

Sierra Leone: gift giving during initial community consultations (for CCCs)

Key considerations

This brief summarises appropriate gift giving during initial community consultations in Sierra Leone. It is intended to provide an overview of good practices to support UNICEF, the WHO and other agencies as they interact with Paramount Chiefs prior to the implementation of CCCs. It does not focus on the community consultation process more broadly, but specifically on gift giving during the first meeting.

The details have been collated from suggestions and insights provided by networks of anthropologists in the UK and US who work in Sierra Leone (both in-country and remotely). These are general considerations that are broadly relevant for the Sierra Leone context, but teams should check with local counterparts for regional specificities.

Kola ('fama loli')

- This is a 'greeting gift', it creates goodwill and opens the lines of communication.
- The team should say they would like to 'greet' the Paramount Chiefs. By saying you want to 'greet', you emphasise that you want to know these people and want them to get to know you.
- For the greeting process, all the talking and greeting should be done by the person who facilitates the meeting (either the district health manager or the interpreter), and not by the team themselves.
- Giving kola through a 'traditional handshake' is very important (this is symbolic, and need not necessitate touching).
- The kola should be offered to each Chief individually, and must be the same.
- Monetary gifts are received with both hands.
- In Temne areas in the north, any meeting with a Chief is initiated with a similar cash gift called a 'boro'.
- In addition to monetary kola, kola nut may also be given as part of the gift.
- Once the kola has been offered to each Chief, it gives you permission to speak, but you need to ask if you can first.
- Giving kola is an absolute necessity when the team engages a Chief in their community, but if you are meeting them elsewhere (neutral ground) there would be no expectation of a gift.
- If you are meeting leaders in an area outside their community, it is appropriate to give 'transport' money.
- To create the initial relationship correctly, a similar procedure needs to be followed if team members are being welcomed by local headmen, section chiefs, representatives of women or youth groups etc.
- Kola should be given every time a new group arrives or an old visitor returns.

Monetary amounts

- The kola must be partitioned, not given in a lump sum for others to partition.
- The percentages are proportional to their positions. Key categories and example amounts (to show the proportions) are:

Chief (20,000 Le)
His speaker (proportion to be confirmed)
Religious leaders / leaders in prayers (5,000 Le)
Male elders (20,000 Le)
Female elders (20,000 Le)
Young men (10,000 Le)
Young women (10,000 Le)
Blacksmith (2,000 Le)
Town crier (2,000 Le)

If the meeting was at a section or sub-section village, 20,000 Leones would have to be given to the chiefdom elders (so they are informed of the team's presence) and a similar amount to satellite hamlets to ensure the cooperation of the whole chiefdom.

Community gifts

- To ensure the individual kola and general gifts are distinct, the team can mention later in the meeting that they would like to offer something for each community represented by the Paramount Chiefs. It would not be appropriate to give a general gift to share between the Chiefs.
- Greater value will be placed on a 'complete gift'. For example, a 50kg bag of rice could be offered for each community, plus an item to cook the rice with, such as a jerry can of oil.
- The offer has to be same for each Paramount Chief.
- In the north, it is appropriate to give 'boro' as cash (see above) and something for the community (rice and/or oil). It is the Chief's job to decide how this gift should be used.
- In Bo and Kono it is less essential to give a community gift in addition to kola.

Ebola-related gifts

- There were various opinions about the appropriateness of offering Ebola-related gifts during the first meeting.
- Some considered that this may spoil the initial message of gift and goodwill (it may be seen to be presumptuous given the context of the meeting) but could be more appropriate for a second visit or if the chiefs ask specifically for it.
- Others suggested that items related to Ebola could be offered (eg. gloves, soap) following the same practices outlined above.
- Further still, it was suggested that a combination of complete gifts (eg. rice + oil and gloves + soap) could be given.

Requests

- It may arise during discussions that the Paramount Chiefs ask for certain things that they lack in their own communities. A demand like this is an honour, even if the team cannot meet all expectations.
- If they ask for something that the team is unable to provide, the response should be 'We do not have xxx to give you at the moment, but we will try in the future'.

Food

- Normally, a visit will be accompanied by food (cooked if there is time to kill a fowl and prepare cooked riced), raw if the visit is short and quickly arranged.
- The team should consider the monetary cost of hosting a visit and preparing a meal, and should generously give kola with this in mind. It is also appropriate to set aside a monetary gift for 'the cooks of the food' as they often provide all the ingredients that go into the sauces, although the rice may be provided by the community leader.
- It is important that the team should eat at least a little of this meal. If they do not feel able to do this, then the local facilitator should notify the Chiefs in advance that a meal is not necessary to avoid the expenditure of resources.

General approach

- Be transparent and accountable – always give kola visibly and publicly; traditional handshakes are usually a public event.
- Be humble – it is considered a very likable personality trait.
- If in doubt, the team could emphasise that they would like to follow local traditions and ask for advice.
- It is appropriate to state publicly that as a foreigner, you don't know what the local categories of people you officially 'greet' are. After being given a list at a public gathering, you can retire to 'hang heads' with the facilitating or accompanying local colleague, to re-portion amounts of kola (in case additional categories appear).
- It is better to deliberate ('hang heads') than to miss somebody out when you are trying to secure everybody's buy in.
- In future consultations, it is important to direct the questions to the chief, but in the knowledge that any of the elders present can also respond, as can the youth or the women leaders. There will be a high level of formality to the proceedings and these should be followed, even if the process seems chaotic because the whole village may come.