



GRAND PRESS RELEASE ON ACC PROBE OF OFFICE OF THE FIRST LADY

23 June 2021

The attention of GRAND has been brought to a press release issued by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) with the caption - ACC CONCLUDES PROBE INTO ISSUES RELATING TO PAYMENTS TO AND EXPENDITURE OF PUBLIC FUNDS BY THE “OFFICE OF THE FIRST LADY OF SIERRA LEONE”, of the 18 June 2021. This press release contained the findings of a probe conducted into the Office of the First Lady by the ACC. This was a follow up to a press release issued by the ACC on 9 February 2021 where it had announced that it would conduct an inquiry into public funds received and spent by the Office of the First Lady. This announcement to probe the Office of the First Lady was triggered by social media publications mainly by the Pan Africanist Press on allegations of misuse of public funds.

The ACC concluded in its release of the 18 June 2021 that, the Office of the First Lady while not constituted by any law is a recognised and accepted “conventional office” within the governance architecture of Sierra Leone and has therefore, been accorded avenues to access public funds including traveling per diems, projects and official events for the past 20 years. The Office of the Auditor General has confirmed resource allocation and audited the Office as part of the audit process of ministries in Sierra Leone. Further that public funds were used to fund named projects with regard to “charity works” conducted by the Office of the First Lady. The release validates the expenditure of the Office by reference to section 39 of the Public Financial Management Act 2016 which gives the State authority to expend State funds to unallocated head of expenditure for “necessary” public causes in the interest of the public.

However, the ACC release shows that it did not deal with the critical issue on the management of the financial resources as promised by its previous press release of 9 February 2021. The release of 18 June 2021 states that given the fact that official documents show that funds were released to the Office of the First Lady since 2007, no criminal responsibility arises. However, the issue that trigger the ACC’s probe was the accountability for amounts and whether they were commensurate to the services that were procured. The release unfortunately states that the ACC will defer the issue of financial accountability to the Office of the Auditor General, when in its release of the 9 February, it had stated that it had “commenced full and comprehensive probe into the Office of the First Lady, past and present, dealing with matters of budgetary justifications for allocations and expenditures”

of State funds to that entity and the legal regulatory framework, if any, for them.” An investigation on the framework to receive funds without looking at issues of accountability does not go far enough for an institution with the mandate of the ACC; not in the face of the social media reports that triggered the probe in the first place.

GRAND is also concerned that the ACC concluded in its latter press release that the Office of the First Lady was a **Conventional Office recognised and accepted within the governance architecture of Sierra Leone**, while in its previous release, it had firmly stated that “most of the payments were either directly made to the holders of that office or channelled through the Presidency, as normal presidential expenditure signed-off on by respective Secretaries to the President.” Both positions cannot be reconciled and the Office of the First Lady cannot be regarded as falling “within the governance architecture of Sierra Leone”.

GRAND is further concerned that the fact that public funds were allocated and cleared through the official lines to fund projects implemented by the Office of the First Lady over the years makes that a correct state of affairs which must continue as indicated by the ACC.

So as to maintain public trust in the institution, GRAND calls on the ACC to conduct a full probe as previously indicated and as would be reasonably expected.

Grassroots Action for National Development (**GRAND**), is a non-profit, humanitarian organisation whose membership is open to all Sierra Leoneans.

The objectives of GRAND include, but not limited to:

1. To undertake humanitarian and developmental projects and activities, specifically targeting the underprivileged, vulnerable and marginalised in our society, particularly women and children.
2. To promote and support good governance and the rule of law through advocacy, constructive criticism and awareness raising interventions.
3. To act as a pressure group to ensure accountability of government, government functionaries and other public servants.