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Collaboration key to Sierra Leone's first national cyber security strategy

Sierra Leone's Ministry of Information and Communication has produced a first draft of its cyber security strategy, in collaboration with the private sector.

Participants in the regional Commonwealth National Cyber Security Incident Response conference in Accra, Ghana in 2019.

CHOGM THEME
A more secure future

PROJEC T TITLE
Commonwealth Cyber Security Programme

COUNTRY
Sierra Leone

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS
Torchlight, Global Partners Digital, Protection Group International

As cyber threats grow in scale and complexity, most Commonwealth countries find themselves ranked low on global indices of cyber security. This means they are unable to safeguard their own interests or cooperate internationally. Francis Sesay, the Information, Communications and Technology Manager for Sierra Leone Cable, who works closely with the Ministry of Information and Communication, explained that three dimensions of society are at risk, "The government, the country's businesses and connected citizens."

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) Commonwealth Cyber Security Programme has benefited every Commonwealth country in some way, helping many to put in place national Cyber strategies, legislation and Critical Information Infrastructure Protection (CIIP) plans. "It was a shock to us when we

attended the [regional Commonwealth National Cyber Security Incident Response] conference in Accra, Ghana in 2019 and saw a lot of African countries were way ahead of us," said Francis.

Identifying capacity gaps

The Accra conference was one of three regional workshops organised by the Commonwealth Cyber Security Programme. Francis was invited by his government to accompany Mariama Yormah, from Sierra Leone's Ministry of Information and Communication. "The workshop was an eye opener. It gave us confidence….it helped us understand what we needed to do and how." Following the Accra workshop, Sierra Leone completed the SIM3 capacity assessment. This has helped them see the gaps in their cyber security, and where they need to focus in

developing their country's cyber security strategy and incident response capacity.

Sierra Leone's commitment

Howie Nichol from Torchlight, who facilitated the regional cybersecurity incident response conferences, explained, "One of the challenges delegates have had to overcome is persuading their decision-makers to allocate resources and sufficiently prioritise cyber security." Francis agreed. "From 2006, it was difficult to get decisions and we are still trying to encourage joint private sector investment." Francis sees new opportunities since the new government came into power in 2018. "They have given cyber security the first real push… they want digital to transform the economy and have published a National Innovation and Digital Strategy in 2019". The strategy covers not only education, health and justice, entrepreneurship and society but also cyber security. It has given the Ministry of Information and Communication leverage to demand resources for a cyber security strategy.

'The Commonwealth Programme came at just the right time for us.'

Francis Sesay

In the last month, with guidance from the Commonwealth Cyber Security Programme, Sierra Leone completed a first draft of its national cyber security strategy. It will be completed later this year. "We recruited a consultant from Ghana and he conducted many consultative interviews. Just two weeks ago in mid-March, we presented the strategy to government officials and the private sector," said Francis. He pointed out, "There were many

comments and suggestions that will be incorporated into a new draft and will be presented to the Ministry of Information and Communications shortly." Francis also added, "The Commonwealth Cyber Security Programme was an excellent forum for technical assistance, advice and networking – it's helped us a lot."

Collaboration is key

Developing a national cyber security strategy is the government's responsibility, but it is a process that involves consultation and participation from the private sector and civil society. "If the government takes a lead on its own then there is scepticism. Everyone needs to be involved," explained Francis. His company, Sierra Leone Cable, is an important government partner in

spearheading action on cyber security, "We manage Sierra Leone's fibre optic infrastructure. We have to be involved."

Recognising the importance of collaboration between different stakeholders, the Ministry of Information invited key leaders in the private sector and civil society to a workshop. Here they discussed the results of the initial capacity assessment of Sierra Leone's cyber security capability. "A lot of data has been collected so we need to demonstrate, security, confidentiality and data protection measures." The government then organised individual meetings with different sectors: banking, telecommunications, insurance and industry. "Some sectors were eager to work together but others see themselves as competitors," said Francis.

Article reports on a cyber attack on Sierra Leone government bank in January this year.