Roundtable on
Media, Information Flows and Conflict in Liberia
Conflict sensitive media practice in Liberia & Comparisons to experiences in Nepal

Hotel Provident, 9th Street, Sinkor, Monrovia

Tuesday March 20 2012

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. Two workshops to discuss challenges and opportunities in media's relationship with the conflict were held in Gbarnga (focusing on community radio) and Monrovia (print, commercial and national radio, journalist associations) in May-June 2011. The briefing paper *Sustaining the Conversation: Media, Information Flows and Conflict in Liberia* was produced in December 2011 and summarises findings and presents

recommendations to the EU and other donors and presented at the expert roundtable. Alert simultaneously conducted an exchange of journalists between Liberia and Nepal to share experiences and challenges of post-conflict journalism.

Objectives

1. To share the findings and recommendations from International Alert's research on media, information flows and conflict in Liberia through the launching of the IfP-EW report Sustaining the Conversation;
2. To compare experiences and challenges and opportunities for conflict-sensitive media practice between Liberian and Nepali experts and practitioners;
3. To inform the IfP-EW Media Cluster synthesis paper on working with media to prevent conflict.

Participants

There were 30 participants (including 6 International Alert staff and 2 visiting Nepali journalists) representing the following organisations:

Government of Liberia
- Ministry of Information Culture and Tourism

Media associations
- Association of Liberian Community Radio (ALICOR)
- Female Journalists Association of Liberia (FEJAL)
- Press Union of Liberia (PUL)

Broadcast media

- Fabric FM
- Love FM
- Popular FM99.5 - Nepal
- Radio Kerghema, Nimba County
- Radio Veritas
- Sky FM
- Truth FM/Real TV
- UNMIL Radio

Print media
- Daily Observer
- Front Page Africa
- Kantipur Publications - Nepal

Civil society and education
- International Alert (Liberia, Nepal and UK)
- IREX
- Liberia Media Center (LMC)
- Media United to Enhance Democracy (MUED)
- University of Liberia, Department of Development Communications
- West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)

Workshop Speakers

Jackson Speare, Country Manager, International Alert Liberia
Richard Reeve, Head of Research and New Initiatives, International Alert U.K
Hon. Isaac Jackson, Deputy Minister of Information, Government of Liberia.
Rabindra Gurung, Programme Officer, International Alert Nepal

Part I – Report Launch

The roundtable opened with welcome remarks by International Alert Liberia Head of Office Jackson W. Speare, II.

Presentation 1: International Alert Head of Research Richard Reeve presented the findings and recommendations of his report *Sustaining the Conversation: Media, Information Flows and Conflict in Liberia.*
The report focused on three questions:
1. How Liberians access information about their communities and nation?
2. How does the type of information they are able to access contribute to or undermine peace in Liberia.
3. What are the challenges to Liberia media in providing reliable information within the present context?

Four recommendations were presented:
1. Strengthen the professionalism and conflict-sensitive reporting capacity of Liberian media.
2. Assist Liberian media organisations to develop business plans and sustainability strategies
3. Work with the Liberian government, media, civil society, and the UN and other international actors to understand and anticipate the impact of the drawdown of UNMIL on the provision of reliable information.
4. Identify opportunities to harness mobile telephone networks and mobile internet for peacebuilding and conflict sensitive early warning and responses.

Government Response: Deputy Minister of Information for Public Affairs Hon. Isaac Jackson followed with a short presentation of his ministry. He emphasised that the government sees the media as a partner that helps to ensure that policies are disseminated to the population. He also made reference to Liberia's media-friendly laws, Liberia being the first West African country with a Freedom of Information (FoI) law. The Ministry is working on mechanisms to be able to provide requested information to media partners as per FoI. He underlined the important role of media in early warning of discontent and wrong-doing to ensure that sources of insecurity do not develop to conflicts but also indicated that the media is responsible for being conflict sensitive through not perpetuating inflammatory rumours nor broadcasting sensationalistic news.

Practitioner Responses: Responses to the presentations on IfP-EW/Alert's research in Liberia and Nepal were given by four Liberian expert media practitioners.

Rev B.B. Colley of WANEP

- **Lawrence Randall, Liberia Media Center Executive Director** – praised the government for introducing the FoI act and reiterated the crucial role for the media in holding the government to account, especially in its second term. He underlined the key question of what would happen to the Liberian media – especially the satellite-relayed UNMIL radio transmitters – once UNMIL drew down. Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS) does not have the technical capacity to take over these facilities.
- **Patmillia Doe Jlah, IREX Media Program Officer** – picked up on the issue of sustainability and business planning for community radio stations, something IREX is working on.
- **Prof. James Wolo, University of Liberia and ALICOR** – provided some information on the issues facing community radio in up-country Liberia and

some potential solutions from ALICOR to provide unified programming for its 52 member radio stations.

- **Rev. B.B. Colley, WANEP** – stressed the importance of dialogue through journalism rather than focus on adversarial issues.

Presentation 2: International Alert Nepal Senior Programme Officer Rabindra Gurung presented the findings and recommendations of his report *Journalism in Transition: Media, Information Flows and Conflict in Nepal.* He explored the differences and similarities of Nepal's media environment with that of Liberia. Challenges that the Nepali media face include: professionalization; practice and skills; politicization; impunity for violence against journalists**;** gender discrimination against female journalists; sustainability; dependency on aid and content from Kathmandu.

Part II – Roundtable Discussion

Key issues for discussion facilitated by Jackson Speare

- What are the common challenges faced by media in post-conflict countries?
- Liberia has an asset in FoI and that is can be openly discussed, but how can journalists benefit more from its FoI Act?
- How can a national dialogue around FoI and its implications be initiated? Now that the law exists, how will it be implemented?

Key points from discussions

- Nepali experiences with the Right to Information Act were shared. This includes provisions for ensuring the security of journalists. Implementation is weak and hindered by the extreme fragmentation of the media sector – there are too many small media houses for the sector to be sustainable or manageable.
- There were requests by the participants to know from the Ministry of Information on the status of the implementation of FoI. How can civil society help to implement FoI and how can the ministry support these efforts?
- Media representatives were concerned that government institutions were unable or unwilling to honour requests for information, especially if these were investigative of misconduct.
- In addition to mechanisms there needs to be sensitisation among government institutions of what information is for public consumption.
- A sensitisation campaign should also entail dissemination to community radios of the FoI law and the procedures it provides to access information.
- If outgoing Ministers follow the practice of removing their documentation from their offices when they leave post, there will be no information to access and no institutional memory.
- There is a lack of trust by government officials towards media, which inhibits officials from releasing information, fearing that it will not be used responsibly or accurately. Journalists should also understand that officials are bound to produce information within 30 days of request, not instantaneously.

- Government is working with the Carter Center for deployment of information commissioners, who will be responsible for the implementation of FoI in the 15 counties.

Suggestions for improvement:

- To ensure continued access to national news community radios could be linked into a larger network that produces and shares news and correspondents.
- County or regional level media hubs to pool correspondents, PUL/FEJAL/ALICOR representatives, technicians and spare parts would help to improve journalistic professionalism, legal knowledge and maintenance.
- Sustainability can be achieved if communities take ownership and responsibility for their local radio stations. Yet the challenges of programme quality remain formidable for such tiny operators: 52 community radios outside Monrovia serve average target populations of around 20,000 adults.
- Sustainability can be supported through increasing local business advertising revenue, local support by communities through initiatives such as cooperatives and through NGOs, government support through advertising, networking community radios, partnership with worldwide organisations that provide content and technical support, volunteers, and greater government support.

Closing remarks by Richard Reeve

Mr Reeve expressed his satisfaction that other organisations present were working on some of the issues raised in the Sustaining the Conversation report, including business sustainability and the dissemination of the FoI Act. He commented that the FoI was an important means for media to play their role in holding the government to account. The framework for the government holding the media to account and for media to guarantee their independence still required clarification. This was one of many issues that should be clarified prior to UNMIL withdrawing its role in monitoring

the media environment. Alert would engage more with UNMIL and stakeholders across Liberia in 2012 to consider the challenges of UNMIL drawdown, including for the media sector. He thanked the participants for their many contributions, which would help to inform the IFP-EW Media cluster synthesis paper, combining lessons from Liberia, Nepal, Sierra Leone and other conflict-affected countries. He hoped that many of the roundtable participants would be able to hold further discussions with the Nepali guests towards this end.

Closing remarks by Jackson Speare

Mr Speare thanked all the participants and especially the visitors from Nepal and the Deputy Minister for staying, contributing and responding to many questions throughout the roundtable. He invited the participants to continue their discussions over lunch.