of the internet service providers provide remote internet service in rural areas where they have signal for the cell phone subscribers. They provide services to users residing or working in the remote parts of the country.

Mobile telephone use is high in Sierra Leone especially as land line can be unavailable; people see it as a good way of staying in touch with family, friends, colleagues, customer and clients. Gradually the internet is making research simple for students and researchers and also improving inter-institutional communication. Satellite television network is gradually making some impact on the people in urban towns as they keep abreast with the outside world.

Essentially, ICT is increasingly making positive impacts on the lives of Sierra Leoneans.

### **Method of Collecting ICT Statistics**

Basically there is no form of collecting ICT statistics in the country. Currently, there are two surveys that are ongoing; one is the Readiness for eGovernment and the other is on ICT service provided by the various service providers in the country. The Readiness for eGovernment is at the data processing stage as the office of the Vice President in partnership with UNDP on the task, ICT service survey data collection has been completed and report writing is at an advance stage as National Telecommunication Commission (NATCOM) is collaborating with Statistics Sierra Leone (SSL) for this important survey. This can serve as a spring board in the development of a national database and form of collecting ICT data. Today, the country has a lot of internet and cell phone subscribers and they are increasing on a daily basis. It is apparent that, Sierra Leone has one of the largest mobile phone network operations among the least developed countries in Africa. The increase in ICT subscription has raised concerns for a national survey to be conducted where in the nature, scope, methodology, cost and benefit of these services to the people of Sierra Leone can be addressed.

According to officials from NATCOM, the expected outcomes from the survey include the number of users of ICT service per service provider and the spending pattern of these users. However, going through the questionnaire, part of ICT Opportunity Index can be computed. Sub indices like Networks and Uptake can be generated. The questionnaire targeted indicators like fixed telephone lines, international internet bandwidth, mobile subscribers and internet users. This nationwide survey was conducted for two weeks. Questionnaires were administered to individual users of ICT service face-to-face by five teams each comprising of a supervisor and five enumerators. Two teams will administer questionnaires in the Western Area, given to its population density and greater access to ICT services and users. A team each will go to the Northern, Eastern and Southern Provinces.

The aim of the Readiness for eGovernment ICT Survey is to provide a comprehensive report on ICT services and products use by Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). The survey is segmented into four modules with each module in the form of a questionnaire. The questionnaires targeted four different sets of respondents. These include Senior Management Officers, ICT Technicians, Private Firms Providing ICT Services to MDAs, and perceptions of the public about the use and provision of ICT service by Government. Browsing through the questionnaires, it is evident that ICT Opportunity Index for MDAs can be generated looking at key indicators like International Internet Bandwidth, Fixed Telephone Lines, Mobile Subscribers, School Enrolment, Literacy, Computers and Internet Users.

Currently, the mobile phone companies are doing some form of research which is market strategy. They collect weekly report on the sales and promotion pattern of fellow competitors. This they outsourced local and international consultancy groups.

However, the two ICT surveys that are ongoing in Sierra Leone can provide baseline indicators in monitoring and evaluating the status of ICT in Sierra Leone. It will be of great importance to Statistics Sierra Leone if ITU can give the support to the institution in collecting ICT Statistics in Sierra Leone as it can enhance communication and information in the country as the use of information and communication technology is on the increase.

### **Dissemination of ICT Statistics**

Like the collection of ICT Statistics, dissemination of ICT Statistics leaves much to be desired. The participation of Statistics Sierra Leone to the next ICT summit is considered an eye opener in addressing the key issues on ICT. As head of the Data Archiving and Dissemination Unit, I intend presenting to the management of Statistics Sierra Leone the creation of a web page our website disseminated ICT Statistics as required by ITU/WTI. Also a national database on ICT Indicators we desire to host.

As at now, the only form of dissemination which is done by service providers is market promotion. Providing information on issues like service or equipment or subscriber per a given number of inhabitants is like a taboo. Access to information is impossible for these service providers to let you.

### **Conclusion**

Sierra Leone has travelled a long way from a state of monopoly of ICT service by Sierratel to its current proliferation. All walks of life are benefiting in their own little way from ICT service. Commerce, research, leisure, agriculture, mining, families etc are all progressing from these services. The importance of ICT service to these people has shown the need for nationwide survey or census on ICT, development of a national database and a proper dissemination strategy.