

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MEDIA IN SIERRA LEONE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR PRIVATE-SECTOR INVESTMENT

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1. Introduction

BBC Media Action is helping to convene a National Media Viability and Investment Conference in Sierra Leone, aimed at fostering the development of a viable media market and promoting sustainable business models for public interest media. Furthermore, it is envisaged that the conference will contribute to:

- Promoting an enabling environment for investment in the Sierra Leonean media market,
- Promote sustainable business models; and
- Facilitating coordinated actions by multiple stakeholders with the view to collectively providing solutions to the challenges faced by the media in Sierra Leone.

The purpose of this political economy analysis (PEA) is to understand how political and economic factors have affected, or hindered, the media sector in Sierra Leone as well as the potential for private sector investment in the media in order to help inform and shape the discussions between local stakeholders during the Conference.

This PEA is based on desk research, with a wide range of literature studied, to support the conclusions and recommendations provided. It is important to note that one of the primary documents consulted was a study entitled "Political Economy Analysis of the Media in Sierra Leone" commissioned by BBC Media Action. It provided essential information in relation to the actors, context, and the interaction of power, influence, and political and business interests.

The report presents a contextual analysis of the media sector in Sierra Leone: the stakeholders; the financial motivation and incentives for their engagement; and the political and economic factors that influence media independence and viability. It also examines the business climate in Sierra Leone, and the current scope of private investment in the media sector. Additionally, it provides a brief analysis of the legal and structural constraints to the development of a sustainable market as well as the opportunities unlocked by the legal reform processes enacted by the state.

Since independence, two major political parties, the All Peoples' Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), have dominated politics and governance in Sierra Leone. These parties have also been a major source of political tension and violence, as their rivalry fuels ethno-regional divides in the country.

According to the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) 2019 ranking, 70 percent of the population is estimated to be living on less than \$1.25 a day; adult illiteracy is around 40 percent; and unemployment and underemployment rates stand at more than 70 percent. The life expectancy at birth is 52.2 years, and the mortality rate is alarmingly high (UNDP 2020). The macroeconomy of the country is weak, with limited diversification and high dependence on small-scale subsistence agricultural activities, and mining (Ganson and M'Cloed 2019).

The need to promote economic recovery led to the government of Sierra Leone focusing on encouraging investments in the country, with multiple international business actors expressing interest in investing in the mineral sector (Bender 2011). Among the companies that eventually gained mining concessions in Sierra Leone were African Minerals Limited (AML) in the Tonkolili district, Koidu Holdings in Kono, and London Mining in Port Loko. However,



demand. However, media houses are usually branded as partisan, with the owners or management accused of being too close to the major political parties.²

The challenge described above has been noted by writers such as Wahl-Jorgensen and Cole (2008), who concluded in 2008 that independent media platforms were almost non-existent in Sierra Leone, with media houses failing to invest in investigative journalism or



3.1.1. State actors in the media sector in Sierra Leone

The Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) is the highest executive body tasked with making policies and laws related to the media and associated sectors. The Ministry has several media-related regulatory agencies and outlets including the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC); National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM); Independent Media Commission (IMC); Sierra Leone News Agency (SLENA); Sierra Leone Cable (SALCAB); Right to Access Information Commission (RAIC); Sierra Leone Postal Services (SALPOST); and Government Printers (GP).

Through the MIC, the current government has championed a number of reforms, including the repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act (POA) of 1965, the revision of the IMC Act and the reinstatement of the annual grant for the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ). The Ministry's interaction with the media sector goes beyond its regulatory functions. Agencies like NATCOM and SALCAB are also among the key revenue-generating entities for the state with income sources including telecom licensing and fines.

The IMC was set up by an Act of Parliament in 2000, with the objective of promoting professionalism in the media throughout Sierra Leone by ensuring that media institutions achieved the highest standards in the provision of media services as well as protecting the interests of journalists and the public against abuse or exploitation by media houses.⁴ The IMC has an obligation to verify the certificates and unique nature of any media house that has already been registered as a business entity with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC). The IMC has certain regulatory functions, including the renewal of operating licences for media companies. The recently promulgated IMC Act of 2020 also states that the Commission has the power to revoke licences and shut down media operations. This has increased the ability of the government's regulatory body to rein in media independence.

The National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM) was established in 2006 as an agency responsible for licensing and regulating telecommunications operators; promoting universal access to basic telecommunication services; and ensuring fair competition for investors, as well as for protecting the interests of users of telecommunication services. The institution is central to the operation of the media sector as it is the central authority responsible for the allocation of the frequencies required for operating all kinds of telecommunication networks. In recent years, the NATCOM is said to have ceased granting new radio spectrums in specific areas in order to limit the number of active media organisations or to prevent new actors from entering the market. Also, in 2019, the spectrum fees for community radio were increased from US\$250 to US\$1,500 (Kamara 2019), a move that would directly influence the operation and sustainsu000002othies ss10(n)2012(on)-2(a)-3(l)-14E@0.00000912 0



2020). There are multiple loose associations within the SLAJ, including the Sierra Leone Reporters' Union (SLRU), Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), the Guild of Editors (GoE), the Association of Journalists on Mining and Extractives (AJME) and the Sports Writers' Association of Sierra Leone (SWASAL).

The Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) is another forum that is influential in the country's media sector. Funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to act as a key driver of the media reform agenda in Sierra Leone, the members of the group consist of representatives from major media organisations and academic institutions. The MRCG is instrumental in organising and coordinating workshops and meetings for journalists in the country. It is also central to the discourse around the need to consolidate peace; strengthen democratic dialogue; and ensure development through an independent and sustainable media sector.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also engaged in reporting and monitoring key events in the country. In a context where the formal media sector is largely underfunded, and lacks the required capacity, a large portion of public interest information is produced by NGOs that specialise in the study and analysis of conflict and that function through the provision of financial and technical support from humanitarian organisations (Bau 2011). Increasingly, these institutions also provide public goods and services to compensate for a national government unable to perform its social role (M'cleod and Ganson 2018). The rise in popularity of religious, community-based media sources serves as a testament to this.

3.1.3. International organisations providing support to media houses in Sierra Leone

There are several organisations providing support to media houses in Sierra Leone, with most of this support geared towards strengthening their capacity, and enhancing their neutrality and effectiveness. They include the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID – now part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), the World Bank, the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Media Foundation for West Africa. For instance, OSIWA has been providing institutional and other forms of support to Radio Democracy FM 98.1 for several years (Radio Democracy 2015).

It is important to note that, at the end of the war, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), provided both financial and technical support to the media in Sierra Leone. It also established a radio station of its own, known as Radio UNAMSIL, which supported the establishment and operation of several community radio stations, as they collaborated in promoting peacebuilding efforts in the country (IRIN News 2000).

In a 2019 report, UNDP (2019: 22) stated, "



Various studies have recorded the very significant investments made by international actors with a view to assuring free, accessible and impactful media in Sierra Leone. This has been coupled with engagements aimed at limiting political influence and the politicisation of media houses, which undermines the public's confidence in the media.⁵

3.1.4. Private-sector investment and business interests in the media sector

There is significant investment in the media sector in Sierra Leone, however, most of it is small-scale and limited to newspapers and community radio stations. The major investments are those that have been made by the AYV Empire, owned by Anthony Navo Jr., and Star TV and Radio by Philip Neville, who also owns the Standard Times Newspaper. Other media houses and their owners include *The Exclusive* newspaper, owned by Sheikh Sesay, the *Satellite* newspaper owned by Babatunde Sesay, *Universal Radio* owned by Josiah Paris, Capital Radio, FM 104.9, owned by Adonis Abboud, Colin Mason and David Stanley and the *Awareness Times Newspaper*, owned by Dr. Sylvia Olayinka Blyden. Radio Democracy FM 98.1 is operated by a board comprising civil society organisations and depends largely on the support of donor institutions, as noted above.

There is no known international investment/ownership in the media sector in Sierra Leone, apart from initial investments made by Nigeria's Lington Igbohor, in the Concord Times in 1992. This challenge may have stemmed from a perception of state control/capture of the media, and of the market's limited ability to yield significant dividends. Thus, investments in the media sector are generally minimal while the market is characterised by unhealthy competition among the respective media houses to make profit. Consequently, there have been reports that media house owners use underhand strategies, including blackmail, to secure financial gains (BBC Media Action 2021a). This approach has equally played into the hands of political elites, who develop a patrimonial relationship with the owners of the media houses. The clientelistic nature of such a relationship is primarily of benefit to the political elites. These relationships have significantly tarnished the image of the media and have dented the public's confidence in the sector.

Despite the challenges examined above, private investment in the media has helped to expand access to information in local communities. Despite challenges with their management structures and operations, community radio stations have filled an information void in rural Sierra Leone – where, for a long time, audiences depended on content produced by “remote” media houses – by giving “a voice to the voiceless and marginalised groups” (BBC Media Action 2021b).

3.2. Factors influencing the media sector in Sierra Leone

The relationship between political actors and private media enterprises has been largely clientelistic, patrimonial and tied to the ideologies of political parties. As observed by M'Bayo (2016: 16-17): “In post-conflict Sierra Leone, a polarised media community and environment appear to have emerged in the wake of the transitional political institutions and the ongoing process of building a new political order. This polarity is based on new and old alliances among media practitioners and the various publics and affiliations, overtly or covertly, with one party or another or the adoption of different political ideologies among media practitioners.”

Over the years, the perception of the nature of the relationship between political elites and media houses has undermined public confidence in the media. The sections below examine key factors that influence the media and its activities in Sierra Leone.

⁵ Based on reviews done for this study.

3.2.1. Media ownership

Prior to the 1990s, both regulatory and operational power were centred on the political executive and exercised through the Minister of Information and Broadcasting. The only electronic media in the

sponsorship (31.2%), projects (25%) and other sources (18.8%)". The study noted that "43.7% of respondents say their institution made no profit last year, 18.7% say they made less than 5% profit, and 12.4% said they made between 5% and 15% profit" (Spencer, n.d.). Apart from the media owners themselves, the major advertisers are the Government of Sierra Leone, the betting company, Mercury International, mobile phone companies, UN agencies/diplomatic missions and NGOs/civil society.

3.2.2. Capacity and skills

The inability of the media to be critical, and strategically provide a credible and independent voice on key issues – especially those related to corruption, social injustice and political violence – is regularly blamed on a lack of adequate training, skills, knowledge and capacity within the media houses and among their employees.

This challenge stems from the lack of investment in training, and the poor quality of training provided by educational institutions. Recognising this gap, international actors including the United Nations, have teamed up with training providers while high-quality media training benefits from the substantial funding allocated by the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG). The goal is to create an enabling environment for media activity and to produce a new generation of media practitioners as agents of social change, democratisation, and development (M'bayo 2015). This is an opportunity not only to produce skilled journalists, but also to instil the moral values required for the functioning of an independent media sector.

Additionally, very few media houses have sufficient financial capacity to function adequately. This challenge is compounded by the fact that they struggle to attract advertising or other types of paid content. Subsequently, they explore other avenues for making a profit, which sometimes affects the quality of their outputs.

3.2.3. Legal reform and incentives

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Offer staff good salaries and attractive conditions of service;
Conduct regular assessments on existing gaps in the market and ways of filling these gaps.

Currently, there is minimal competition among TV stations in Sierra Leone, and the quality of services provided is poor. Investments, especially in TV stations, will help to improve quality standards across the board. Currently, only SLBC, AYV and Star TV offer such services.

5. Conclusion

The media sector in Sierra Leone has made significant progress since the end of the civil war in 2002. It currently comprises state, private-owned and community-based institutions, including an increasing number of new media platforms. Nevertheless, analysis of the political economy of the media sector reveals that there are some key areas of concern. Part of the narrative can be explained by the fact that the media sector is nested within the wider political landscape and, therefore, experiences increasing political interference as well as a

- iii. Media actors should be provided with training not only in capacity-related skills, but also in issues of integrity and ethical values. The lack of such training has resulted in ethical and professional shortcomings across the industry. The upcoming conference should be used as a platform to remind media professionals of the ethics that guide their work, and why these parameters should be respected.
- iv. To avoid state capture of the media, there is



