

An Assessment of the Role of Community Radio in Peacebuilding and Development: Case Studies in Liberia and Sierra Leone

Radio Life (Zorzor, Lofa County, Liberia)
Radio Kergheamahn (Ganta, Nimba County, Liberia)
Radio Wanjei (Pujehun District, Sierra Leone)
Radio Kolenten (Kambia District, Sierra Leone)

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Introduction

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has been working in Liberia since 1997 and in Sierra Leone since 2000. SFCG's Talking Drum Studio, with offices in Monrovia and Freetown, has established its brand across the region as a leader in peacebuilding through community radio programming and related activities. As Sierra Leone and Liberia have transitioned from violence to peace, SFCG has supported the process with public information, dialogue, community outreach and capacity building through radio projects like news shows, soap operas, and community outreach projects. This emphasis on an inclusive approach to community problem solving has formed the foundation of SFCG's peacebuilding work for over a decade in the region. With ten years of experience utilizing community radio in Sierra Leone and Liberia for the promotion of peace, SFCG has strong reason to believe in community radio's capacity to promote a transparent, accountable, and participatory development process in these countries.



Radio Life Manager QuaQua Miller (right)

In June of this year, SFCG recruited four interns¹ to undertake a learning evaluation of four community radio stations in rural Sierra Leone and Liberia. The evaluation focused on areas still struggling to achieve meaningful development in a post-conflict setting and was designed to assess the relationships between drivers of development and community radio stations. Current radio programming was also analyzed for its impact on local development processes while an audience survey and focus groups were used to better understand audience perceptions and uses of local radio. Lastly, radio stations were evaluated in their capacity as independent development agents with an eye towards ongoing peacebuilding functions. This

Location Backgrounds

Liberia:

Located in Nimba County, Radio Kergheamahn has been broadcasting since 2002, though interrupted for two years during Liberia's Second Civil War. Nimba County is located in the north-central portion of Liberia, a crucial fighting ground when rebel forces entered the country through the Guinean border.

Located in Lofa County, Radio Life is the only available radio station and the principal source of both news and entertainment for two of the county's six districts: Zorzor and Salayea. According to County figures, over 95% of those currently residing in these areas were displaced during the war and nearly 50% of all current residents have only returned to the area in the last five years. At present the bulk of development activities focus on achieving basic amenities and services for Lofians across the county.

Sierra Leone:

Radio Wanjei is the only radio station available in Pujehun district and the primary source of both news and entertainment. Located in the southern province of Sierra Leone, it shares its eastern border with Liberia and is considered one of the most underdeveloped districts in Sierra Leone. The civil war in Sierra Leone began here in 1991 suffered an especially high amount of devastation throughout the 10-year war. Seven years later, the district has been unable to rebuild much of the destroyed infrastructure or regain its exporting farming activities. Amputees, widows, and orphans are in high number and still find difficulty with daily survival tasks.

Kambia District is situated in Sierra Leone's Northern Province, and borders Guinea to the North. When the civil war reached the area, most of its population of over 270,000 fled to Guinea. Radio Kolenten began broadcasting in December 2005 to address injustices and inequalities in the district, raise awareness of governance mechanisms, and to further development and peacebuilding.

¹ Cyrus Ahalt (Radio Life), Lisa Inks (Radio Wanjei), Simone Grant (Radio Kergheamahn), Immanuel Wolff (Radio Kolenten)

evaluation drew on four weeks of field-based data collected and was conducted through programming and schedule analyses, individual stakeholder interviews, broad-based listener surveys, focus group discussions, and close analyses of radio stations' management, staff, and operations.

Development Actors and the Radio

In communities across both countries, leaders are perceived as generally knowing their communities' needs but government-led development processes significantly lack accountability and transparency. The quantity and quality of information dissemination differs across the regions in this study. However, feedback mechanisms were sorely lacking at all locations and primarily informal where present. Community radio stations are significantly impacting development in their communities via strong relationships with a number of International and local NGOs. Impact falls across two categories:

- Vital support for program implementation and coordination for development drivers, leading to improved efficiency, broader reach, accountability, and community feedback.
- Regular airing of education and awareness programming via partnerships with INGOs like Search for Common Ground and others. Such programming has yielded demonstrable results in changing attitudes and behaviors with regard to, for example, women's rights (including gender based violence and rape), health, education, and nonviolent local conflict resolution.

Relationships between political actors and radio are significant. Political tensions between actors and radio stations were observed resulting in incomplete or biased information, financial constraints on the radio, interruptions in radio broadcasts, and can even threaten peace in the community. However, across the four communities in this study, government at the most local levels engages radio, viewing local stations as an important tool for information-sharing. Specifically, radio stations in all locations have the option of attending monthly development-oriented planning and review meetings run by local government leaders. Though capacity constraints can limit participation in some places, in others these meetings yielded meaningful results and notably increased community knowledge of local development plans and activities.

Evidence from all four locations considered in this study also revealed strong relationships between radio and civil society organizations (CSOs). Trade unions, women's groups, youth groups, religious associations, teachers unions, and special interest groups all use radio to communicate important messages to respective memberships, improve their organizational profiles, voice their concerns to the community, and mobilize community-members to change attitudes and behaviors. Through their use of radio, CSOs experience improved efficiency and development outcomes relative to their own goals. In addition, many CSOs see radio as their primary tool for raising community awareness on issues important to them and influencing the public dialogue.

Overall, community radio plays a central role in disseminating information related to development and in improving development outcomes through partnerships with development actors at all levels. However, radio impact at present is often reliant on the cooperation of government. In addition, community radio stations are making limited use of their power as media outlets to compel government participation in media.

Evaluation Tools and Questions

The assessment was conducted in June 2009 based on a qualitative research method to better understand the impact of community radio in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Using surveys, key informant interviews, focus groups, the analysis sought to answer the following questions:

- How does radio programming address the development agenda?
- To what extent are the drivers of development using community radio, and how?
- How is community radio received in the areas it services? How can it improve?
- What are the different formats of programming, and how diverse are the voices given airtime?

The Community Radio Station as an Agent of Development



The staff of Radio Life

While community radio's impact on development in the communities it serves is accomplished primarily through partnership with development agents and development-minded local actors, the radio is also a demonstrably effective, independent agent of development. Community radio is universally acknowledged in the communities it serves as the sole independent and reliable source of news and information. In fact, in three of the four locations, community radio was the sole source of information in general.

Examples of high-impact programming included local news magazines shows, locally-based investigative journalism shows, women's-issues programming, trivia, programming dedicated

to exploring issues in romantic relationships, local sports news and live coverage, and discussions in local languages. Frequently cited as among audience-members' favorite are sensitization and awareness programs. Extensive evidence underlined the power of sensitization and awareness programs to direct the public dialogue in these small, rural communities. Examples of topics covered in popular sensitization and awareness programs include: Child Rights, Disease Prevention, Childcare and Childrearing, Access to Education, Gender-Based Violence, Rape, Legal Rights (including statutory versus traditional systems of law), and Corruption. Similarly, radio in all locations were active promoters of community cleanliness and sanitation. Interactive, public forum programming (call-in forums, etc.) are also frequently cited as both popular and impacting community attitudes and behaviors. A majority of listeners credited community radio stations with improving basic living conditions and influencing an attitude of community responsibility and pride in regard to their surroundings.

Station leadership is perhaps the single overriding factor determining a radio station's impact and effectiveness. One station considered in this study, for example, achieves high impact primarily due to the efforts of its leadership. Much of Radio Life's (Lofa County, Liberia) success can be attributed to the tone set by manager QuaQua Miller, who dedicates nearly 80 hours a week to the station and is also a strong and audible voice for peace and community-led development in his community. It was notable across locations that the tone set by station managers' permeate staff attitudes and approaches to the work of a community radio station.

Finally, it was observed at all stations that overwhelming majorities of audience members expressed a strong desire for expanded broadcast times. This was particularly in Sierra Leone where the stations studied here typically broadcast between 8 and 10 hours daily. Call for expanded broadcasts were less overwhelming but still evident in Liberia, where free electricity via partnerships with local telecommunication companies allowed both stations studied to broadcast between 16 and 18 hours daily.

The Community Radio Station as an Agent of Peacebuilding

Perhaps not surprisingly, given SFCG's and community radio's original focus on peacebuilding, the radio stations observed in this study continue to represent a strong voice for peace in the communities they serve. It was universally agreed throughout the areas assessed that political challenges represent an opportunity

for community radio stations to further influence peace in their communities, particularly in increasing focus on issues of corruption, partisanship, transparency, and political conflict. While programming devoted to peacebuilding could be expanded, listeners reported a high impact programs from programs that did address peace and nonviolent local conflict resolution, attributing to them a major role in reducing rape and gender based violence in their communities.

Significantly, community radio stations in all locations were described as active participants in diffusing potential violent crises. For example, in Kambia, Radio Kolenten works with local farmers and herders as well as governmental leaders to prevent violent conflict regarding disputes over rice production and cattle grazing. Such conflicts were once a common source of bloodshed in the late rainy season but no longer escalate. Similarly, at Radio Life in Zorzor, radio staff and locally-produced programming is credited by many (including the local Police Commander) with actively diffusing previously violent tensions between Mandingo and Lorma ethnic groups.

In all locations, it was noted that radio particularly helps marginalized peoples without access to other means of communications (e.g. cell phones). At some stations, access to public forum programming directly empowers historically marginalized populations. In others, where the poorest residents do not have access to such programming, it is believed that the sense of connectedness created by local language, local news, and sensitization programming achieves considerable outcomes with regard to inclusiveness and community togetherness.



Young community radio journalists in the studio

Radio was also universally cited as vital in facilitating peaceful election processes. In Liberia, for example, voter education around a complicated run-off vote between now-President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and George Weah reduced tensions notably, in ways that many believed warded off potential violence. At all four locations, radio's ability to quickly disseminate election information is believed to have counter-acted the potential for unfounded rumors to fuel conflict. Though more training specific to election processes is needed, community radio will be essential to providing for peaceful elections in the future.

Overall, this study finds that community radio continues to play a strong role in local peacebuilding. Specifically, programming that directly addresses issues related to community inclusiveness and non-violent conflict resolution has meaningful impact across locations. Radio is also noted as an active agent in diffusing local conflict and preventing backsliding into violence. At the same time, however, all locations revealed a significant unmet potential for increased quantity and quality of radio-led peacebuilding. Specifically, inclusion of marginalized populations – particularly women and youth – could be improved. This again underlines the need for broad capacity building across community radio stations.

This study concludes that in addition to explicit peacebuilding programming, radio stations' promotion of inclusive development processes – such as good governance, effective communication, security, and local economic growth - has a broad impact in also promoting sustainable peace.

Full assessment report is available on request from Sophien Ben-Achour, sben-achour@sfcg.org.