

The African Union Transitional Justice Policy's call for Capacity Building for the Sustainability of Transitional Justice Mechanisms in Sierra Leone.

By MRCG

The process of fortifying TJ initiatives or legacies to improve their efficacy, impacts, and long-term sustainability is known as capacity development. Capacity building, of any nature, does not only guarantee thorough understanding of a particular subject, but it also ensures viability of such initiatives, even when funding or supports would have stopped coming. Organizations employ institutional arrangements—policies, protocols, procedures, and structures—to successfully organize, manage, and coordinate their operations with others in order to carry out their missions. Therefore, institutional arrangements for capacity building are the essential processes, policies, and structures needed to organize and oversee an organization's capacity building process holistically. All Transitional Justice (TJ) processes have, as their goal, the attainment of sustainable peace, justice and accountability and should, as a matter of priority, build and/or strengthen national and local capacities.

On 12 February 2019, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government unanimously adopted the African Union Transitional Justice Policy (AUTJP). TJ is defined by the Policy as the different institutional mechanisms and policy measures (formal and traditional or non-formal) that societies adopt through an inclusive consultative process to overcome past violations, divisions, and inequalities and to create conditions for security as well as democratic and socioeconomic transformation. The utilization of local expertise in TJ processes is increasingly recognized as a crucial element in ensuring the effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability of such initiatives. Transitional justice refers to a range of mechanisms and measures used by societies emerging from conflict or authoritarianism to address past human rights violations, seek justice, and promote reconciliation.

Building and/or strengthening national and local capacities should be a top priority for all TJ initiatives, which aim to achieve lasting peace, justice, and accountability. As a result, every TJ process must include a capacity-building element that enhances society's ability to support and legitimize national processes; TJ processes should make use of local knowledge and, in cases where it is lacking, appropriate African capacity from the Diaspora and at the regional and continental levels; and they should offer recommendations on how to engage internationally in developing local capacity.

The capacity-building component aimed at strengthening society's ability to support and legitimize national TJ processes in Sierra Leone must address the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that impede meaningful societal engagement. This involves a comprehensive approach to empower civil society, build trust in institutions, and promote grassroots ownership of the transitional process. Building public understanding of transitional justice mechanisms ensures societal buy-in and participation, especially utilizing; the radio, community theaters, and workshops to educate citizens about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), reparations programs, and the Special Court for Sierra Leone; partner with education authorities introducing conflict history and TJ principles in schools to promote a culture of accountability and peace; and training local journalists to report responsibly on transitional justice processes to avoid misinformation. All of these would help citizens to be better informed, enabling them to contribute constructively and legitimize national TJ mechanisms.

Also, strengthening Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), as they are critical to bridging the gap between local communities and formal transitional justice initiatives. The provision of financial and technical resources to local CSOs who are working of TJ initiatives would enable train other CSOs on governance, program management, and evidence-based advocacy for justice, reparations, and reconciliation and would

also facilitate partnerships between local CSOs and international organizations for mentorship and resource sharing and these efforts would make empowered CSOs be capable of advocating for victims, monitoring TJ processes, and holding institutions accountable. Enhancing Government's accountability and transparency in building the capacity of government agencies strengthens public trust and the legitimacy of TJ processes in the country, train public officials and members of transitional justice bodies on human rights, justice, and conflict sensitivity, strengthen oversight mechanisms to prevent resource mismanagement within TJ programs, engage communities in the design and implementation of TJ policies, such as reparations or memorialization initiatives. These approaches would also increase transparency and accountability and bolster societal trust in government-led TJ initiatives. Strengthening society's capacity to support and legitimize TJ in Sierra Leone requires multi-level investments in education, local leadership, public engagement, and institutional development. By empowering citizens to actively participate in these processes and fostering trust between communities and state institutions, a more resilient and sustainable path to justice and reconciliation can be achieved.

Local experts have a deeper understanding of cultural norms, traditions, and social dynamics. This ensures that TJ measures, such as truth commissions or reparations programs, are sensitive to the community's values and beliefs. By involving local actors, TJ processes gain greater acceptance and legitimacy among the affected populations. Trust is fostered when victims see familiar faces as part of the process. Local stakeholders often have firsthand experience of the conflict and its aftermath, which allows them to contribute nuanced perspectives that might be overlooked by external actors. Engaging local expertise builds institutional and social capacities that are crucial for long-term reconciliation and reform. These actors are more likely to remain engaged after international stakeholders exit.

Local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Sierra Leone have played a significant role in providing capacity-building support to TJ processes after the country's brutal civil war (1991–2002). These organizations have been critical in bridging gaps between local communities, the TJ mechanisms established post-conflict, and the broader aims of truth, justice, and reconciliation. They have worked extensively to raise awareness about TJ mechanisms and enhance the skills of stakeholders involved in these processes. NGOs such as Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) and Fambul Tok conducted outreach efforts to educate communities on the aims and functions of the TRC and the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Groups like Timap for Justice provided training for local paralegals and community leaders, enabling them to participate in transitional justice processes more effectively and advocate for victims' rights. Many organizations in Sierra Leone has ensured that people in rural and hard-to-reach areas had access to TJ mechanisms. Fambul Tok focused on empowering communities to host their own reconciliation ceremonies, fostering grassroots healing.

With support from the Africa Transitional Justice Legacy Fund (ATJLF), the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) has, since 2020, trained over two hundred and fifty (**250**) local journalists across the country on reporting on TJ issues and creating more public awareness on TJ mechanisms. It has also provided mentorship and fellowship programs for trained journalists for the production of over three hundred (**300**) specialized TJ reports in the form of audio visuals contents since 2020. The MRCG's efforts has served as a powerful example of how civil society can drive grassroots and community-based approaches to sustaining dialogue on transitional justice and complementing formal mechanisms like the TRC and the Special Court for Sierra Leone. The effective utilization of local expertise enhances the inclusivity and resilience of Transitional Justice processes. Balancing local and international expertise is key to addressing the unique needs of post-conflict societies.

Also, international engagements in building local capacity for TJ in Sierra Leone requires a thoughtful, sustainable, and context-sensitive approach to ensure local ownership and effectiveness. International actors should engage as partners rather than leaders, empowering local organizations and communities to take the lead to establish collaborative frameworks, like the partnerships that international NGOs such as the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) formed with Sierra Leonean groups during the TRC. International actors should prioritize training and resource-sharing tailored to the needs of local TJ practitioners and institutions. Local NGOs are key drivers of TJ processes in Sierra Leone. Supporting their technical, financial, and organizational capacities ensures sustainability.

Here are a list of some forms of international-local engagement initiative for the sustainability of TJ mechanism: **Enhance Legal and Judicial Infrastructure** - international support should prioritize the reform and strengthening of local judicial systems to build trust and capacity for justice delivery, embed mentorship programs within national legal institutions by pairing international legal professionals with Sierra Leonean counterparts, and provide resources to digitize case management and improve access to court services.

Support Documentation and Knowledge Management - robust data collection and evidence preservation are essential to ensure transparency and future access to historical records of TJ processes, funding documentation projects to support the collection of victim testimonies and conflict records, train local stakeholders in data management systems, ensuring the secure handling of sensitive information, and international actors could replicate the collaborative efforts seen in Sierra Leone's TRC, where local documentation projects were integrated into the final national report.

Promote Inclusivity and Local Ownership - international actors must ensure that local stakeholders, including marginalized groups, are at the forefront of TJ initiatives, develop inclusive consultation processes to engage women, youth, and traditionally marginalized groups in decision-making, ensure that capacity-building activities target diverse participants, particularly victims of war-related sexual violence, and initiatives like the Reparations Program for Women and Children in Sierra Leone to underscore the importance of gender-sensitive engagement.

Fund Sustainable, Long-Term Programs - international assistance must go beyond short-term programs to foster long-term institutional and societal transformation, transition from project-based funding to multi-year frameworks with consistent monitoring, invest in creating a national transitional justice fund for reparations, rehabilitation, and grassroots reconciliation projects, and provide technical assistance to the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) to enhance its capacity in delivering reparations sustainably.

Facilitate International-Local Knowledge Exchange - international experts can play a pivotal role in bringing global expertise to Sierra Leone while learning from local practices, host knowledge-sharing forums and engage Sierra Leonean experts in international networks, leverage peer-to-peer exchanges between Sierra Leone and other post-conflict societies like Rwanda or Liberia, and the international organizations like the ICTJ successfully integrated comparative global experiences to contextualize their engagement in Sierra Leone.

Strengthen Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms - international actors should work collaboratively to evaluate TJ programs' impact while avoiding undue interference, support the creation of independent monitoring bodies that track TJ progress with local input, use participatory approaches, involving communities in defining success metrics and evaluating outcomes, collaborate with local researchers and universities to ensure independent evaluations are embedded in the TJ process.

Avoid Imposing External Models - international actors must adapt TJ mechanisms to the local context rather than imposing universal frameworks, use hybrid approaches that blend traditional and international practices, such as customary reconciliation practices combined with formal justice measures, and engage in cultural sensitivity training for international practitioners. This is because the success of community-based reconciliation ceremonies (e.g., Fambul Tok) demonstrates the importance of tailoring TJ processes to local traditions. International engagement in building local capacity for transitional justice in Sierra Leone should prioritize collaboration, long-term investment, and local ownership. By supporting local institutions, empowering civil society, and fostering culturally relevant approaches, international actors can ensure that TJ processes not only address past atrocities but also lay the groundwork for sustainable peace and reconciliation.

In order for the policy to avoid being described as “just a piece of paper” because the provisions and guidelines in the document have not been domesticated and implemented, Sierra Leone must fulfill its pledge to domesticating the AU-TJP.