

**Training Workshop on
Youth, Media and Conflict Sensitive Reporting in Elections
Crystal Hotel, Gbarnga, Bong County, Liberia**

Tuesday, May 31 - Wednesday, June 1, 2011

Summary Report

Background

The **Initiative for Peacebuilding – Early Warning Analysis to Action** (IfP-EW) is a project led by a consortium of 10 NGOs funded by the European Union's Instrument for Stability. Organized in four clusters, it aims to develop and harness international knowledge and expertise in the field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In particular its objective is to ensure that all stakeholders, including EU institutions, can access strong, independent, locally-derived analysis in order to facilitate better informed and more evidence-based policy and programming decisions.

The objective of the **Media, Information Flows and Conflict Cluster of the IfP-EW** is to analyse the ways formal and informal media operate within conflict-affected and divided societies in order to understand how information provision can be better supported by the EU and other international partners. It aims to achieve this by conducting research and capacity-building training with representatives of the media sector in a number of conflict-affected contexts: Kosovo/Serbia, Liberia, Nepal, Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste.

In **Liberia**, International Alert began research on the inter-relationship between media, information flows and conflict in November 2009, with field research in Monrovia, Bong, Lofa and Grand Gedeh counties conducted in February-May 2010. A briefing paper summarising findings and presenting recommendations to the EU and other donors will be produced later in 2011 and launched at an expert roundtable in Monrovia. Alert will also conduct an exchange of journalists between Liberia and Nepal to share experiences and challenges of post-conflict journalism.

Concept and Objectives

The two-day interactive workshop in Gbarnga was delivered by International Alert in association with the Alliance of Liberian Community Radio (ALICOR) and the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY) as part of the IfP-EW project on Media, Information Flows and Conflict in Liberia. A second workshop was held in Monrovia two days later. The workshops were held three months ahead of a planned constitutional referendum and five months ahead of general elections in Liberia. Participants came from the three most conflict-affected counties during Liberia's 1989-2003 civil war: Bong, Lofa and Nimba counties. These counties were also expected to be among the most closely contested in the forthcoming elections and had suffered relatively high instances of inter-communal or anti-state violence in recent years.

The objectives were:

1. To provide introductory training to community radio reporters and producers as well as youth leaders on the importance and practice of conflict-sensitive reporting;
2. To examine the perspectives and challenges of journalists in rural and border areas when reporting during sensitive periods like the elections;
3. To document experiences, in order to feed into a briefing paper on media, information flows and conflict in Liberia;
4. To highlight and focus on the youth factor in the elections of 2011 and build connections between local youth and media.

The event was held with financial assistance of the EU. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of IfP-EW/International Alert and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the EU.



Day 1: Tuesday 31 May

1. Welcome and Introductions

Jackson W. Speare, II - International Alert, Liberia Head of Office,

In his welcome and opening remarks Mr Speare introduced the objectives of the workshop and highlighted the importance and vulnerability of Media and Youth as stakeholders and actors in the Liberian post-conflict elections. Understanding the causes of violent conflict in Liberian society is part of that, as is understanding how to report in a manner that prevents or mitigates rather than inflames conflict. An alliance between journalists and youth leaders could be an important means to promote peaceful elections; a second workshop later in the week would present ideas generated in this workshop to their colleagues in Monrovia. He said the session would be interactive and urged the participants to discuss freely.

Richard Reeve - Manager for Security and Peacebuilding, International Alert (London)

Mr Reeve, the chief researcher, introduced the IFP-EW consortium, its objectives and their application in Liberia. He cited the example of deadly violence in Voinjama in February 2010, sparked by incendiary rumours from the other end of Lofa County. Key knowledge the project seeks include: how people in rural Liberia get information; how information is transmitted; how the youths and media help to shape information; conflict sensitive reporting and generally how the media and youths help to promote peaceful assembly around the election.

James Wolo, Professor of Development Communications, University of Liberia, Head of Media Monitoring at UNMIL and Chair of Alliance of Liberian Community Radio (ALICOR)

Prof Wolo, the lead facilitator, reminded the participants of their importance to the forthcoming electoral processes: referendum in August and national elections in October/November. He recounted several stories from his long experience of journalism in Liberia, through the civil wars, highlighting the importance of journalism in promoting facts, communication and reconciliation.

2. Introduction of Participants: How do media influence conflict in Liberia?

The 15 participants came from four counties of northwest Liberia: Bong, Lofa, Montserrado and Nimba. They represented nine community radio stations, UNMIL Radio and four county chapters of the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY).

The participants then introduced themselves and shared their experiences of the interplay between media and conflict in Liberia.

- In **Saclepea**, central Nimba County, community radio was used to explain the voter identification process and ease concerns over the activism of a new political party.
- In **Jorwah**, northern Bong County, a small town on the Guinea border, people worry about the situation in southern Guinea [highly volatile in 2009-10] and the treatment of cross-border women traders. Community radio broadcasts in the common Kpelle language, informing both sides of the border and receiving phone calls from listeners in both countries. Radio staff are involved in the cross-border Moma Development Association.
- In **Bong Mines**, western Bong County, youths burned a police station because they felt police did little to remedy the killing of a child and the people had no information on what was being done. A community radio station was then built. When a second child went missing, the radio was used to disseminate information and appeals for help. The child was found and there was no violence.
- In **Zorzor**, Lofa County, young people were going missing, leading to suspicions that they were being killed for use of body parts in traditional medicine. The youths felt that the elders and zoes (Poro society leaders) were responsible for the disappearances. In the context of incendiary rumours of involvement, houses were burnt and one old man stabbed. The radio station played a vital role in calming tensions by broadcasting the different sides of what happened.
- In **northern Nimba County** Female Genital Mutilation at bush schools was prominent, causing setbacks to girls' education. The County Superintendent used local radio to appeal to the traditionalists and parents who were not satisfied and wanted to storm the bush school. This brought calm (and the girls) back to the town.
- In **Gbarnga**, Bong County, the high rate of killings involving young people especially motorcyclists was not being addressed by the police. He spoke of the need for reconciliation to take root, criticizing the TRC process in Bong County alleging that it failed to address its intended purpose.

- In **Zota**, northern Bong County, there was a mysterious disappearance of a boy, which had the potential of causing chaos. Local radio was used to convene youths to find a peaceful course of action in finding the missing boy.
- In **Monrovia** mob violence often results in the killing of suspected criminals, and sometimes attacks on their families too. The youth intervened, persuading the police to establish a sub police station and also appealed to the youth not to use violence in pursuing perpetrators.
- In **Vahun**, Lofa County, a woman fled domestic abuse by her husband in her village and went to seek help from a chief and a women's group in town. The women's group mobilized some 50 women to march from Vahun town to the village, where they reportedly caused disorder and confiscated property and cattle. The District Commission used the community radio to appeal for calm and recall the women and husband to town for judgement and resolution.
- In **Voinjama**, Lofa County, while the community radio station was closed for a staff training workshop, rumours spread of an imminent invasion from Guinea. The journalists returned to work, investigated the rumours and used the radio to counter them and appeal to people not to flee the town.
- In **Ganta**, Nimba County, FLY mediated a potentially violent conflict between two political parties around a party convention.

3. What is Conflict?

The group discussed individual ideas of conflict and what the ingredients of conflict are. Prof. Wolo provided a working definition from the Oxford English Dictionary and then asked the participants about their views on what brings about conflict.

- Conflict arises when people are not well informed or when the actual facts about specific issues are lacking.
- Conflict arises when there is a lack of understanding or ignorance of the facts.
- Is an election a type of conflict? What is the purpose of election? Meant to bring about change in leadership. But meant to happen within a context where contestants and voters understand, accept and observe the rules of the game without recourse to violence.
- Violent conflict is very different from a conflict of ideas or priorities.

Early warning and early response - What can we as youths and media people do in order that political conflict does not flare into violence?

- Peer education- youth should spearhead sensitizing other youths.
- Appropriate Language usage- use of common language or vernacular in educating and sensitizing the youths.

- Use existing structures acceptable and credible to the youths. In the event where there is a conflict, a mediation group be formed from among the various groups as a means of uniting the various groups.
- There could be a reconciliation committee to bring all the youths under one umbrella at various hotspots.

A brief discussion of “youth conflict enclaves” identified ten of Liberia’s 15 counties.

Discussion of issues that tend to cause conflict among Liberian youth followed.

4. What is good journalism?

Key message: **Accuracy + Impartiality (balance) + Responsibility = Reliability**

Reliability is key to public trust in the media, without which it is propaganda.

Reliable independent and diverse media are key for democracy to flourish.

Sustainability is also key to impartiality – community radio stations need good business models and planning to avoid having to seek/accept money from special interests/politicians.

Professor Wolo made a presentation on the tensions between journalistic professionalism and patriotism, emphasizing love for one’s country in the exercise of professional duties and the importance of presenting a realistic rather than simply a negative perspective.

****LUNCH****

5. What is Conflict-Sensitive Reporting?

Prof. Wolo began the session with a checklist for Conflict Sensitive Reporting, which included:

- Avoid reporting the conflict as consisting of two opposing sides. Find others affected interests and include their stories, opinions and goals.
- Go beyond the elites and avoid defining the conflict by always quoting the leaders who make familiar demands.
- Avoid reporting only what divides the sides in the conflict.
- Avoid sensationalist words such as ‘devastated’ or ‘tragedy’ to describe what has been done to one group.

- Avoid focusing on the fears and suffering of only one side.
- Avoid loaded words like ‘terrorists’, ‘fanatics’ and ‘extremists’
- Avoid emotional and imprecise (or falsely precise) words like massacre, decimate, assassination, etc.
- Avoid presenting opinion as fact.

He reminded the journalists to invite youth leaders in a bid to give them the opportunity to express their views on how they can contribute to settling conflict. He also told them to remember that they have a role in assisting youth contribute to the facilitation of peace. Atayeh Forums were suggested as a type of political discussion forum by which young people could engage in politics and informal information provision, discussing what they had read or heard on the radio.

6. Group work on media and youth strategies for a violence-free election

Participants were split into three groups of five persons each, with the youth representatives forming one while the ten media representatives were sub-divided into two groups. They were assigned to discuss and report to plenary on the roles of their respective sectors in ensuring a violence-free election in Liberia.

Day2: Wednesday 1 June

1. Media, Youth and Violence-free Elections

The day started with the presentation of group reports from the previous day’s assignment given on the roles of the media and youth in ensuring a violence-free election in Liberia.

Group one - Media

- Sensitize people and create awareness by producing programs in various local languages.
- Provide equal airtime to all candidates without favouring any particular candidate.
- Avoid the use of profane language by one candidate against opponents.
- Design youth-oriented programs and engage youth participation regarding the election and conflict prevention.

Peer critique

The media must first understand the electioneering process, rules and guidelines, including the referendum so as to effectively disseminate information on them. Election laws and guidelines should be made available to community radio. For the media there is a problem of information flow from central government to the rural areas.

Group two - Media

- Improve capacity to provide early warning by producing programs including talk shows that seek to gauge feedback from the audience of issues of concern.
- Produce dramas in local languages to educate and change behavior.
- Be informed about the electoral process to adequately inform others.
- Exercise neutrality; don't take side; give access to all candidates; gain proper accreditation at polling sites.

Peer critique:

Journalists are becoming opinionated and not allowing the views of others to be heard. They do not know or observe the Press Union of Liberia Code of Conduct. One challenge the media faces is clearly knowing the audience or else they are wasting time. Then they must speak the language the people are used to and will listen to. Media should encourage local dramatic groups in helping to tell the story or explain an idea.

Group Three - FLY - Youths role in preventing conflict in the pending elections

- Understanding the election process through peer education
- To participate in process, youth must have the willingness to understand
- To help prevent election violence, youth and media should engage each other on their role in elections process
- Prevent on-site election violence- commit youth to a violence-free election
- Refusing to take negative pieces of advice from ill-intended politicians
- Youth promote tolerance in the midst of political divergence. Look more to what we have in common
- Network youth activities among various political youths
- Promote political dialogue among community youths to enable young people to know and understand what is on-going.
- Youth engaging election authorities in the counties to be informed as to what they are doing and make them more effective.
- Establish a youth monitoring team; youth leaders should serve as observers to help quell trouble.
- Accredite youth groups/leaders as observers to monitor the process; relating a form of inclusion.

Challenges: limited/inadequate support from government and partners to carry out their functions. Need to build the capacity of youths to execute their functions. Youths lack relevant and targeted information to youths on electoral processes.

2. Group Work: Priorities for Conflict-Sensitive Election Work

Another group work to refine the initial report to include goals, challenges and recommendations for peaceful election that would form a draft of the workshop declaration.

****LUNCH****

3. Challenges to Reporting on Elections, 2012

The two media groups reported: on the need to train the local media, citing that election coverage and reporting as well as other specialized training was important for the media to function effectively. They also mentioned that the media must be sensitive to early warning signs and produce programs such as talk shows and jingles as a way of reaching their diverse audiences while providing adequate and relevant information to listeners and readers.

Group 1 - Media A

- lack of disseminated election laws;
- infrastructure: logistics, broadcasting equipment and mobility;
- lack of specialized training on election process;
- financial constraints.

Group 2 - Media B

- media institutions should be empowered to address the issues of: limited information, i.e. elections code of conduct, election laws;
- most media practitioners lack training and technical capacity.
- Information technology is critical; many still use obsolete equipment - computers, internet are lacking;
- staff compensation.

In their strategies for peaceful elections the media groups recommended that:

- Jingles and targeted election messages be produced in simple English or vernacular languages for women and youth groups at community level;

- Media institutions abide by the PUL Code of Conduct; avoid the use of hate messages, and give equal access to all contestants;
- Provision of modern media equipment to facilitate quality output;
- NEC and partners build capacity of media practitioners

Group 3 - FLY

Challenges to Youth

- lack of basic technical and vocational skills for economic empowerment;
- drugs and substance abuse;
- youth involvement and exclusion from governance;
- promoting and supporting youth leadership in transforming youth into adulthood;
- unemployment;
- poor education leads to lack of empowerment.

FLY Strategy: formulation of youth-youth network and election monitoring group.

Recommendations:

- all institutions make use of local media to inform the people;
- election laws be made available to all media houses;
- election officials/magistrates make use of local radio stations.

4. Conflict Sensitive Journalism

Good reporting reduces conflict: Practice impartiality; do not *interpret* speech of respondents; think about the potential of your words to inflame conflict tensions; report on who is trying to resolve the conflict and how.

In the face of potential conflict the media becomes:

- Information provider
- Watchdog –bridging the gap between the public and the government
- Gatekeeper - first to get information to pass unto the public.
- Diplomat –negotiating with people on how they can participate in the process
- Peacemaker- bridging the gap between people/groups in conflict

Media's role in conflict management and mitigation:

- Bridging the communication gap
- Educating the audience on how to vote
- Building confidence – e.g. in election campaign activities

- Correcting misperception and focusing on facts

Conflict sensitive journalists chose their words carefully, they try to quell the situation instead of enflaming it.

Understanding types of violence:

- Cultural violence or ethnic/religious/tribal prejudice
- Xenophobia
- Myths and legends
- Religious justification
- Gender discrimination

Politicians should sign-up to written guidelines by the media not to use hate words against political opponents.

5. Developing a Communication Strategy on Conflict Mitigation and Prevention

Following his presentation, the participants began working on the text of the Gbarnga Declaration on Youth, Media and Information Flow for Peaceful Elections in Liberia, 2011, which was concluded and subsequently signed by all represented.

Appendix - Gbarnga Declaration on Youth, Media and Information Flows for Peaceful Elections in Liberia, 2011

Preamble

Liberia goes to the polls in October 2011. This election presents a new challenge for the people of Liberia in that sectors such as the youth and media would be responsible for creating a conducive and appropriate environment for conducting a peaceful electoral process. Representatives of ten members of the Liberia Community Radio and five representatives of the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY) meeting in Gbarnga, Bong County from 31 May -1 June 2011 under the facilitation of International Alert as part of the Initiative for Peacebuilding-Early Warning discussed the challenges and opportunities for peacebuilding in Liberia in respect of youth and in the electoral period. At the interactive workshop, participant identified a number of challenges to the peaceful conclusion of elections in Liberia and the full and free participation of youths and youth organizations and the media in the electoral process. Participants committed themselves to free, fair and peaceful elections and identified strategies to bring the youths and media together to share information, promote reconciliation and democracy and prevent conflict.

Recommendations were produced to advocate best practices and policies to media practitioners, youth organizations, the National Election Commission, Government of Liberia and their local and international partners during the 2011 electoral period.

Goals

- To ensure the conduct of a free, fair and democratic non-violent election through which the electorate is well informed; to encourage a wider participation of the people particularly youth, women with the media and youth working in collaboration with the NEC, civil society and the government of Liberia in a way that it is sensitive to conflict in Liberia.

Being mindful that the youth constitutes more than 60% of the Liberian population and that the media play a vital role in guaranteeing the freedom for a democratic electoral process;

We the participants do hereby commit ourselves to fully contribute to the success of the elections by utilizing the opportunity the media provides in educating, informing and sensitizing the public to a violence-free election.

Early warning

- Insufficient engagement of youths and the media in the electoral process.
- Inadequate dissemination of electoral information to the public.
- Limited specialized training for media practitioners for election coverage and reporting of election law and procedures.
- Vulnerability of youth and the media to political influence

Strategy

To ensure a free, fair and transparent non-violent election:

- Election information should be disseminated in the local vernaculars and simple Liberian English;
- Community leaders should engage youth and women in discussing election issues;
- The Liberian media should adhere to conflict sensitive reporting; practice PUL Code of Conduct; avoid hate speech;
- Youths should be engaged in peer education on election information dissemination;
- Youth organizations and the NEC should engage with each other;
- Political parties' youth should engage in promoting a conflict-free election.

Recommendations

We the participants recommend that:

- The NEC provides full information to media and youths on electoral procedures and laws. The youth and media require the full support of civil society, NEC, local and international organizations and the government in order that we fully participate in a violence-free election for sustaining and building peace in Liberia in the electoral and post electoral period.

Done under our hand and seal on this 1st day of June AD 2011 in the city of Gbarnga, Bong County, Republic of Liberia.

1. Robert Y. Matally _____ Radio Saclepea, Nimba County
2. Alexander T.Kukah _____ Radio Bong Mines, Bong County
3. Tiletor T. Folonkpala _____ Radio Jorwah, Bong County

4. Beatrice Kruah _____Radio Karn, Nimba County
5. Maxwell Dolo _____Radio Zota, Bong County
6. Abdus N. Sannoh _____Radio Vahun, Lofa County
7. John Gayflor _____Radio Kintoma, Voinjama, Lofa County
8. Flamah Howard _____FLY, Lofa County
9. Jerome L. Tarbolo _____FLY, Montserrado County
10. Daniel F. Weetol _____FLY, Bong County
11. Amos Williams _____FLY
12. Aaron Garziah _____FLY, Nimba County
13. George P.S. Tartee, Sr. _____Radio Totota, Bong County
14. T. Quaqua Miller _____Radio Life, Zorzor, Lofa County
15. Chester Dolo _____Radio Kergheamahn, Ganta, Nimba County