

Search for Common Ground – Democratic Republic of Congo Key Findings from Media Mapping

A snapshot of the DRC media

Radio: 1 national public station (RTNC) and 355 private radio stations:
167 non-commercial stations, 107 commercial stations and 77 religious stations plus 4 international stations which broadcast in various parts of the country and radio Okapi (MONUC/Hirondelle Fondation), broadcasting nationwide.

Television: 51 channels in Kinshasa, 70 in various provinces

Press: 10 daily papers and 15 periodicals in Kinshasa

Founded in 1982, Search for Common Ground is an international non-governmental organisation dedicated to transforming how the world deals with conflict, moving away from adversarial approaches toward cooperative solutions. SFCG has been working in the Democratic Republic of Congo since 2001, initially to support the Inter-Congolese Dialogue and subsequently expanding its operations to include media production and training. Media performs various functions, including the provision of information, representation of different social groups, control and oversight and providing a forum for citizens to get their voices heard and for civil society to participate. News media plays an essential role in facilitating interaction between different authorities and between authorities and civil society; relations which lie at the heart of democracy. SFCG has therefore been developing a tool aimed at strengthening these relationships and to encourage reflection and frank discussion on positive experiences as well as difficulties.

EVALUATION SCOPE

With support from the Government of Finland, Search for Common Ground commissioned a study of the interactions between media, government and civil society in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This tool assesses the situation in the country against an ideal model of interaction that supports a healthy democracy and identifies dysfunctional areas as well as providing examples of good practices. Each section of the tool is accompanied by exercises to help future focus groups engage in discussion.

Three key questions the tool addresses are:

- How is information made available?
- What information is the public receiving and how is it being understood?
- What quality and quantity of information is required to ensure full participation and engagement of the public?

KEY FINDINGS

1. **Radio is the preferred source of information in the DRC** – In many areas it is the only form of media available – and generally the one in which people have the most trust. Nevertheless, it is rarely cited as a means for members of the public to get their voices heard, nor members of civil society.

2. Despite the plurality of local and national media throughout the country, Congolese people, especially women and the less educated, feel **under-informed** about major issues related to reconstruction and **disconnected from the democratic life of the country**.

Survey respondents were particularly critical of the lack of information available on decentralisation, resource management and good governance. Over half of those interviewed, especially those with lower levels of education, said they do not know how to get their voices heard by the authorities and a further 70% were convinced that their opinions are not taken into account by local representatives. Congolese people mostly see their principal means of democratic participation being through elections and “freedom of expression”, which are forms of “direct democracy”, rather than through collective participation such as political parties or local organisations.

3. This phenomenon is due to the **dysfunctional relationships between the media, government and civil society**.

The media is heavily controlled by the government and political interests with the result that public information is little more than propaganda delivery. As such, media is mostly used as a tool to wield political power. Both civil society and the media are seen as a threat to authority rather than as a possible channel for democratic dialogue.

“Journalists consider their work as services rendered to those who pay, and not as communication between the government and the public” – Head of the Ministry of Communication and Media

Journalists avoid printing critical articles for fear of legal or violent retribution and do not feel adequately protected by the law, executive, judiciary, nor associations that defend freedom of expression. Moreover, media leaders have stated that they consider “taboo” such subjects as defence and national security, the intelligence service, top-level authorities, the private life of the President, mining, execution of political

prisoners and military strategies in the Kivus.

While the emergence of community radio stations in the various provinces helps to compensate for the gap in public information, in addition to providing popular education and local news, most of them suffer from a lack of resources. In general, the quality of media reporting is affected by a shortage of resources. For example, in-depth investigations are rare because there is often no available transport and no internet access and the informal structure of both community and commercial private media makes it difficult to plan ongoing or future investigations. Basic standards of professional journalism, such as crosschecking are often not observed as many media providers, especially rural radio stations, cannot afford to employ qualified candidates. In any case, journalism schools are perceived as providing training that is too theoretical.

The media does little to ascertain what the population thinks or wants, instead considering its role to be to “educate” the public and deliver information in a top-down fashion. The media also perceives civil society as disorganised and shows the same distrust towards it as does the government, despite civil society’s focus on training and building awareness instead of militant activism. For its part, civil society tends to use the media to deliver specific messages, rather than to open up dialogue and participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the media

1. **Build relationships with civil society** by working on-the-ground, systematically seeking out civil society associations qualified to give information on topics in the news, providing opportunities for the public to call in and ask questions and showing a willingness to receive relevant information and tailor content accordingly.
2. **Prioritise the provision of comprehensible and accessible information which does not shy away from criticism** based on in-depth and cross-checked investigations that are carried out by organizations rather than being personal propaganda initiatives.
3. **Favour positive and action oriented information** which aims to solve problems and lets the public know in advance of opportunities to participate, such as demonstrations and meetings.
4. **Strengthen journalists’ associations** which could provide an important nexus within civil society and facilitate regular contact

- between journalists, activists and the general public, as well as challenge prevailing media practices as dictated by clientelistic media owners
5. **Form partnerships between major national and local media** to help small and under-resourced stations take advantage of their position as channels for bottom-up, democratic expression.

For public institutions

1. Develop communication and information services
2. Produce materials (e.g. annual reports) that provide information on their work and improve their visibility

For civil society

1. **Use simple and appropriate communication tools** (e.g. booklets, project summaries) to help journalists understand the basic objectives and work of each association and adopt strategic tools such as logos, slogans and communication plans for each event.
2. **Produce a public version of annual activity reports** to give visibility to the work achieved.
3. **Discourage the public from accepting mediocrity as the norm** by building a sense of responsibility around demands for quality information and facilitating closer scrutiny, for example, by creating media consumer associations.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Société Experts for SFCG carried out a sample survey of 864 people comprised of groups of about 30 men and women from 26 town districts (split into age groups of less than 35 and more than 40), as well as 12 in-depth interviews with key figures in the administration, media and civil society in each location. This was followed by a series of qualitative interviews with 46 opinion leaders in Kinshasa: 15 from the media sector, 12 from public authorities and 19 from civil society.

This document is a summary of a September 2008 Media Mapping Survey in DRC. A full copy of this report can be acquired by contacting Frances Fortune at ffortune@sfcg.org.

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