

**Workshop on  
Media, Youth and Conflict in Liberia: Challenges and Opportunities**  
Corina Hotel, Monrovia, Montserrado County, Liberia

Friday June 3, 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 half-day interactive workshop in Monrovia was delivered by International Alert in association with the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY) as part of the IfP-EW project on Media, Information Flows and Conflict in Liberia. A prior workshop was held in Gbarnga the same week. 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 Monrovia area (Liberia's capital city and home to one-third of its people) and represented print media, commercial radio, UNMIL Radio and the professional organisations Press Union of Liberia (PUL) and Female Journalists Association of Liberia (FEJAL). The workshop was structured around a series of discussion questions on challenges facing the media and the presentation of the Declaration on Youth, Media and Information Flows for Peaceful Elections in Liberia, 2011, agreed by the participants in Gbarnga on 1 June.

The objectives were:

1. To examine the perspectives and challenges of journalists in Monrovia and nationally, especially when reporting during sensitive periods like the elections;
2. To document experiences, in order to feed into a briefing paper on media, information flows and conflict in Liberia;
3. To highlight and focus on the youth factor in the elections of 2011 and build connections between youth and media in Monrovia and between capital and counties.

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.



## Welcome and Introductions

**International Alert Liberia Head of Office Jackson W. Speare, II** welcomed the participants and spoke of the workshop in Gbarnga and its Declaration. He spoke of the importance of understanding the media context in Liberia for the EU and other donors to better respond to challenges facing the media in the present context.

**Professor James Wolo**, the chief facilitator, called on the youths and journalists to look at four key questions:

1. What are the pressures, challenges, impediments to good practice facing the Liberian media, especially during the electoral period?
2. How do media report on youth and youth issues?
3. How are the circumstances and conditions in which media operate in Monrovia different to up-country?
4. How can media and youth organizations work together and with the National Elections Commission (NEC) and other stakeholders to ensure peaceful election?

## Discussion

### Pressures, Challenges, Impediments to Good Media Practice

#### Financial independence vs. political independence

Media houses are faced with providing **equal access to all parties** but are commonly perceived to be doing favours to politicians and paymasters by giving differential coverage. The media is stigmatized by the people for perceived partiality. There is low trust.

Most media houses are striving to survive giving the **high cost of production**, be it print or electronic. During elections, politicians influence decisions by pumping their cash into the media. Media managers can only balance this financial influence if they have external sources of support (e.g. UNMIL, NGO- or Church-funded)

Many newspapers and radio stations owned by politicians are opened during election campaigns and can buy in (buy-off?) professional journalists with better salaries. But they close down after elections.

One journalist spoke of the stigma he experienced from past elections stressing that media heads need to explain to politicians that reporters are assigned beats and not just

present at rallies or press conferences because they have been paid to be there. Journalists need to be visibly identified at press conferences. However, to be independent journalists need to show that they are independent in the way they behave – which means not getting too close to any one party, therefore should rotate beats.

Media house cannot or will not cover their reporters' costs for transportation, lodging or welfare, meaning that journalists have to ask or accept bribes from parties/candidates and travel in their vehicles.

Managers and owners of media institutions decide who or which party to support in the elections, something that often causes friction between journalists and their employers.

The Government of Liberia is the biggest advertiser in the Liberian press and all journalists want to have access to the president and ministers, thus they are uncritical of the Unity Party and its politicians.

One participant dismissed the assertion that politicians favour certain media institutions, pointing out that most journalists go to party functions uninvited and thereby hope to receive 'kato'<sup>1</sup> for providing coverage. Many Liberians see journalists as 'prostituting their profession'.

### **Liberian media after UNMIL**

Journalists do not benefit from the huge amounts media house owners and managers get from advertising UN jobs or carrying UN jingles. Anyway, UNMIL takes a long time to pay its bills.

In the absence of UNMIL, there would be a need for the constitution of a Media Commission that would serve as a regulatory body for media institutions in the country to ensure good practice and no hate speech.

UNMIL is ignored or rarely criticized by Liberian journalists, who see it as impenetrable – “a kingdom unto itself”.

### **Reporting on youth and youth issues**

Young people don't understand the workings of the media and how powerful the media is. First is to engage youths to explain how the media work. Youths may not understand the issues and how they are addressed.

Media tend to assume youths are guilty and trouble-makers, not looking beyond certain behavior or protests to the politicians that inspired or paid for it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kato is Liberian English for a gift ('cadeau' in French) given with certain expectations.

Media does not reach out to youth groups unless there is a paid programme. “Young people only buy sports papers. If they don’t buy papers, how can we write for them?”

Liberian youth are psychologically traumatised by war and unemployment and need specialized programming.

A participant spoke of the need for FLY to lead the campaign in getting the young people engaged with the media. Professor Wolo likened this youth-to-youth engagement as comparable to the Crowd-50s or Crowd-60s community age-set groups which served as positive impact on peers in Liberian towns prior to the civil war.

### **Differences in media circumstances in Monrovia relative to the hinterland**

Bad roads hinder the distribution of newspapers outside of Monrovia. In the wet season, only UNMIL helicopters can carry newspapers and journalists to up-country areas.

Even a large newspaper like The Inquirer only produces 2,000 copies per day, of which only 750 may sell, the majority of them by subscription to UNMIL, INGOs and Government. There is no formal distribution beyond Montserrado.

Better to focus on radio for disseminating information up-country, because of illiteracy. Need to focus on local languages because few speak even simple English. But need to understand differences in dialects, too, as the wrong dialect can be off-putting or incomprehensible. Technical issues like electoral conduct and the substance of referendum provisions need to be explained in very simple language.

Professional journalists from Monrovia mentoring community radio journalists could be very useful in raising professional and ethical standards up-country. But the challenge is how to incentivize journalists to work outside Montserrado.

NEC needs to be more proactive in reaching out to the media with information about the referendum.

### **Promoting collaboration between Media and Youth for peaceful elections**

NEC could get involved to provide the relevant information to the media so that they disseminate to the youths and other stakeholders. Youth-to-youth engagement is desirable. Media and youth organizations could form a strong partnership in sensitizing the youths.

NEC needs to become more proactive in communicating and disseminating electoral information.

Youth could be involved more in production of dramas and youth-oriented programming.

How can young people be discouraged from joining political party 'task forces'<sup>2</sup> like in the 1980s or 2005?

FLY could work with its member organization and perhaps political party youth wings to establish and enforce a code of conduct or manifesto on peaceful behavior during elections. This would encourage dialogue and collaboration between youth and political parties.

Media organisations could agree to bar politicians bent on making hate speeches from gaining any coverage. This would require an enforced code of conduct and speaks to the importance of dialogue between the media, NEC and political parties.

## Conclusion

The participants were thanked for their active contributions. The Gbarnga Declaration on Youth, Media and Information Flows for Peaceful Elections in Liberia, 2011 was presented and endorsed by some of those present. The endorsed declaration was subsequently carried in a number of newspapers and read on the news by several radio stations.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Task Forces' were party-affiliated militia, armed, intimidating or violent groups of young men. In 2005 there were reports of such militants in military clothing in southeast Liberia. Such groups were commonly mobilised in electoral periods by parties in the three countries surrounding Liberia in 2007-11.