Draft Report on a Media Development Strategy
Sierra Leone

Produced for IMC
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Media Development Strategy for Sierra Leone

Introduction
The Independent Media Commission, supported by UNDP and UNESCO has taken the initiative to outline a strategy for the media development in Sierra Leone. Ahead of this initiative, a study has been carried out to map the capacity needs of the media sector and particularly of the professional media associations through a number of stakeholder workshops. Another study carried out by Mr Francis Gabbidon analysed legislation dealing with media and pointed to gaps and possibilities for improvements.

An international expert was hired by IMC and UNDP/UNESCO to synthesize the existing analyses of the media landscape and through a comprehensive stakeholder process to develop a strategy for a future professional, independent and sustainable media sector. A local senior expert was hired to assist carrying out the process.

The key problems for the media sector were identified through interviews with managers and editors from more than 30 public, community and commercial media houses. The national commissions for Elections, Political Party Registration, Anti-Corruption, Human Rights, Democracy and Law Reform were interviewed to learn from the practices of similar bodies. The strategic possibilities were discussed with the media, politicians from the major political parties, the Deputy Minister of Information as well as the Parliamentary Committee for Information and Communication.

A key part of the stakeholder process was the organisation of two workshops where the priorities of the strategy were agreed to. Approximately 120 workshop participants from all regions including Freetown took part in the process and counted managers of media, media organisations, local political leaders, parliamentarians, commissioners, civil society organisations and others involved in media and democratic development.

The first draft of the strategy has subsequently been discussed in detail with some of the key international development partners in Sierra Leone.

The following strategy has gathered all the information given by the participants in this process, and the priorities in the strategy have been agreed virtually unanimously by all stakeholders. The strategy demands strong commitments and active participation from all partners –the Government and Parliament, the Independent Media Commission and the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists.

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1 CONTEH, Abdul, Building Capacity of Media Organizations in Sierra Leone, Needs Assessment Report, IMC, October 2013
Background
Sierra Leone is a country with remarkable media freedom, a multitude of private, community and public print and electronic media, but also a country in which all media are financially strained.

The country has 64 registered print media with a circulation between 500 and 4000 copies, around 70 registered community radios, commercial and religious broadcasters, and a public broadcaster with one national radio channel, one TV-channel and 6 regional radios, which occasionally broadcasts regional TV-programmes.

The meagre market and strong competition make the media test the limits or even break them with sensational stories, brown envelope journalism, blackmail and allegiance to certain political and economic interests that finance some of the media. Independent observers claim that the media are split in government party APC and largest opposition party SLPP supporters. This combined with low professionalism; low ethics and a politicised content constitute a challenging media environment.

Sierra Leone is still developing its democratic traditions after the 11 years of war that ended in 2002, and the political handling of media sector challenges still leaves much to be desired.

The media sector has recently seen quite extraordinary events with the arrest and detention of journalists under the law on seditious libel, Section 33(1) of the controversial Part 5 of the Public Order Act No. 46 of 1965. These events have spawned negative media coverage internationally and have seemed to tarnish the reputation of Sierra Leone’s democracy. The application of the Law on Criminal Libel to media in itself breaches international standards for media regulation.

Since 2002 the Independent Media Commission (IMC) in Sierra Leone has been charged with registration of all media, allocation of licenses to publish and broadcast, management of a media complaints function, stimulation of media quality and coordination of journalist training. The IMC is established by law, funded by the state and its commissioners are ultimately appointed by the President and approved by the Parliament.

Another important organisation in the media landscape is Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), organising almost all professional journalists in the country. As a major actor in the development of the media sector, SLAJ nominates commissioners to IMC and board members to SLBC. SLAJ affiliate bodies are the Guild of Editors (GoE), Sierra Leone Union of Reporters (SLRU), and Women in Media in Sierra Leone (WIMSAL).

A network for independent community and commercial radios – the Independent Radio Network (IRN) - organises 27 radios and provides the framework for the production and exchange of programmes and other collaboration among them.
Key Priorities
The vision for the media development strategy is to build a sustainable and diverse media sector whose professionalism contributes to strengthening the democracy and development of Sierra Leone.

In all the consultations as well as in the larger workshops, four priorities were repeated again and again. The strategy must find ways to obtain:

1. Improved ethics of the media through regulatory or self-regulatory mechanisms
2. Strengthened independent allocation of licenses, handling of media complaints, and stimulating an enabling regulatory and political environment for professional and pluralistic media
3. Sustainable and independent public service broadcasting serving all the people of the country
4. Strengthened capacity, professionalism and sustainability of private media organisations and practitioners

1. Improved ethics through regulation or self-regulation
The sensationalism and sub-standard ethics characteristic of a number of media in Sierra Leone are highly detrimental in a post-conflict and transitional society. This practice is caused by unsustainable media economy and in some cases claimed to derive from agendas by those interests that fund these media.

The responsibility for changing this practice and ensuring professional integrity and responsibility lie with the responsible editors-in-chiefs and their sub-editors and journalists.

Over the last 50 years, the Criminal Libel Law in Part 5 of the Public Order Act No. 46 of 1965 has been invoked on many occasions against editors and journalists, threatening them with prison sentences as criminals. This has been criticised internationally, is against international practice and seems not to have had an impact on improved ethical standards. Before the last general election, the two major political parties declared that they would repeal this legislation.

The Civil Libel Law – Defamation Act No. 32 of 1961 is still in function, but it is rarely used. It seems to take years before any media cases are finally decided. If punitive measures are taken by IMC towards the media and are appealed to court, this has suspensory effect until the court has made its verdict which has resulted in many unfinished cases.

With the Independent Media Commission Act No. 12 of 2000, the IMC started as a hybrid regulatory body is charged with the handling of complaints and with ensuring ethics and professionalism of the media based on its statutory Code of Practice developed with inputs from SLAJ. However, the IMC has been challenged by particular media institutions and practitioners refusing to obey to its decisions. Government representatives are said to
have interfered in decisions on allocation or banning of licenses or to have bypassed IMC by bringing media to court in cases of defamation or libel. To provide an effective regulation of media ethics, the IMC needs to strengthen its independence, integrity and powers to implement its decisions.

Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), founded in 1971, organises most journalists across the country. It aims to strengthen media’s role through accurate information and by upholding the independence and ideals of professional journalism. SLAJ developed its latest Code of Conduct in 2001 which was to be upheld by its Disciplinary Committee. However, the Committee did not deal with all cases, and after some years it in reality ceased to function. Consequently, there is a real need for SLAJ as a respected professional association to become an effective self-regulatory body able to process and solve most cases before they reach IMC and eventually the Courts.

Based on the above analysis, the key recommendations are that:

- The Parliament removes any paragraphs (Part 5) involving media in the Criminal Libel Law – Public Order Act No. 46 of 1965, aligning Sierra Leone media regulation with international standards.
- The Civil Libel Law – Defamation Act No. 32 of 1961 is reviewed but maintained.
- The Independent Media Commission Act No. 12 of 2000 is reviewed and adapted to strengthen the independence of its commissioners and to provide mechanisms to ensure the implementation of its incentives and punitive measures related to the Code of Practice.
- SLAJ activates its Codes of Ethics and self-regulatory mechanisms in line with best international standards.

2. Improved allocation of licenses, handling of media complaints, and enabling media environment.

The IMC was established to:

a) Promote a free and pluralistic media throughout Sierra Leone
b) Ensure that media institutions achieve the highest level of efficiency in the provision of media services
c) Promote fair competition among media institutions and persons engaged in the provision of media services
d) Protect both the interest of the public and journalists against any form of exploitation or abuse
e) Promote technological research and the development of adequate human resources for the advancement of the media industry throughout Sierra Leone.

Among its committees are the ones for:
Applications for licenses and registration
Complaints
Policy (media policy formulations, research and training)
Technical issues for NATCOM and electronic media

These functions are essential for IMC as regulatory body and very important for the democratic role of media in Sierra Leone. It is essential that IMC is considered a neutral body by citizens and all political parties alike. However, following the very comprehensive stakeholder process including the large management forums two points remain very problematic.

- The IMC was in some cases considered to be too compliant to Government in its allocation of media and withdrawal of licenses in deciding on complaints. The IMC was criticised for not protesting against government interference in media issues that should be decided by IMC.
- The IMC was also criticised for occasionally being lenient with unethical journalism in the media. Their alleged leniency was claimed to protect some of their media colleagues.

Many external observers find that these problems are caused by the IMC’s de facto lack of independence since the President appoints and dismisses the Chairman and the 10 commissioners forming the IMC. Consequently, IMC’s independence and integrity should be strengthened in the future. Another cause for criticism is the lack of civil society representatives or media consumers among the IMC commissioners, because IMC was also set up to protect citizens. The protection of citizens seems only carried out by two legal practitioners who are supposed to be on the Board.

A thorough study of the function and capacity of the IMC was carried out in 2013 by a Capacity Building Consultant\(^2\). Among his main conclusions were that a malfunctioning Secretariat added to the perceived weakness of IMC. Instead of focusing on advocacy, policy and decision making, the commissioners find themselves facing substantial practical work that should have been delegated to the employees of the Executive Secretary. A strategic plan exists but IMC seems to lack the strategic management capacity to effectively utilize the plan to fulfil its mandate.

A decentralisation of the functions of IMC has begun with desk officers placed in two of three regions outside of Freetown. To enable rapid reactions to media misconduct, it is being considered to establish offices in all three regions with one desk officer and one commissioner in all regions.

\(^2\) CONTEH, Abdul *Building Capacity of Media Organizations in Sierra Leone, Needs Assessment Report*, IMC, October 2013
The IMC’s cooperation with the National Telecommunication Commission (NATCOM) is based on tentative approval of licenses from IMC to broadcast media before allocation of frequencies. It is important to ensure that the media as serving the public are given priority over the potential commercial use of the new digital frequencies.

Based on the above analysis the key recommendations are that:

- All commissioners of the IMC regulatory body should be appointed without reference to and interference from the President, the Government or the Parliament, and CSOs or media consumers should be represented in IMC.
- A range of practical adjustments to the Act on IMC, prepared in 2011 should be reviewed and implemented as part of a general revision of the IMC, including updating its code of practice.
- A re-organisation of the Secretariat should be implemented as soon as feasible giving it responsibility to process cases and prepare policy and decision documents for decision by the Board of Commissioners.
- Comprehensive capacity building of staff and exchange of practices for the commissioners should take place with similar bodies internationally.

3. Sustainable and independent public service broadcasting serving all the people of the country

Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) was launched in 2010 as a result of a merger of the state broadcaster SLBS and a national UN radio. Today it broadcasts on one national radio channel and one national TV-channel with 6 regional radio stations charged with producing and broadcasting a regional radio programme.

SLBC has considerable problems. Its economy is poor; its national radio programming is generally accused of suffering from inferior quality and productivity. According to the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation Act 2009, SLBC has very limited sources of income generation. At present, the SLBC management regularly asks the President for allocations from the Consolidated Funds to cover core salaries. It has been plagued by internal conflicts involving its board, management and staff.

To become an efficient public service broadcaster serving the people of Sierra Leone, SLBC must clarify the roles and authorities of the management, the public service mandate, and its sources of funding.

The chairman and all members of the board are nominated by individual organisations, but appointed by the President, subject to approval of the Parliament. The Board members are appointed for three years without any accountability to the appointing organisations and are constrained to control, supervise, guide and advise the corporation. The Act does not define explicitly if the Board holds overall financial responsibility or
defines the editorial responsibility of the DG and his/her staff. The day to day financial responsibility lies with the DG, who is also appointed by the President, on the recommendation of the Board and subject to approval by the Parliament. (The Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation Act, 2009). Several stakeholders confirm a bias of the channel towards the current government as was also indicated in the 2012 final report from the EU Election Observation Mission.

This development has de facto made the Government take over considerable responsibility for the SLBC, including calling on the Public Sector Reform Unit (PSRU) to assess the overall governance and management of the SLBC. There are indications that salaries have been paid to people no longer employed by SLBC and that economic irregularities have taken place within the broadcaster. Many stakeholders seem to doubt that the present management is capable of running the national broadcaster, and the SLBC is expected to run out of money before the end of the year unless actions are taken. Both the present Government and the main opposition political party seem to support making SLBC have independently appointed trustees and sustainable independent funding. Identifying the best model for this and detailed calculations of the needs and potential incomes of the SLBC are needed.

As for each of the regional broadcasters, the salaries of 3 of their management and 5 of their contractual staff members are paid from Headquarters quarters in Freetown. However, among the three regional broadcasters visited some had managed to raise additional funding from the regional community, which allowed a reasonable level of equipment. Other regional broadcasters had very few resources. The regional broadcasters seem responsible for their own budget, which seem to be in-transparent, insufficient and lacking long-term projections. The regional broadcasters have to produce 16-20 hours radio every day with the exception of 4-5 news programmes relayed from the national broadcaster. Due to the unstable relay of the national programmes, they have to improvise their broadcast schedule. Occasionally, the regional stations in Bo, Makeni and Kenema produce and broadcast television programmes. This is however at a very basic technical level.

Sierra Leone is confronted with the challenge of transferring from analogue to digital broadcasting before 2015. Most interviewees see this as unrealistic. However, also in the case of Sierra Leone, there are solid economic and development gains from using the frequencies that will be available for internet and communication services when the analogue broadcast signals stop. The Ministry of Information has made an agreement with Chinese companies to set up digital terrestrial systems similar to Startime in Nigeria. Today, radio is the dominant media in Sierra Leone but undoubtedly TV penetration here as in comparable countries will increase rapidly in cities and across the rural areas through joint viewing facilities, set up by entrepreneurs or by the local community leaders.

Based on the above analysis the key recommendations are that:
• A new Board of Trustees and the Director General are appointed independently who will be accountable to their institutions and not to the President, the Government or the Parliament.
• A sustainable and politically neutral funding mechanism is provided for SLBC
• Capacity building of first the Board of Trustees and then the Director General is implemented in cooperation with peers from similar organisations abroad in order to establish and implement a strategy, outlining in detail the public service mission, target groups, programme schedule, and the division of broadcasting obligations for national and regional radio channels and for TV if relevant
• Internal procedures and guidelines for production and content should be reviewed and adapted, including the agreed distribution of broadcast time between national and regional broadcasters
• Extensive training of DG and editorial managers should be carried out and programme formats developed.

4. **Strengthened capacity, professionalism and sustainability of private media organisations and practitioners**

Since the civil war in Sierra Leone ended in 2002 journalists have been given substantial media training through international NGOs such as BBC Media Action, Search for Common Ground, Deutsche Welle, OSI etc., or through local organisations such as SLAJ, IMC, Independent Radio Network (IRN), Women in Media in Sierra Leone (WIMSA), Cotton Tree News (CTN), the university based communication and journalist education as well as other NGOs.

Most training has been done haphazardly for individuals who have often been trained on the same topics more than once. The journalists have been motivated to participate in order to qualify for per diems or lodging. Also, there are no general lists of participants in these trainings. Most trainings are aimed at reporters, and omitted building the capacity of editors, managers and media houses, which has in reality reduced the utility of new skills. The professional associations for media and journalists primarily need management and strategic capacity building to obtain the influence they should have.

Apart from SLBC, the main media broadcast structure is the IRN with 27 community and private radios that coordinate training, news and current affairs programmes. The IMC Media Code of Practice (p.26) defines a community radio as a body, which is for, by and about the community, whose ownership and management is representative of the community, which pursues social development agenda and which is not for profit. In reality, community radios are generally based on volunteers that have been trained in basic radio skills. They have typically received donor support as a key element in their funding, but have since found new and inventive methods of income generation, which still makes running a community radio an uphill affair. Local commercial radios have to generate their income mainly from small businesses, while national broadcasters can
target large and international advertisements as could the local ones if they market themselves as a group.

The print media of which 64 are registered by IMC seem to constitute the most significant media sector problem. A mushrooming of small irregularly published newspapers of modest quality produced by a miniscule staff challenge the position of a few professional newspapers. Often the small sensationalist papers rely on undisclosed political or economic interests. These papers may be founded by lonely riders out of job, or by journalists after having graduated from university as a means to escape the high unemployment rate and the precarious conditions of young journalists. Some print media might become sustainable if a system of common distribution to all cities is implemented or if they merge. However, even on a global scale the future for print is rather bleak.

Based on the above analysis the key recommendations are that:

- Specialised training and coaching should focus on editorial, business and management levels within media and media associations.
- Coherent and coordinated training should be carried out in all regions and media houses, adjusted to different levels of training, academic education and in-house coaching.
- Collaborative mechanisms such as IRN, common distribution of newspapers, or joint sale of advertisements should be encouraged in order to facilitate sustainable and professional media.
Sierra Leone Media Development Strategy

2013-2018

Aim:
The overall aim of the Media Development Strategy is to strengthen democratic dialogue, consolidate peace and ensure development through professional, independent and sustainable media.

This is achieved through four priorities with specific strategic objectives:

Objective 1:
To improve media ethics in Sierra Leone

Short term achievements
The Code of Ethics of Sierra Leone Association of Journalists is reviewed and a self-regulatory mechanism for its members activated which complies with best international standards.

Any paragraphs involving media in the Criminal Libel Law – Public Order Act No. 46 of 1965 are removed by the Parliament, hereby aligning the media regulation of Sierra Leone with international standards.

Mid-term achievements
The Independent Media Commission Act No. 12 of 2000 is adapted to strengthen the independence of its commissioners. Its Code of Practice is reviewed, and mechanisms are established to ensure implementation of its incentives and punitive measures related to this Code.

The Civil Libel Law – Defamation Act No. 32 of 1961 is reviewed. Court cases on libel are processed quicker than today and no longer entail suspension of IMC decisions.

Long term achievements
The Independent Media Commission is considered being substituted with an independent regulatory body.
Objective 2:

To improve independent allocation of licenses, handling of media complaints, and promotion of an enabling media environment

Short term achievements
The new members for the board of commissioners and the chairman of IMC are selected as planned without any political interference by March 2014.

The internal procedures on financial management, resource mobilisation, preparation of complaints cases, license applications and policy papers are strengthened through comprehensive management capacity building.

Mid-term achievements

The Board of the Independent Media Commission has carried out exchanges with other similar regulatory bodies in order to learn from their experience, including how to regulate new media platforms.

A strategy has been developed for IMC’s priorities for media policy initiatives, advocacy and communication to strengthen profile, credibility and impact of the IMC.

The decentralisation of IMC with regional officers and possible commissioners has been finalised.

The Independent Media Commission Act No. 12 of 2000 has been adapted to include practical changes elaborated in 2011 and recently, ensuring its political independence by removing presidential appointment and parliamentary approval of commissioners, and has incorporated an updated Code of Practice, transparent media ownership with limited monopoly and consistent implementation of legislation.

Long-term achievements

The constitutional review emphasises the independence of media as part of the new constitution.
Objective 3:

To build a sustainable and independent public service broadcasting benefitting the entire population of Sierra Leone

Short term achievements

Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation Act CT 2009 is adapted to include:

- The new Board of Trustees and the Director General are appointed as bodies entirely independent of Government and Parliament.
- A sustainable and politically neutral funding mechanism is established.
- Precise public service mandate and clear rules of authority and responsibility for Board of Trustees, the Director General and other management established.

Mid-term achievements

The new Board of Trustees and the Director General of the public broadcaster are assisted by peers from similar organisations abroad in their establishment and implementation of a strategy, defining in detail the public service mission, the departmental structure, target groups, programme schedule, and the division of broadcasting obligations for national and regional radio channels and for TV.

Extensive expert assistance serves to elaborate new programme formats and build the capacity of the editorial and technical staff responsible for producing them.

Internal procedures and guidelines for production and content have been reviewed and adapted, including division of broadcast time between national and regional broadcasters.

Long term achievements

The capacity of existing production and distribution equipment is analysed and additional or new technical formats are acquired if needed.
Objective 4:

To strengthen capacity, professionalism, collaboration and sustainability of private media organisations and practitioners

*Short term achievements*

A mechanism for coherent and coordinated training is established, available to all regions and media houses with different levels of practical training, in-house coaching and academic education.

Professional associations for media and practitioners – such as SLAJ, WIMSAL, GoE, SLRU and others - are strengthened through capacity and institution building transforming them into essential building blocks for a sustainable media development in Sierra Leone.

*Mid-term achievements*

Collaboration mechanisms for production, distribution and capacity building between media organisations such as IRN, CTN and other broadcast and print organisations are stimulated to strengthen sustainability and quality.

*Long term achievements*

Coherent media legislation is developed uniting all legislative measures for public, community, commercial, online and social media platform media.

**Implementation:**

To implement the Media Development Strategy a steering committee is formed with the participation of the Ministry of Information and Communication, the IMC, the SLAJ and key development partners.

International and national experts are expected to provide technical assistance to facilitate the process to achieve each of the four objectives.

18.11.2013