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International Development

***Insight on Free Health  
Care Launch in Sierra  
Leone***

Rob Yates

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## List of Abbreviations

Acronym	Full Title
DFID	Department for International Development
GoSL	Government of Sierra Leone
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
TORs	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly

## President Bai Koroma launches free health care in Sierra Leone

On Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> April, the President of Sierra Leone, used the occasion of Independence Day to launch free health care for children under 5 and for pregnant and breastfeeding women. Addressing a crowd of around 2000 people<sup>1</sup>, packed into the grounds of the Freetown's maternity hospital, he emphasised his government's commitment to this policy, saying:

"Today, I want to reassure the nation that I am determined to make this policy work. You may have heard hollow promises from politicians before about free services, but in the past these announcements have not been backed up by other actions. This time it will be different. "

He then went on to report a series of health systems reforms that have been fast-tracked over the last six months since he announced the launch of free care at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) last September. These have included:

- Undertaking a payroll cleaning exercise that removed around 1000 ghost workers, freeing up resources which enabled the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) to recruit 1000 legitimate health workers. This resulted in a 15% increase in the health workforce which was cost neutral;
- Increasing all health workers salaries by at least 90% with some highly skilled staff receiving five-fold rises in their salaries;
- Procuring over \$10 million of pharmaceuticals and strengthening drug storage and supply systems;
- Initiating a new financial mechanism to provide cash grants to all health facilities for them to purchase essential supplies;
- Accelerating essential infrastructure repairs in hospitals, health centres and district drugs stores;
- Conducting a mass communications campaign across the country to inform the target population of their rights to free care.

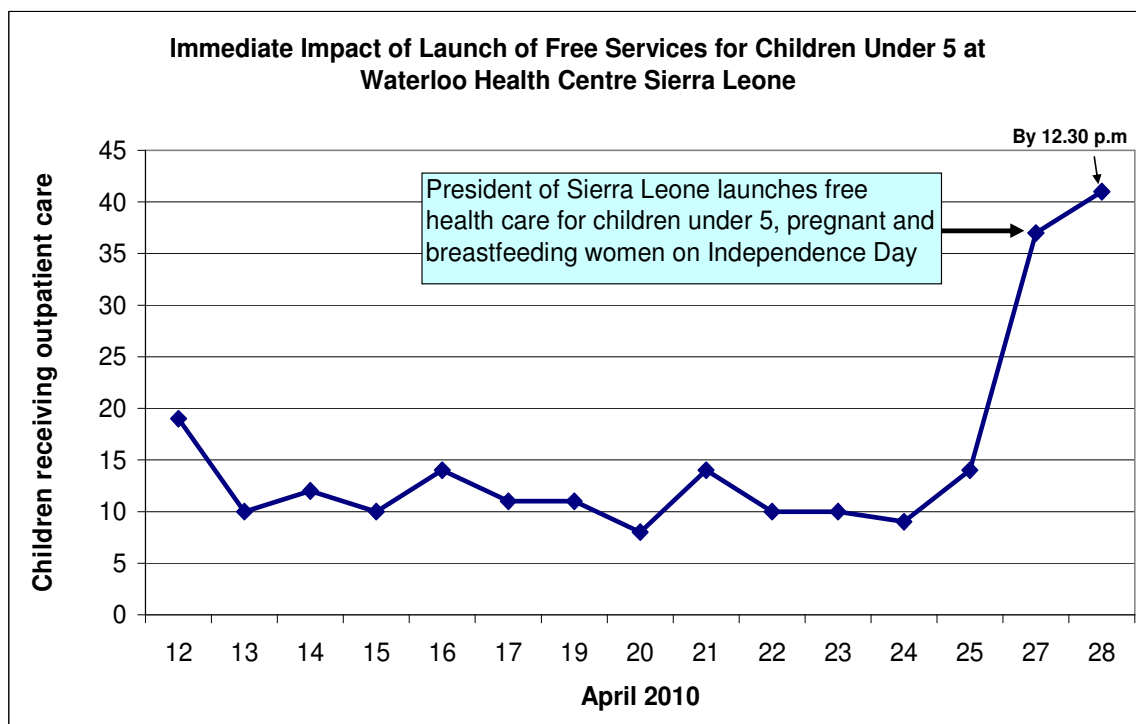
<sup>1</sup> A copy of the full statement is attached in Annex 2

The whole reform process was spearheaded by the President himself who toured the country to check that hospitals and health centres were prepared for launch day.

As the President spoke one of the first beneficiaries of the new policy (a 13 year old girl) was undergoing an emergency caesarean section operation which saved her life and that of her baby. Also on the same site, the Ola During Children's Hospital (Picture 1, 2, 3 and 4) treated 310 children under 5 on Tuesday, around six times their usual workload. On Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> they treated 440.

Meanwhile across the rest of the country health units recorded similar surges in demand for free health care. This is illustrated in the following graphic and photographs:

**Graphic 1: The launch of free services for U5 in Waterloo health centre**



**Picture 1: A solitary chicken in a health centre waiting room the day before launch**



**Picture 2: The same waiting area two days after the introduction of free care**





**Picture 3: The queue at the Ola During Hospital at 8 am on Launch Day**





**Picture 4: A mother receives free malaria drugs for her sick child at Ola  
During**



Whereas the vast majority of the credit for this successful launch lies with the President and his Government, DFID Sierra Leone has been at the heart of these reforms from the outset. This included encouraging the President to make his announcement at the UN, providing specialist health financing technical assistance, procuring £5.5 M of pharmaceuticals, financing the clean-up of the health payroll and agreeing to provide £ 12 M to part-finance the large rise in health workers salaries.

The huge increase in the use of services confirms earlier research that patient fees had indeed been excluding vulnerable groups from the country's health facilities. At Lakka health centre a woman gave birth to her sixth child on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> April but it was her first to be born in a health unit. These experiences reinforce the policy recommendation of the Maternal Newborn and Child Health Consensus that countries should provide free services at the point of delivery for women and children.

Clearly it is very early to evaluate the impact of the policy change but in the coming months the GoSL and partners will be undertaking extensive research to track changes in health care use, determine who is benefiting and how it is impacting on Sierra Leone's MDG indicators.

## **Annex 1: Terms of Reference**

### **TORs for mission to support the launch of free health services in Sierra Leone on April 27<sup>th</sup> 2010**

#### **1 Background**

The President of Sierra Leone announced at the UN in September 2009 that he would introduce free public health care for pregnant and lactating women and children under 5. In November 2009 he announced that the launch date for this policy change would be 27<sup>th</sup> April 2010 – Independence Day. Since the beginning of the year there has been a massive effort by the GoSL and its development partners to put in place major systems reforms in anticipation of the free services launch. This has involved an exercise to clean the entire health sector payroll, the procurement of £5.5 M of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, the construction of medical stores and the implementation of an extensive communications campaign. Furthermore negotiations are ongoing to increase health workers salaries to compensate them for their loss of income from fees and the additional work they will have to undertake as a result of the likely rise in demand for health care. Specialised DFID technical assistance has been involved in these systems reforms since the turn of the year and is now required again in country as launch day approaches.

#### **2. Purpose of consultancy**

The purpose of this consultancy is to help the GoSL and its development partners to organise a successful launch of free health services on April 27<sup>th</sup> and to help publicise the impact of this event widely within Sierra Leone and internationally

#### **3. Approach and activities**

In the run-up to the Presidential launch on 27<sup>th</sup> April work with key stakeholders in the GoSL and the donor community to implement final systems reforms, help prepare communications material and manage media interest in the free services story. Also

undertake visits to selected health facilities to assess their preparedness for the free services launch.

Following the launch, work with the same stakeholders to fire-fight any systems failures that have emerged and also help record and report the immediate impact of the reforms. In particular, help generate communications material that shows the impact on the uptake of services by women and children and records the populations' perceptions of the policy change.

#### **4. Timing and inputs**

10 days spent in country (21-30 April 2010)

#### **5. Reporting requirements/outputs**

The consultant will draft a brief back to office report outlining key areas of further work that CPHF could support.

#### **6. Management arrangement**

The consultant will report back to Susan Mshana, DFID Sierra Leone.

## **Annex 2: Statement by His Excellency Dr Ernest Bai Koroma, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone**

### **Statement by His Excellency Dr Ernest Bai Koroma President of the Republic of Sierra Leone At the Launch of the Free Health Care Programme for Pregnant Women, lactating mothers and children under five At PCMH Hospital Tuesday 27 April 2010**

I am very happy to be here today on this historic occasion. For many years now, many pregnant women, breast feeding mothers and children under five have been suffering and dying because they simply could not pay the fees for the consultations, drugs and other services in our hospitals. Today we are taking the biggest step ever to put an end to that unenviable situation.

From this Independence Day, every pregnant woman, breastfeeding mother and child under five years of age will be entitled to free health care in every Government health facility in the country. From pre-natal check-ups to surgical services, drugs, vaccinations and inpatient hospital care, no pregnant woman, breast feeding mother or child under five would have to pay a single Leone.

Today, I also want to reassure the nation that I am determined to make this policy work. You may have heard hollow promises from politicians before about free services, but in the past these announcements have not been backed up by other actions. This time it will be different.

For example, we know how important it is that life-saving drugs are available in our health centres. So with the help of our international partners, we have bought over ten million dollars

worth of drugs and supplies. The bulk of these goods have already arrived in the country and are being distributed around all the Government health facilities. For pregnant women, breast feeding mothers and children under five, these drugs will be available free of charge and I am relying on you the public and health workers to inform me of any malpractices in their supply and distribution.

Furthermore, we realise that the success of this policy depends on the skills and care of our hard working health professionals. For many years, previous Governments have not appreciated the vital contribution our health workers have made to the health of the nation. Our doctors and nurses have been underpaid and overworked. As a consequence, it became a common practice for health workers to charge vulnerable patients inappropriately to make up for their inadequate salaries. From today this will change.

As you may have heard my Government has doubled the salaries of most health workers and increased salaries even more for our most skilled workers. By making this commitment, we the Government will pay the health workers so that the children and pregnant women of this nation don't have this responsibility. I am sure that the nation understands why we have accelerated health workers salaries like this but it is essential that all our health staff adhere rigorously to the new policy. From today no health worker should demand any fees from a child under five or from a pregnant or lactating woman. If this does happen, we want to hear about it. We are determined to make this initiative succeed and we would use all the powers bestowed upon by the people of Sierra Leone to bring to book anybody that is working against this health care initiative.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all health workers who have stayed in the country and worked in the posts, community health centres, district and urban hospitals to save the lives of pregnant women, to care of breastfeeding mothers and children under five. I thank you all for your loyalty, support to the health system and commitment despite the difficult conditions.

Distinguished guests, by taking this action today, we in Sierra Leone are one of the first countries in our region to help the



women and children in this way. Last September when I visited the United Nations General Assembly, I announced our new free health care policy at a meeting chaired by the UK Prime Minister and the President of the World Bank. Five other heads of state also announced that they would be extending their free health care policies. But we in Sierra Leone will be the first to make this happen. I am confident that by taking this bold action today Sierra Leone's health indicators will soon overtake those of many of our neighbours.

My government is making this happen because we believe that motherhood should be a blessing to our families, and not a threat to a woman's life. We believe that a child should be a bundle of joy and not a source of tears and despair. Let us secure the future of our nation by securing the lives of children; let us guarantee the happiness of our families by making pregnancy and motherhood moments of joy and hope. Let us commit ourselves to the success of this initiative and make it a testament of our collective aspiration for a better, healthier and happier nation.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great faith we will succeed in making Sierra Leone a better, healthier and happier nation that I launch the Free Health Care Initiative for pregnant women, breast feeding mothers and children under five.

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