

Search for Common Ground - Liberia Key Findings - 2007 Media Sector Mapping Survey

SFCG is an international NGO with programmes in 17 countries with a mission to transform the way the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches towards cooperative solutions. SFCG has been working in Liberia since 1997, operating a multi media production studio (Talking Drum Studio) and a complementary outreach project to achieve its overall goal, to improve the population's access to information about policies and decisions that affect their lives. As part of its efforts, SFCG in Liberia is fostering closer relationships between civil society, local communities and the Government. In post-war Liberia, the type and quality of communication between the Government of Liberia (GoL) and the people is central to consolidating the peace process. Of particular importance is communication about both the post-war recovery agenda and policy reforms intended to establish a more equitable society. SFCG – Liberia is concentrating on strengthening the capacity of civil society groups and rural radio networks to engage in the reform process, to connect with their leaders, and to ensure appropriate platforms are in place to enhance the interaction between the state and the people.

EVALUATION SCOPE

With support from the British Department for International Development (DFID) and the Government of Finland, SFCG carried out a mapping of the media sector in Liberia examining specific information channels related to two dominant policy frameworks: the interim Poverty Reduction Strategy (iPRS) and the Youth Policy.

The iPRS and Youth Policy both aim to increase citizens' access to and participation in government. The iPRS focuses on rebuilding the country while the Youth Policy outlines the need for participation of the youth sector.

To better understand the interaction between civil society and the state this study was done to gather information on a number of issues. Five key questions were asked:

1. What information is in circulation and available on the dominant policies required for consolidation of peace?
2. What are people reading, watching and listening to?
3. What kind of information is available?
4. Who has access to various levels of information?
5. How do people access information and make use of it?

The research was national in scope and encompassed all media channels: radio, print and television. A number of methods were employed to understand how individuals and communities are receiving public information and what they know about iPRS and the Youth Policy. Generally the study found that there is little public discussion of policy ideas or frameworks – despite some effort to achieve this and despite statements to the contrary - and the media in general has not been engaged in the policy development process.

KEY FINDINGS

- Channels of communication between the media and GoL are not open. The media is *not* regarded as a partner in the process of creating a participatory democracy by the GoL, implementing agencies or even international agencies and donors. The media is remarkably independent. While the potential for suppression exists, it is unlikely;
- The 2005 free election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf resulted in an optimistic outlook in a country somewhat cynical about power after years of war. Despite significant poverty levels, the disastrous effects of the war, lack of basic services and widespread corruption, relations between the GoL and citizenry are good. This trust may quickly break down if policy initiatives aren't seen to allow for participation or to deliver results.

What Information is in circulation and available on the dominant policies?

- The study indicated that there is not widespread dissemination of information or discussion about iPRS or the Youth Policy. The public lacks access to real, credible information generally;
- The number of times the policies were specifically mentioned by name during the research period by any of the newspapers was extremely low;
- Neither iPRS nor the Youth Policy documents include any form of communication or media strategy. Personality, vertically driven forms of communication, rather than issue or horizontal information, dominate. This runs counter to the official emphasis on *participation*;
- The Ministry of Information provides straightforward, factual information rather than developing a strategic communication plan for engaging citizens in a dialogue;
- The survey indicated that local government officials had no idea about one of the GoL's major policies, about which they are responsible for passing on information, and discussing with the people.

'When the Government wants to make use of our radio then relations are good, but if we report corruption, or the police being out of control, then we get into problems, and receive threats that we'll be closed down.'

**- community radio coordinator,
March 2007**

What are people reading, watching and listening to?

- Most Liberians rely on the radio for their news and information. There is a strong stated preference for local language programming. Yet, local officials do not use it as their primary method of informing people. Radio is trusted, has coverage, is easily understood and representative. Potentially, it can also represent the people and hold the government to account. The business model, however, is weak and providers lack training;
- The Press is read by opinion leaders and can explain complex issues. Given its powerful readership, it could be a positive force, particularly if an investigative approach was adopted. However, it is often unprofessional, has a weak distribution system and is expensive. It could become irrelevant if perceived as dishonest;



- Liberian TV has an influential audience and could represent the people particularly if it held the government to account. The audience is small and production is expensive. Potentially, it could become purely commercial and focused on the wealthy few;
- There is one government owned radio station, the Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS). Of the three radio stations broadcasting nationally, Radio UNMIL the most popular is owned and run by the UN. Radio Veritas is owned by the Catholic Church, and Star Radio is owned by Fondation Hirondelle, an INGO;
- Community radio stations operate largely without government interference, although irregular power supply and the cost of fuel for generators are challenges. Their main concerns are sustainability and prevention of politicization;
- Information is presented as though all decisions are centered on the President, for example, the popular ‘Conversation with the President’ broadcast on LBS. This also runs the risk of reinforcing a centralized information dissemination process.

What kind of information is available?

- The research indicated a lack of alignment between the information produced and what the consumer wants to know;
- The media has an important oversight role, but to be able to play this role properly many Liberian media practitioners say that they need more and better information from Government and other sources. Public and media access to government information particularly budget and financial issues remains difficult;
- There is a considerable appetite, particularly among the community radios, for reliable information in formats and in languages which they can use;
- Local authorities said that they prefer to use meetings to pass on information on policies. In contrast, ordinary people, stated that meetings where they are regarded as passive ‘receivers’ of information are ‘not useful’;
- The top-down approach is inadequate in the new and complex reality of Liberia today as it is ineffective at communicating ideas, and is even less effective at gathering or collating popular feedback. Despite recognition of this in Government, few ideas or plans exist for changing the institutional informational landscape.

‘The local administrator in Buchanan wanted to spend the \$1M per year being given to the county by Mittal Steel on a grader for the roads. The youth wanted it to be spent on a secondary education college, but we [the local community radio] had to take up the issue before the local administration would even discuss it.’

**Hector Mulbah, Station manager,
Radio Gbehzohn, Buchanan**

Who has access to various levels of information?

- Information is centralized in the capital, Monrovia. While only one third of the population resides in Monrovia, all of the newspapers, radio stations broadcasting nationally and the TV stations are housed there. There is no formal mechanism that transmits information from the rural towns and villages to either Monrovia-based media, or to Monrovia policy makers;
- All media formats have the potential threat of restriction if the government feels threatened;
- Community stations are able to bridge the information gap between central government and the rural communities by relaying major news stories. The essence, however, of community radio is to create a platform for mainstreaming the voices of rural communities.

How do people access information and make use of it?

- Focus groups suggest that audiences — both rural and urban — are quite sophisticated, with clear criteria for believing or having faith in a particular source;
- Interactive fora, where questions are asked and answered and in which the substantive content of policies are opened up for exploration and discussion are rare;

- The few existing vertical information flows assume that local officials listen to the radio stations and then pass on the substance to policymakers;
- Mobile phone companies have increased the potential for more two way communication. Mobile phones present an opportunity that has not yet been adequately explored as a tool to support policy dissemination.

CONCLUSIONS

- There has been little evident, large-scale participation by the people in the process of coming up with the iPRS policy objectives. Distribution of both the iPRS and Youth Policy, and of information about them and their aims is lacking at nearly all levels, from local officials to media, to the wider community.
- Community and independent radio stations (including SFCG's radio production house TDS) have not developed effective strategies for communicating the new policies in ways that seek to engage citizens.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out over a five month period in 2007 using several survey tools. Interviews were conducted with key informants. To understand how individuals and communities receive public information and what they know about the iPRS and Youth Policy. Focus group discussions were grouped into different age and education levels and represented both genders. Newspapers were scanned for articles to determine the extent to which any of the main policy instruments were mentioned. The articles were then analyzed. Local GoL officials and civil servants from both rural and urban areas, representing both genders and a variety of backgrounds were surveyed in face-to-face interviews.

Source: This document presents a summary of the Media Sector Mapping report prepared in July 2007 for DFID and the Government of Finland. A full copy of the report is available by contacting Roy Schlieben, SFCG Africa Program Associate, at rschlieben@sfcg.org.