

# MEDIA, YOUTH AND CONFLICT PREVENTION IN SIERRA LEONE

Nick Oatley and Rashmi Thapa

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# MEDIA, YOUTH AND CONFLICT PREVENTION IN SIERRA LEONE

## AUTHOR PROFILES

Nick Oatley is Director of the Institutional Learning Team at Search for Common Ground (SFCG). He has worked in the field in SFCG's Africa Programmes, and taught at universities in Washington DC on peacebuilding and monitoring and evaluation issues. Prior to joining SFCG he worked for the UK Government and before that at the University of the West of England, Bristol.

Rashmi Thapa is the Research Coordinator at Handicap International. Before that she worked for SFCG-Nepal. Rashmi travelled to Sierra Leone to undertake the research which informed this report.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<b>AFRC</b>	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
<b>APC</b>	All People's Congress
<b>BBC</b>	British Broadcasting Corporation
<b>CDF</b>	Civil Defence Forces
<b>ECOMOG</b>	ECOWAS Monitoring Group
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>GOSL</b>	Government of Sierra Leone
<b>IRN</b>	Independent Radio Network
<b>ISP</b>	Internet Service Provider
<b>ITU</b>	International Telecommunications Union
<b>NPRC</b>	National Provisional Ruling Council
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>RSLAF</b>	Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces
<b>RUF</b>	Revolutionary United Front
<b>SLA</b>	Sierra Leone Army (renamed RSLAF in 2002)
<b>SLBC</b>	Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (since 2009)
<b>SLBS</b>	Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (until 2009)
<b>SLPP</b>	Sierra Leone People's Party
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNAMSIL</b>	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (1999-2005)

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## INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone's past is marked by political violence, an overly centralised government, and a ten-year civil war which devastated the country. The country lacks a truly independent media sector; the national media is dominated by élites in the country's capital, Freetown. Marginalised groups such as women, youth and those living in rural areas have had limited access to accurate, independent information and to participation in the country's national decision-making processes. In a country of extreme poverty, limited electricity and only 41 percent literacy<sup>1</sup>, radio is the preferred channel for information and communication for up to 90 percent of the population, although the Sierra Leonean media market is diverse and growing.

The use of media in Sierra Leone presents many examples of how it can be used to promote violence as well as help prevent the outbreak of violence. Likewise, youth is also seen as vulnerable to manipulation (associated with high youth unemployment and social exclusion) and is often in the frontline of violence in conflict-affected areas. However, youth can also be a force for peace and stability.

In this report we examine the role of media and the challenges they face in the context of a charged political landscape and ongoing tensions between competing political parties in Sierra Leone. We also consider the role that youth has played in acts of violence and in violence prevention.

This report is based on desk and field research conducted in August 2010. Research was conducted in three districts (Freetown, Bo and Kenema). A total of 266 people were involved in the research through a combination of focus group discussions and surveys. An intercept methodology was used to interview 169 people drawn from five sub-groups: youth, media professionals, politicians, members of civil society organisations and ordinary citizens. Attempts were made to include individuals stratified by age, profession, location, and gender from various backgrounds and walks of life.

## BACKGROUND

Sierra Leone was ravaged by civil war from 1991 to 2002. The war began in 1991 when a small band of Revolutionary United Front (RUF) insurgents crossed the border with Liberia and entered the eastern part of Sierra Leone. After resistance from the Sierra Leone Army (SLA), a political coup in 1992 led to the formation of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), a short-lived transition to democratic rule in 1996-97. This was then followed by the brutal Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) regime, which was overthrown through the military intervention of West African forces in 1998. After the Lomé Peace Accord of 1999, and a massive intervention by UN and British forces thereafter, the war was officially declared over in 2002. There had been widespread violence and chaos, with both warring parties recruiting large numbers of young men and boys. In the two years after the war, 72,000 combatants were demobilised, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established on 5 July 2002 and a report published in 2004, and a Special Court initiated prosecutions against 21 persons from all factions deemed most responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

1 World Bank (2010). 'Literacy rate; adult total (% of people ages 15 and above) in Sierra Leone', accessed 20th March 2012. Available at <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/sierra-leone/literacy-rate-adult-total-percent-of-people-ages-15-and-above-wb-data.html>

## THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN SIERRA LEONE

The war undermined an already fragile political, educational, economic and media infrastructure, leaving the nation struggling to pick up the pieces. Nevertheless, Sierra Leone has a proud tradition of indigenous independent media, being the first nation in anglophone West Africa to publish newspapers. By the time Sierra Leone gained independence in 1961, radio had already replaced print media as the primary communication medium. In the post-colonial era, the climate was initially supportive of a free press, although later governments sought to control the media by means of legislation, threats and coercion<sup>2</sup>. The climate for media operation deteriorated dramatically during the civil war. 70 percent of trained media professionals left Sierra Leone, 'leaving the industry in the hands of mostly untrained media practitioners'<sup>3</sup>.

Since the end of the war in 2002, and the return of many displaced citizens and journalists, vibrant and diverse media emerged under the democratically-elected regime of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah (1996-2007<sup>4</sup>). Sierra Leone's media sector has diversified at a remarkable rate since the war. Proliferation of radio stations nationwide, television services established in some provinces, and a plethora of newspapers published daily and weekly in Freetown have changed the structural conditions for information and knowledge sharing. These outlets play a major role in information-sharing behaviour. Radio formats are shifting, with radio dramas, phone-in programmes and other interactive types of programming evolving in many places.

Sierra Leone's 41 percent literacy rate is a key determinant in the manner in which information flows. Information is centralised in Freetown, the seat of the national government and where almost a quarter of the population resides. The capital is home to all the newspapers, 35 percent of radio stations, and has many more internet cafés than in the provinces. Community and independent radio stations have begun to affect this dynamic, but there are still significant structural problems in how information flows in and out of the capital<sup>5</sup>.

In terms of specific sources of information, Charts 1 and 2 below, from AudienceScapes<sup>6</sup>, shows that Sierra Leoneans do have a diversity of sources for news and information. While radio leads all communication media, quite a few people also receive information and news from various members of their community through word of mouth.

- Radio is the most important channel for the public to receive information;
- Television is not widely available and is costly;
- The mobile phone network has transformed how information flows in the country. Mobile phone use is growing, with 40 percent of those surveyed stating their household had access to a mobile phone.

2 B. Cole (1995). *Mass Media Freedom and Democracy in Sierra Leone*. Freetown, Sierra Leone: Premier Media Publishing House.

3 P. Coker (2003). *The Role of the Media and Public Information* in M. Malan, S. Meek, T. Thusi, J. Ginifer and P. Coker (2003). *Sierra Leone – Building the Road to Recovery*. Institute for Security Studies Monograph 80, pp. 77-88.

4 Kabbah was first elected in March 1996, during the war, but overthrown by the AFRC in May 1997. He was restored to power by ECOMOG intervention in February 1998 and was re-elected President in May 2002.

5 Search for Common Ground/Talking Drum Studio Sierra Leone (2005). *Media Sector Mapping In Sierra Leone*. Washington/Sierra Leone. Available at [http://www.sfcg.org/sfcg/evaluations/SLE\\_MM\\_Oct05\\_Media%20Sector%20Mapping%20Sierra%20Leone%20-%20SFCG%20Talking%20Drum%20Studio.pdf](http://www.sfcg.org/sfcg/evaluations/SLE_MM_Oct05_Media%20Sector%20Mapping%20Sierra%20Leone%20-%20SFCG%20Talking%20Drum%20Studio.pdf)

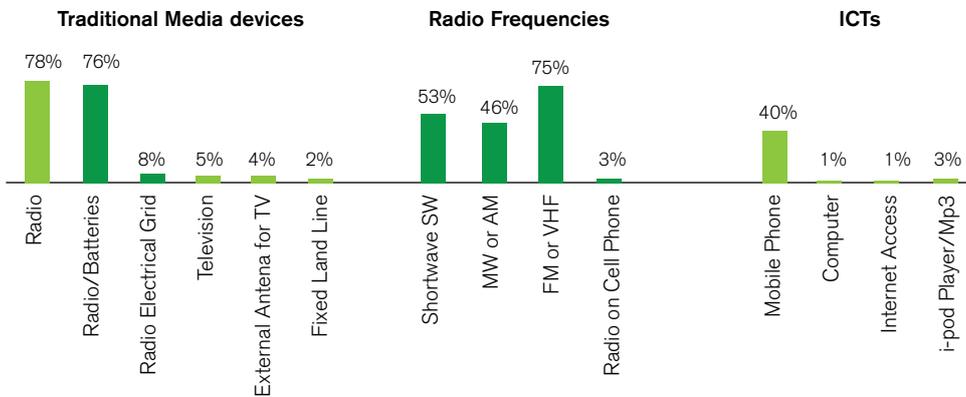
6 AudienceScapes developed by InterMedia provides the most up-to-date picture of the media landscape in Sierra Leone based on a survey and research undertaken in 2008.

**CHART 17.**

Nearly all household radios rely on battery power with only a minimal amount able to connect to the electrical grid.

Almost all household radios can receive an FM signal. A large number can also receive MW and SW wavebands, which are more commonly used by regional and community radio stations.

**SIERRA LEONE: HOUSEHOLD ACCESS  
PERCENT OF THOSE WHO SAID THEY HAVE HOUSEHOLD ACCESS TO THE  
FOLLOWING MEDIA DEVICES/TECHNOLOGIES**

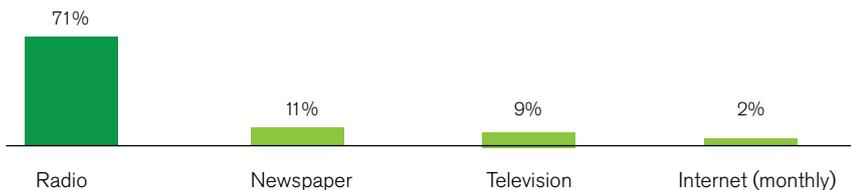


Sierra Leone 2008: survey of urban adults (15+), n = 2099

**CHART 2<sup>8</sup>.**

Sierra Leone's high poverty rates and level of illiteracy has hindered newspaper and TV use, leaving radio as the public's main source for news and information

**SIERRA LEONE: MEDIA USE  
PERCENT OF THOSE WHO SAID THEY USED THE FOLLOWING MEDIA  
DEVICES/TECHNOLOGIES IN THE PREVIOUS WEEK OR MONTH**



Sierra Leone 2008: survey of urban adults (15+), n = 2099

7 AudienceScapes (2008). 'Radio Access And Use in Sierra Leone', accessed 20th March 2012. Available at <http://www.audiencescapes.org/country-profiles/sierra-leone/country-overview/radio/radio-308>  
 8 Ibid.

## RADIO

Radio is by far Sierra Leone's most accessible and used communication medium; seventy-eight percent of the population has household access to a radio. The level of penetration of radio varies between districts, from 96 percent in the urban part of Western Area, to 65 percent in Kailahun, and is higher in urban than rural areas. Charts 1 and 2 above describe the access that households have to different sources of media and the use of media sources based on the survey conducted by AudienceScapes in 2008.

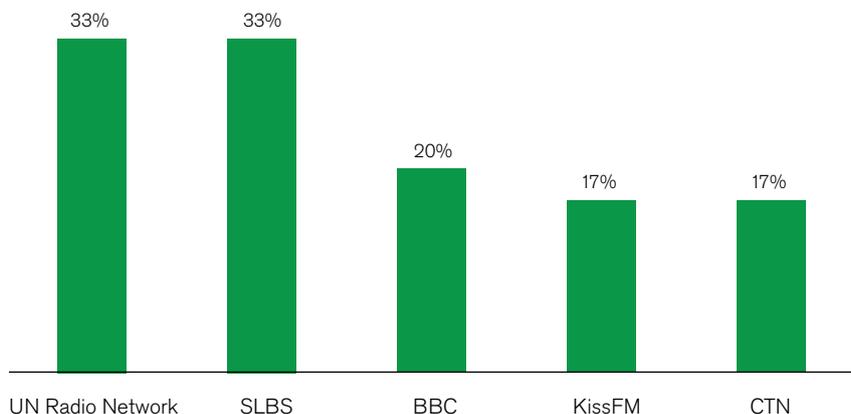
From 2002 to 2010 the UN Radio Network and the state-run Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS) network dominated the airwaves on a national level. Since UNAMSIL's withdrawal in 2005, the radio market has been gradually restructured. Its assets were transferred to the new public broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) in April 2010. The Public Communications Act of 2009 established the SLBC to provide a public interest radio station independent of government influence. In 2010, the SLBC began broadcasting two radio stations, one dedicated to providing political analysis and a second station broadcasting social and cultural programmes<sup>9</sup>.

Results of a 2007 British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) survey indicated it was important to listeners that radio news was unbiased, accurate and trustworthy, and that radio was by far the most trusted media in Sierra Leone. The results showed that radio was the most-used source of information to learn about events happening in the country, including national elections<sup>10</sup>.

All major cities in the country run their own radio stations and there are many local commercial radio stations; however, only a few national stations are in operation. Chart 3 shows the popularity of the major stations in Sierra Leone based on evidence of the InterMedia Survey in 2008.

### CHART 3<sup>11</sup>

#### SIERRA LEONE: POPULAR RADIO STATIONS PERCENT WHO LISTENED TO THAT STATION IN THE PREVIOUS WEEK



Sierra Leone 2008: survey of urban adults (15+), n = 2099

9 The Independent Media Commission of Sierra Leone (2010). 'Facts & Figures', accessed 20th January 2010. Available at <http://www.imc-sl.org/FactsFigures/tabid/56/Default.aspx>

10 BBC World Service Trust and Search for Common Ground (2007). *Media Use, and Attitudes Towards Media, in Sierra Leone*. London/Washington/Sierra Leone. Available at [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/pdf/media\\_report\\_2007.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/pdf/media_report_2007.pdf)

11 AudienceScapes (2008). 'Radio Access And Use in Sierra Leone', accessed 20th March 2012. Available at <http://www.audiencescapes.org/country-profiles/sierra-leone/country-overview/radio/radio-308>

General weekly use of radio almost equals that of household access to radio at 71 percent of all respondents. This indicates that, even though the cost of batteries may be a burden, it is not a large enough hurdle to constrain regular use. Interestingly, listening to the radio is primarily an activity undertaken at home; only a small percentage of respondents said they listened to the radio in a public place or at a friend or family member's house.

Language and place of residence are two other factors influencing how often and to which radio stations Sierra Leoneans listen, e.g. in Northern Province, 47 percent of respondents said they would prefer listening to the radio in Temne, while in Eastern and Southern Provinces a large proportion of respondents said they preferred radio programmes in Mende.

## MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS

Survey findings and statistics provided by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) show that mobile telephone networks are the second-most-accessed media or communication device in Sierra Leone behind radio. From 2003 to 2008, the number of mobile phone subscribers in Sierra Leone grew nearly tenfold, according to ITU, growing from 113,000 mobile subscribers in 2003 to over 1,000,000 in 2008<sup>12</sup>.

In the 2008 AudienceScapes household survey, around 40 percent of respondents said they had household access to a mobile phone. This percentage, while high compared to other estimates (ITU estimates 18.14 percent), hints at not only wider use beyond official statements but also the widespread habit of mobile phone sharing.

## PRINT MEDIA

After the end of the Civil War, newspapers were not a widely used medium, especially outside Freetown, with only 15 daily newspapers published<sup>13</sup>. As the country recovered the number of newspapers increased and there were 58 newspapers registered in 2010, despite a fragile economy and high rates of illiteracy<sup>14</sup>. Most newspapers are privately run and often critical of the government. The number of people reading newspapers is affected by low levels of literacy in the country. This is a particularly important factor for some sections of society, as only 30 percent of adult women are literate, with lower literacy levels outside Freetown.

As Chart 1 shows above, only about 11 percent of survey respondents said they read a newspaper on a regular basis (weekly). Among newspaper readership, older people are more likely to read a paper on a daily basis and younger people to read on a weekly basis. Moreover, people trust the information published in newspapers less than that broadcast on the radio<sup>15</sup>. The standard of print journalism is generally low, with some journalists lacking the training and skills they need to write, edit and disseminate information effectively in print<sup>16</sup>. However, these publications have minimal circulation, reflecting a lack of modern equipment, technical capabilities, distribution infrastructure and sound business management<sup>17</sup>.

## INTERNET USE

Internet use in Sierra Leone can be described as nascent. In 2008, there were only about 14,000 internet users among a population of 5.7 million people, according to ITU<sup>18</sup>. In 2008 a wireless service was introduced

12 AudienceScapes (2008). 'Mobile Communications in Sierra Leone', accessed 20th March 2012. Available at <http://www.audiencescapes.org/country-profiles/sierra-leone/country-overview/mobile-communications/mobile-communications-306>

13 International Research Exchanges Board (IREX) (2010). *Media Sustainability Index: Sierra Leone*. Washington/Sierra Leone. Available at [http://www.irex.org/system/files/Africa\\_MSI\\_2010\\_SierraLeone.pdf](http://www.irex.org/system/files/Africa_MSI_2010_SierraLeone.pdf)

14 Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (2011). *2010 Human Rights Report: Sierra Leone*. Washington. Available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/af/154368.htm>

15 Freedom House (2009). 'Sierra Leone', accessed 20th January 2010. Available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2009/sierra-leone>; IREX (2008). *Media Sustainability Index 2008: Sierra Leone*. Washington/Sierra Leone. Available at [http://www.irex.org/system/files/2-Africa\\_08\\_sierra.pdf](http://www.irex.org/system/files/2-Africa_08_sierra.pdf)

16 Freedom House (2009). 'Sierra Leone', accessed 20th January 2010. Available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2009/sierra-leone>

17 The Independent Media Commission of Sierra Leone (2010). 'Facts & Figures', accessed 20th March 2012. Available at <http://www.imc-sl.org/FactsFigures/tabid/56/Default.aspx>

18 AudienceScapes (2008). 'The internet in Sierra Leone', accessed 20th March 2012. Available at <http://www.audiencescapes.org/country-profiles/sierra-leone/country-overview/internet/internet-307>

and usage is said to have increased, although no additional recent figures have been published. There are nine internet service providers (ISPs) in Sierra Leone. Freetown has a city-wide wireless internet connection and internet access is offered in some cafeterias, hairdressers and dedicated internet cafés. However, problems, such as intermittent electricity supply, have affected general embracing of the internet<sup>19</sup>. Mobile internet services are available in the area around Freetown and a slow connection is available in other areas of the country.

A reflection of the high cost of internet access and of a telecommunications infrastructure heavily damaged by the country's civil war, the number of respondents saying they had internet access at home failed to even reach one percent of the AudienceScapes survey. Of those that had used the internet in the past, about two thirds reported doing so at an internet café.

## TELEVISION

While the radio industry has thrived since the end of Sierra Leone's civil war, the television market has stagnated. Poverty continues to be television's largest barrier to growth. The majority of Sierra Leoneans living under the poverty line can neither afford the cost of a television set nor the goods which may be advertised on television<sup>20</sup>. Overall, only about 5 percent of Sierra Leoneans surveyed said they had access to a television at home. Affluent residents are at an advantage as they can afford generators to power their homes, or they reside in urban areas such as Freetown or Bo where electricity supplies are somewhat more reliable. Only about 8 percent of respondents reported having access to the national electrical grid.

There are two national television stations broadcasting in Sierra Leone: one run by the governmental SLBC and a private station, ABC Television-Africa (ABC), run by the AISOW Broadcasting Corporation.

## MEDIA ENVIRONMENT AND REGULATION IN SIERRA LEONE

The liberalisation of the broadcast market and the creation of a new Independent Media Commission (IMC) in 2000 to oversee licensing infused the radio broadcast market with confidence. In a recent (2009) display of its independence, the IMC withdrew the licences of the ruling All People's Congress (APC)'s radio station, the Rising Sun, and that of the Sierra Leone People's Party, Radio Unity. The stations' closures were on the grounds that their broadcasts were hostile to peace and security<sup>21</sup>.

Despite the efforts of many donors who have supported media development programmes, local media practitioners still suffer from corruption, self-censorship, and politicised and inaccurate reporting. Nonetheless, the government's general attitude towards the press has improved in recent years and the number of attacks on journalists has declined.

## CHALLENGES TO MEDIA IN SIERRA LEONE

### LEGAL CONSTRAINTS AND ACTS OF VIOLENCE

Today, Sierra Leonean journalists can report freely on any event, issue, or activity. They name and shame corrupt officials in the hope that this will serve as a deterrent; they play their watchdog role by monitoring the activities of the government and institutions of public trust. However, while journalists in Sierra Leone have enjoyed increased freedom of expression since the end of the Civil War due to guarantees of freedom of speech and the press in the Sierra Leonean Constitution, the government still occasionally restricts these rights in practice.

Criminal Libel Law, including the Seditious Libel Law of 1965, can be used to control what is published in the media. These laws work against the guarantee of the right to communication by empowering the judiciary to jail journalists convicted of libel. Critics of this legislation argue that it is used as a tool to suppress dissent against power holders,

19 O. A. Ogundeji. 'Wireless Services Expand Net for Sierra Leone', *PCWorld Business Center*, 9th April 2008. Available at [http://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/144347/wireless\\_services\\_expand\\_net\\_for\\_sierra\\_leone.html](http://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/144347/wireless_services_expand_net_for_sierra_leone.html)

20 53.4 percent of Sierra Leoneans live under the US\$1.25 a day poverty line and 76.3 percent live under the US\$2.00 a day poverty line. United Nations Development Programme (2009). *Human Development Report*. New York.

21 L. Fofana. 'Radio Stations Banned', *Inter Press Service News Agency*, 15th July 2009. Available at <http://ipsnews.net/africa/nota.asp?idnews=47675>

while proponents insist it is a necessary tool to enforce responsible journalistic practice. Imprisonment and violence have also been employed by the political establishment against journalists. Recent cases include:

- Paul Kamara, editor of *For di People*, imprisoned for 14 months in 2004-2005 for seditious libel;
- Harry Yansaneh, the acting editor of *For di People*, died in 2005 of kidney failure from the injuries caused by an attack by people allegedly sent by a deputy in the ruling party<sup>22</sup>;
- Police forces attacked eight journalists at a State House function in August 2008.

Other attacks linked to political motivations have included the destruction and theft of equipment owned by the Voice of the Peninsular community radio station and the ransacking of Radio Unity, the radio station aligned with the opposition SLPP by supporters of the ruling APC party<sup>23</sup>. Such events prompted media watchdog Reporters Sans Frontières to rank Sierra Leone 115th out of 175 countries in 2009 on its Press Freedom Index<sup>24</sup>. However, there has been rapid improvement in recent years, with Sierra Leone being ranked 91st in 2010 (out of 178) and 63rd (out of 179) in 2011-2012.<sup>25</sup>

## OPERATIONAL PROBLEMS

Low literacy levels and the absence of a viable economy provide a poor context for media dependent on advertising revenue in order to operate. Newspapers are particularly affected. While the proliferation of newspapers in the capital allows political and economic élites to seek, receive and impart information and ideas, there is little access to information and participation for the majority of the population living outside Freetown.

## SHORTAGE OF TECHNOLOGY AND EQUIPMENT

The lack of a consistent electricity supply is a fundamental challenge to running any technology-intensive enterprise. Outdated equipment, a lack of spare parts and of funding to pay staff and keep operations running are constant challenges (particularly for the small independent radio station sector).

## “COASTING”

Not all journalists in Sierra Leone receive regular wages and a significant proportion also work without pay<sup>26</sup>. Wages of journalists are low in comparison to the average wage<sup>27</sup>. As payments to journalists do not always amount to a liveable wage, journalists are often forced to find other means to support themselves. This can translate into unethical practices as some journalists engage in what is known as “coasting”, or the exchange of payments to feature news stories or to suppress damaging information – whether real or fabricated. This results in journalists not being trusted. Journalists are also perceived to be aligned with various political parties, which further discredits the accuracy and independence of journalism.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE COMMUNITY RADIO SECTOR

Sustaining community radio is a serious challenge in Sierra Leone. For most community radio stations, electricity from the national grid is absent and running generators is expensive. Rural communities are poor and cannot pay for minor services such as public announcements. The danger exists that politicians will mobilise and patronise stations, eroding the public watchdog work undertaken by radio stations<sup>28</sup>. Financial constraints have also led some stations to abandon their community status in favour of a more commercial model.

22 Commonwealth Press Union. *2005 Press Freedom Brief*. London. Available at [http://web.archive.org/web/20071124131843/http://www.cpu.org.uk/pf\\_2005\\_review.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20071124131843/http://www.cpu.org.uk/pf_2005_review.html); Reporters sans Frontières (2006). ‘Sierra Leone’, accessed 20th March 2012. Available at <http://en.rsf.org/report-sierra-leone,42.html>

23 Freedom House (2009). ‘Sierra Leone’, accessed 20th January 2010. Available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2009/sierra-leone>

24 Reporters Sans Frontières (2009). ‘Press Freedom Index 2009’, accessed 20th March 2012. Available at <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2009,1001.html>

25 Reporters Sans Frontières (2011). ‘Press Freedom Index 2011/12’, accessed 20th March 2012. Available at <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2011-2012,1043.html>

26 D. Parkinson (2005). *Problems Affecting Newspaper Management in Sierra Leone from 2000-2005*. Unpublished Dissertation, Institute of Library Information and Communication Studies, Fourah Bay College, p. 33

27 A. S. Nasralla (2005). *Running a Newspaper as a Business: A Case Study of Sierra Leonean Newspapers*. Unpublished Dissertation, Institute of Library Information and Communication Studies, Fourah Bay College, p. 5

28 B.-B. Sesay (2010). ‘Community Radio Stations, but for how long?’, accessed 20th March 2012. Available at <http://www.audiencescapes.org/sierra-leone-community-radio-widespread-how-long-413>

## YOUTH IN SIERRA LEONE

Youth in Sierra Leone includes anyone between 15-35 years, which constitutes approximately 55 percent of the population. The overall unemployment rate stands at around 22 percent, but for youth this number doubles to over 45 percent<sup>29</sup>. Significant youth unemployment is exacerbated by a large “lost generation” who received no education or opportunities during the war. The involvement of youth in violence in Sierra Leone has its roots in the country’s political past. The mobilisation of youth in politics was a strategic move which targeted the group which was arguably most affected by decades of economic decline and social degradation. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities between the RUF and the government in 1991, Sierra Leone’s youth was already facing an uncertain future due to a combination of factors: years of corruption, a patrimonial economy based in Freetown which benefited the country’s élite, neglect of the countryside, dilapidated infrastructure, chronic and rising unemployment levels, and the general collapse of the education system all combined to lead many people to believe that only a violent overthrow of such a corrupt system would improve their lives<sup>30</sup>.

Commenting on the situation in Sierra Leone in a report on 30th January 2009, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted that ‘considerable socio-economic challenges...could pose challenges to the gains achieved in the peace consolidation process’<sup>31</sup>. Since unemployment remains the most severe concern in Sierra Leone’s post-conflict stability, the Secretary-General also warned that ‘[u]rgent action is therefore required to create employment opportunities with a view of reducing the lingering effects of the marginalization of the country’s young people, who constitute the largest segment of the population’<sup>32</sup>.

The government’s promise to establish a commission to look into issues affecting the country’s youth has not been pursued. Moreover, funds earmarked towards addressing youth issues accounted for less than 2 percent of the government’s 2011 budget. A great deal of commentary on youth unemployment in the run up to the November 2012 elections has linked youth marginalisation and violence in urban areas, where gangs desperate to eke out a living by any means necessary involve themselves in robberies and other illegal activities<sup>33</sup>.

In spite of the formation of organisations, such as the Movement for Concerned Kono Youth (MOCKY), which have developed platforms aimed at articulating the needs of youth with the potential of becoming political and social movements, youth continue to be excluded from social and political structures. If feelings of neglect and actual exclusion are not addressed, then this will always pose a serious potential threat to the sustainability of peace in Sierra Leone.

29 P. Adeyemi. ‘The Problem of Youth Unemployment In Sierra Leone’, *Sierra Express Media*, 7th June 2010. Available at <http://www.sierraexpressmedia.com/archives/9656>

30 A. McIntyre and T. Thusi (2003). ‘Children and Youth in Sierra Leone’s peace-building process’, *African Security Review Vol 12, No 2*. Available at <http://www.iss.co.za/pubs/asr/12No2/Content.html>

31 UN security Council (2009). *First report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone*. New York, p.4. Available at <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/SL%20S200959.pdf>

32 Ibid, p.13.

33 A. Kawusu. ‘Sierra Leoneans go to the polls in November 2012: Will youth unemployment matter?’, *The Sierra Leone Telegraph*, 10th January 2102. Available at <http://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/?p=796>

## 3.1 THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND YOUTH IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

### 3.1.1 THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL MEDIA

We have seen how media can be linked to the incitement of violence and this has been the case in Sierra Leone. The media are seen to contribute to tensions and violence through biased news stories and partisan, subjective reporting. This was particularly the case during the 2007 elections when they were used to mobilise young people in support of political interests. Print media, in particular, were seen as being overtly political in their coverage, with a number of newspapers taking partisan positions<sup>34</sup>.

However, the role that media have played in decreasing tensions and violence prevention has been less frequently mentioned. Radio, in particular, has played an important role in helping to sensitise communities to the negative effects of violence, spreading *awareness*, providing a *platform* for youth voices through radio discussions and other formats. Community Radio, particularly in rural areas, is seen as closely connected to the locality and is a trusted source of information. For example, Talking Drum Studio is a multimedia studio producing seven national- and eight district-level radio programmes for distribution to 18 local and international radio stations across Sierra Leone. The Talking Drum Studio was established by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and works collaboratively with the Independent Radio Network (IRN) to create original radio content aimed at stimulating dialogue on critical issues. In addition, SFCG supports the two main national programmes developed with IRN to increase access to information on the political reform process: Parliament Bol Hat and Wi Yone Salone.

Alongside broadcasting educational radio dramas, IRN radio stations have been particularly active in broadcasting independent and impartial news. IRN stations played the critical role of media watchdog during the 2007 presidential and 2008 local council elections. Key to their success has been the development of the two aforementioned programmes, Parliament Bot Hat and IRN National News (Wi Yone Salone). Parliament Bol Hat is an issue-based radio programme which seeks to strengthen the relationship between Members of Parliament (MPs) and their constituencies by educating listeners about current topics of debate in parliament and by informing them about the roles and responsibilities of Parliament. IRN National News is a cooperatively-produced, community-oriented national news programme which broadcasts local news from all over the country. The programme is working to solidify the community radio sector and improve its role as media watchdog<sup>35</sup>.

Cotton Tree News (CTN), produced by the Fondation Hironnelle in cooperation with Fourah Bay College and the local FM radio station Radio Mount Aureol, produces a daily package of news and information which is broadcast widely and includes entertaining, but also informative, programming on topics such as women's issues, the environment, and youth and religious issues.

These examples demonstrate how IRN, comprised of community radio stations across Sierra Leone, has been a model of how media can be used to build trust, provide accurate information and sensitise communities to the importance of active participation in peaceful elections.

### 3.1.2 HARNESSING NEW MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGIES

The mobile phone network is transforming how information flows in the country. Journalists can now seek information from around the nation, expanding their coverage and accuracy without having to travel. This development applies to print, television and radio channels. Additionally, radio stations use mobile phones and SMS to solicit feedback and foster discussions with their listeners. It is now common practice for stations to open their phone lines at the end of discussion programmes for the audience to comment and ask questions. This process is opening up opportunities for greater citizen participation in governance issues.

Mobile phone technology, in connection with Ushahidi<sup>36</sup>, is now being used for election monitoring<sup>36</sup>. A project funded by the UK Department for International Development and managed by SFCG-Sierra Leone, supporting a

34 Commonwealth Secretariat (2007). *Sierra Leone Presidential and Parliamentary Elections 11 August 2007 and Run-off Presidential Election 08 September 2007: Report of the Commonwealth Observer Group*. London, p.21. Available at [http://www.thecommonwealth.org/shared\\_asp\\_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=170435](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=170435) more information see [visualiz](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=170435)

35 AudienceScapes (2008). 'Radio Access And Use in Sierra Leone', accessed 20th March 2012. Available at [http://www.thecommonwealth.org/shared\\_asp\\_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=170435](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=170435)

36 Ushahidi is a non-profit tech company that specialises in developing free and open source software for information collection, visualisation and interactive mapping. For more information see <http://ushahidi.com/about-us>

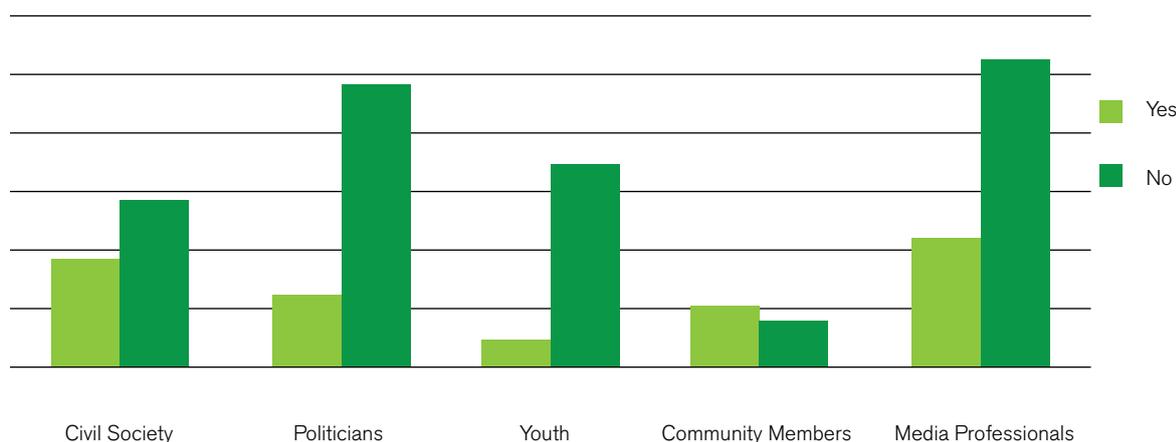
broad coalition of civil society organisations, will be setting up a media data centre which will use text messaging to collect real-time feedback from over 8,000 Long Term Observers across all 14 Districts of Sierra Leone in the run up to the elections in November 2012. Election Monitors and Polling Station Observers will also send in texts on election day to report on voting conduct. All messages will be fed in to Ushahidi software and instantaneous maps produced of incidents or polling activity. It is clear that mobile phones present an opportunity for conflict prevention, which is only now being explored as a tool for early warning and conflict prevention.

### 3.1.3 YOUTH, MEDIA AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

When asked if media play a role in inciting violence among youth, the majority of respondents to the SFCG survey felt that media did not play a direct role. Among those who felt that it did incite violence, the most commonly cited example was the use of hate speech. Some respondents referred to the practice of some radio stations which broadcast demoralising and demeaning messages about other groups and political parties. This was particularly prevalent during the 2007 elections (see the case study below). This tactic is still applied by some radio stations, as well as some print media, to perpetuate negative perceptions about the “other”. These messages are used by political parties, criminal groups and even groups involved in community conflicts.

#### CHART 4<sup>37</sup>

#### DO MEDIA PLAY A ROLE IN INCITING VIOLENCE AMONG YOUTH?



The following example of the role of media and youth in the 2007 national election shows the different ways in which youth and media can combine as both positive and negative forces in violent conflict.

### 3.1.4 CASE STUDY: THE ROLE OF YOUTH AND MEDIA IN THE 2007 ELECTIONS

The 2007 general election was the second since the war ended in 2002. The constitution prevented President Kabbah from seeking re-election, which led to anxiety among the public as to who would be the next president. The run up to the elections saw high levels of media coverage and, in spite of the establishment of a Media Code of Conduct, there were still many cases of unethical practice and airing of malicious programmes<sup>38</sup>.

IRN, UN Radio, the BBC, and SLBS all worked to provide conflict-sensitive broadcasting of impartial and accurate information before and during the elections. Listener numbers were high (70 percent listened to UN Radio alone<sup>39</sup>), and this encouraged Sierra Leoneans to vote.

<sup>37</sup> Results of SFCG survey in August 2011.

<sup>38</sup> UNDP (2007). *Monitoring Panel for Media Code of Conduct on Coverage of Sierra Leone's Electoral Process appreciates Media compliance*. Sierra Leone. Available at [http://www.sl.undp.org/4\\_media/Newsroom/Media\\_Monitor\\_Panel.htm](http://www.sl.undp.org/4_media/Newsroom/Media_Monitor_Panel.htm)

<sup>39</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2007). *Sierra Leone Presidential and Parliamentary Elections 11 August 2007 and Run-off Presidential Election 08 September 2007: Report of the Commonwealth Observer Group*. London. Available at [http://www.thecommonwealth.org/shared\\_asp\\_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=170435](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=170435)

Beside interventions aimed at sensitising voters, the two major parties (the APC and SLPP) ran their own radio stations during the elections. These radio stations constantly broadcast messages aimed at persuading people to vote for them. Some of the hosted discussions played songs and aired public service announcements which contained more extreme messages, insinuating that more aggressive action might be needed. At times the radio stations even announced the location of ballot boxes and called upon young people to disrupt transportation. Newspapers were also heavily politicised, with rumours of many media houses being bribed or threatened to publish articles favouring different parties.

In this politically charged environment, youth were sought-after targets for both positive and negative election campaigning. Many respondents in the SFCG survey testified that youths were used in political rallies and violent demonstrations. One respondent recalls:

*During the election day, on APC radio, very disturbing news was broadcast that the SLPP were taking away the ballot boxes from Siaka Stevens Street in Freetown. All the APC youth gathered at the destination and didn't allow the van to pass. They started fighting when the SLPP youth came there too. At the time, armed police had to come and had to be deployed all over Freetown.*

MICHAEL KAILE

However, some young people were also trained to sensitise people to the importance of elections and how to vote. A young respondent recalled:

*I was fifteen years old during the 2007 elections. I was too young to vote but I was part of a youth club in Bo. I learned how to sensitise people from the IRN radio member. So a group of us went around houses of our community with flyers showing people how to vote. I also volunteered in controlling the queues during the Election Day.*

EMMANUEL KONDEH GOLIA

These two anecdotes show the contrasting roles which young people played during the 2007 elections. While political parties used media to mobilise youth to incite violence, different organisations successfully appealed to youth to help sensitise constituencies and ensure the elections ran smoothly.

After the elections, Sierra Leone's Vice President, Samuel Sam-Sumana, ordered an indefinite ban on radio stations owned by the ruling APC (Rising Sun FM) and its main rival, the SLPP (Radio Unity) for fear that violence would follow the increase in inflammatory broadcasts by the two radio stations, and would undermine the possibility of peace and stability following the elections<sup>40</sup>.

40 L. Fofana. 'Radio Stations Banned for Inciting Violence', *Inter Press Service News Agency*, 20th March 2009. Available at <http://ipsnews.net/africa/nota.asp?idnews=46201>

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has outlined the media landscape in Sierra Leone and reflected on the role of media and youth in relation to violence in the period following the declaration of peace in 2002. The research showed that both media and youth can play positive and negative roles in terms of conflict and conflict prevention. We saw that politically motivated media and particularly the use of “hate messaging” was one clear driver of violence. However, community radio stations were seen as a force for peace and provided training for young people to go out into the community and sensitise community members to the importance of elections and how to vote. The 2007 elections illustrated these two roles: media were misused to mobilise young people to create obstructions and incite violence during the elections, yet also showed the positive potential of young people and the media.

Recommendations for promoting peace and stability in Sierra Leone go far beyond the role of media and youth. Recent publications have highlighted the need for continued improvements in post-war governance, including greater decentralisation and inclusion, restoration of trust in politics and democratic processes, greater representation of marginalised groups in politics, and resource governance reforms. In the reintegration and reconciliation sphere there have been calls for the need to work with alienated youth and concentrate on reconciliation to overcome mistrust and trauma through Truth and Reconciliation Commissions<sup>41</sup>. From the analysis conducted for this report, a number of more specific recommendations can be made to help media and youth play a more positive role in averting violent conflict and providing early warning signals:

- The Independent Media Commission (IMC) should be supported by international organisations to strengthen its oversight practices and improve media regulation to prevent inflammatory reporting and “hate speech”;
- Foreign interventions could support media houses to become more economically viable, improve professional standards and be more resilient against political influence;
- Channels of communication between media houses, youth groups, the Sierra Leonean state, and other concerned international and regional organisations (e.g. UN, ECOWAS) should be established;
- International donors should continue to provide support to train journalists on rumour management and professional conflict-sensitive reporting (particularly regarding election coverage)<sup>42</sup>;
- Donors should prioritise on, explore and encourage the use of mobile phones as a tool for conflict early warning and monitoring systems.

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41 For more information see two recent publications which set out these wider changes needed to bring about peace and stability: Conciliation Resources (2012). *Accord Issue 23: Consolidating Peace Liberia and Sierra Leone*. London. Available at [http://www.c-r.org/sites/www.c-r.org/files/Accord23\\_LowResVersion.pdf](http://www.c-r.org/sites/www.c-r.org/files/Accord23_LowResVersion.pdf); Africa Research (2011). *Old Tricks, Young Guns. Elections and Violence in Sierra Leone*. London. Available at <http://africaresearchinstitute.org/files/briefing-notes/docs/Old-Tricks-Young-Guns-Elections-and-violence-in-Sierra-Leone-22ZK27SBXD.pdf>

42 R. Armao (2012). *Covering Elections: The Challenges of Training the Watchdogs*. CIMA.



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c/o International Alert  
205 Rue Belliard, B-1040 Brussels Tel: +32 (0) 2 234 5792 Fax: +32 (0) 2 234 5799  
ifp-ew@international-alert.org www.ifp-ew.eu



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