

# **MEDIA SECTOR MAPPING IN LIBERIA**



**Search for Common Ground/Talking Drum Studio Liberia**

July 2007

## NOTES

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The Media Sector Mapping research was undertaken by Adrien Sindayigaya - Programme Director SFCG Burundi, Oscar Bloh - Country Director SFCG Liberia, and Francis Rolt Independent Consultant. The study relied in large part on the knowledge, support, expert input, advice, help and contacts of the staff of SFCG Liberia's Talking Drum Studio (TDS) and for this we thank them.

This report was written by Oscar Bloh and Francis Rolt with input and advice from many others.

Cover photo: *Children in Gbarnga*

Photo Credit: *Francis Rolt/SFCG*

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## INTRODUCTION

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Information has been identified as a driver for change and the media sector as a tool in development for Africa<sup>1</sup>. 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 recovery agenda and policy reforms intended to establish a more equitable society.

Search for Common Ground in Liberia (SFCG) was established in 1997 and builds partnerships and coalitions to achieve its mission, particularly in the area of media work. It has a total of 22 partner radio stations with 10 in Monrovia and 12 in rural communities. The organisation promotes social cohesion, political participation - particularly by women, youth and other marginalized groups - and a more secure environment. One way this is accomplished is by fostering closer relationships between civil society, local communities and Government<sup>2</sup>.

With funding from the British Government's Department for International Development (DFID), SFCG is implementing a two year project to enhance the interaction between civil society and the state in Liberia. It builds on governance reform processes, and links up to the implementation of the Government Economic Management Assistance Plan (GEMAP), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as engages and supports the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) process. The project aims to strengthen 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.

This media sector mapping provides answers to questions which are critical to understanding this interaction<sup>3</sup>. These questions are:

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?

This media sector mapping in Liberia builds on findings from a similar research project in neighbouring Sierra Leone in 2005<sup>4</sup>. This research also dovetails with a governance and communication-related project which SFCG is implementing in six African countries with support of the Government of Finland. This project, entitled **Radio: A Platform for Peacebuilding** aims '*to improve the population's access to information about policies and decisions that affect their lives*'.

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<sup>1</sup> *Research Summary Report*, Africa Media Development Initiative, 2006 BBC World Service Trust

<sup>2</sup> Source: [http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/liberia/programmes\\_liberia.html](http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/liberia/programmes_liberia.html)

<sup>3</sup> *TOR Media Sector Mapping, Liberia*, SFCG March 2007 – the TOR is available in **Annex 1**

## BACKGROUND

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The Government of Liberia has two core policies - the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy (iPRS), and the Youth Policy, both of which have the goal of increasing citizens' access to and participation in government. The iPRS outlines the GoL's determination to respond to the rebuilding of the country in a way that does not simply rebuild the structures of the past. It states:

*'Such a situation will only sow the seeds for the next conflict. To be conflict sensitive, all development interventions must empower and enhance individual and collective dignity and respect. As poverty is a by-product of denial of human rights, pro-poor strategies must be implemented within a participatory, accountable and transparent process. This also means placing focus on individuals and groups that are socially excluded, marginalized, vulnerable and disadvantaged. Strategic interventions [...] thus will be guided by the principles of social and political inclusion and participation of all Liberians irrespective of ethnicity, religion, and class.'*<sup>5</sup>

The Youth Policy notes that 55% of the population is under 20 years of age, and states clearly the need for the participation of this sector of the population.

*'As reflected in the first MDGs Report for Liberia published in 2004, all eight goals target and affect youth. The youth are not only beneficiaries of improved human well being, but should also be recognized as principal actors in enabling Liberia to achieve the MDGs. [...] Youth have a role in the formulation and implementation of development policies in the next 10 years leading to 2015. This calls for increased recognition of the role the youth will play in overcoming extreme poverty and achieving sustainable human development. Government, civil society and development agencies should therefore create an enabling environment and provide tangible support to empower youth organizations and forums to contribute to this process.'*<sup>6</sup>

The GoL and donors have set up two good governance, transparency and accountability structures in parallel to the iPRS and the Youth Policy. These are the Governance Economic Management Assistance Plan (GEMAP), and the Governance Reform Commission (GRC). The overall objective of GEMAP is to improve the GoL's economic management system, while the GRC is intended to engender governance reform so as to increase citizens' access to and effective participation in decision making processes. These structures are clearly of relevance to SFCG Liberia programme's objective of fostering closer relationships between civil society, local communities and government.

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<sup>5</sup> *Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy*, Second Draft, August 19 2006. Government of Liberia

<sup>6</sup> *A National Youth Policy for Liberia: A Framework for Setting priorities and Executing Actions, Placing the Youth on the National Agenda of Liberia*, December 2005, Federation of Liberian Youth and Ministry of Youth and Sports, Government of Liberia

## SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

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A number of research methods were used to gather information. These include:

- **Key informant interviews** - Thirty seven (37) one on one interviews were conducted in Monrovia and Ganta, Saclepea, Saniquelle, and Tubmanberg
- **Focus groups** - Nineteen (19) group discussions were convened in Monrovia, Gbarnga, Ganta, and Focquelleh.
- **Analysis of newspaper articles** - Four of Liberia's major newspapers were scanned for articles about the main policy instruments and the articles were analysed.
- **Survey of local officials** - A questionnaire was administered to 147 local government officials and civil servants.

The key informant interviews and focus group discussions took place over an eight day period from March 6-14 2007. The follow-up survey of local officials and civil servants was conducted in May 2007. The analysis of newspaper articles was over a three month period from January to April 2007.

The objective of the focus groups and key informant interviews was to understand better how individuals and communities receive public information and what they know about the iPRS and Youth Policy. Nearly two hundred individuals took part in the nineteen focus groups, and a series of guided questions were used to lead the discussions. Of the nineteen focus groups, 4 were in Ganta, 4 were in Bomi, 2 in Focquelleh, 3 in Gbarnga, and 6 in Monrovia (Gardnersville, Sinkor, and Convent). The groups were separated by gender, age (18-35 and 36-60), and education level (uneducated/educated).

To conduct the newspaper analysis, 243 editions of the four most popular and credible newspapers (*The News*, *The Inquirer*, *The Daily Observer*, and *The New Democrat*), were analyzed for the period January-April 2007, to determine the extent to which any of the following subjects were mentioned: the iPRS, Youth Policy, GEMAP, TRC, or GRC. Each newspaper comes out 5 times per week, except for *The New Democrat* which comes out 3 times per week. The number of editions analyzed were as follows: *The News* – 77; *The Inquirer* – 73; *The Daily Observer* – 42; *The New Democrat* – 51.

The articles in each edition were put into four broad categories. Multiple articles about one category in each edition were counted only once. The categories are:

- Contemporary Issues, including local and international news
- Social Reports and Features
- Entertainment, including culture, sports and celebrities
- Policy Reform.

The survey of GoL officials was administered face to face with 147 civil servants in 27 locations. One hundred and two (102) of the participants classed themselves as coming from rural areas, compared to 45 from urban. In total, 110 men were interviewed and 37 women. Professionally, 68 were Civil Servants with decision-making authority, 9 were Superintendents, 10 were District Commissioners, 12 were Mayors, and 48 were from other civil service positions with less decision-making authority.

The question guides for the focus groups and key informant interviews, and the list of key informants can be found in **Annex 2**. The local government officials' questionnaire can be found in **Annex 3**.

## **GOVERNMENT MEDIA RELATIONS**

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Each Liberian Government Ministry has a Public Information Officer (PIO), but channels of communication with the media are not particularly open, and can be characterised by a certain amount of suspicion according to the Deputy Minister of Youth and Sports, Sam Hare<sup>7</sup>. Mr Hare advocates better collaboration between media and the government, suggesting that the media should '*Forge a partnership and avoid saying, "You are the press and we are the government"*'.

"The creation of community radios has been a waste of funds. These means should have been given to the state radio so as to have national coverage. Only two community radios are working properly and the rest are doomed because they are not really supported by their communities, and only play music and broadcast communiqués."

Hon. Charles A Snetter,  
Director General, LBS

These sentiments were echoed by the Secretary General of the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) '*The Government doesn't properly recognise media's role in a democracy*'<sup>8</sup>. Our own observations and research suggest the same; the media is not regarded as a partner in the process of creating a participatory democracy by the GoL, nor by implementing agencies, and not even by international agencies and donors.

Again, according to the PUL, some media organisations suspect that others are favoured 'friends' of Government and receive invitations to Press briefings, while they are reportedly not invited, and/or are not supported by Government advertising<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand PIOs complain that press journalists, in particular, require payment (US\$20-25) to cover any issue, or indeed even to attend press conferences<sup>10</sup>. One journalist accepted that this is true but claimed that PIOs also demand a 15-20% kickback on these payments<sup>11</sup>.

In general the media in Liberia is remarkably free, and we were informed by the Ministry of Information that it, '*has chosen not to enforce certain aspects of its statutory responsibility as it might infringe press freedom*', or '*go against the Constitution*'<sup>12</sup>. This doesn't exclude the possibility that potentially at least this 'statutory responsibility' could still be used to suppress critical voices, although at present it seems unlikely. This is nonetheless a potential threat to the media and to freedom of expression.

Wide and relatively unhindered reporting was permitted for both international and local journalists during the 2005 and 2006 Presidential elections, but in general the ability of local journalists to report accurately and fairly is restricted by a lack of funds, training, and experience.

Attacks on and harassment of journalists have decreased significantly from 2004, and no journalist has been jailed in Liberia since 2003.

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<sup>7</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>8</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>9</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>10</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>11</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>12</sup> Key informant interview

## GOVERNMENT CITIZEN RELATIONS

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The October 11, 2005 presidential and legislative elections and the subsequent November 8, 2005 Presidential run-off were, according to the US State Department,<sup>13</sup> *'the most free, fair, and peaceful elections in Liberia's history'*. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf defeated (60% - 40%) her closest opponent, George Weah, to become Africa's first democratically elected female president. She was inaugurated in January 2006 and has formed a Government of technocrats drawn from among Liberia's different ethnic groups, including members of the Liberian diaspora who have returned to the country to rebuild government institutions. The President's party, the Unity Party, does not control the legislature, in which 12 of the 30 registered political parties are represented.

Years of war have made Liberians cynical about power but they are hopeful that this time they have elected someone who is really able to live up to her campaign commitments. Optimism ran somewhat dry in the months following the election when nothing much seemed to change, although the GoL's 150 day action plan did in fact achieve a lot. Liberia's problems are such that much time will be needed to resolve the most pressing issues which are:

- More than 75% of the population lives below the poverty line of \$1 per day (and 50% on less than 50 cents a day)
- Liberians are still living with the disastrous political, social and economic effects of the war
- Delivery of basic services such as health and education are almost entirely lacking
- Corruption exists on a grand scale.

Even with all these problems, relations between GoL and the people are good, but if the various policy initiatives aren't seen to either allow for participation, or to deliver the results which people hope for, this trust may quickly break down. As the iPRS states;

*'It is [...] crucial not to simply return to the past or pre-war situation. Such a situation will only sow the seeds for the next conflict. To be conflict sensitive, all development interventions must empower and enhance individual and collective dignity and respect. As poverty is a by-product of denial of human rights, pro-poor strategies must be implemented within a participatory, accountable and transparent process.'*<sup>14</sup>

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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Liberia's media sector has diversified remarkably since 2004. A proliferation of radio stations nationwide and a wide variety of newspapers published daily and weekly in Monrovia has changed the way information is accessed and knowledge is shared.

At 57.5%, Liberia has a relatively high literacy rate,<sup>15</sup> although this literate population is heavily concentrated in the capital, Monrovia. Monrovia houses only about a third of the

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<sup>13</sup> Source: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/6618.htm>

<sup>14</sup> iPRS 2<sup>nd</sup> draft, GoL, Aug. 2006

<sup>15</sup> The male literacy rate (73.3%) is higher than the female rate (41.6%). Source: <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/li.html>.

population but information is centralized there; the city is home to all the newspapers, all of the radio stations broadcasting nationally, and all the TV stations. It is also the seat of the national Government and the place where policy statements are released.

### *Media Environment and Reform*

Most Liberians rely on radio broadcasts to receive news and information<sup>16</sup>, as TV is limited to those few who have the ability to purchase the sets, the generators and fuel to provide electricity. Newspapers, on the other hand, are poorly distributed<sup>17</sup> and are also expensive relative to incomes (25-30 Liberian dollars, or the equivalent of 2 cups of rice, which most ordinary Liberian families have difficulty buying daily).

There is one Government-owned and state run radio station (LBS), as well as the UN's Radio UNMIL, the independent (NGO-owned) Star Radio, and the Catholic Church's Radio Veritas. LBS operates a single radio service, covering Monrovia and less than 25% of the territory of Liberia, although the Chinese Government is rebuilding the national network. Star Radio and Radio Veritas both reach the majority of the population and cover more of the country than LBS, but less than Radio UNMIL which has a shortwave facility and is the only station covering the whole country (apart from a few shadows caused by the topography). With all of the 15 counties hosting FM radio stations, most areas are covered at least partially by their collective broadcast range. Radio, therefore, is the most widespread and popular media channel - with near to national coverage.

All newspapers are based in Monrovia and publish with varying degrees of regularity, providing diverse political perspectives. Although the total print run for all these papers is unlikely to amount to more than 5,000<sup>18</sup>, they carry surprising weight with opinion leaders, and are often used as primary source material by radio stations. The cost of starting a newspaper is relatively low, which contributes to their proliferation.<sup>19</sup>

Liberia's 1986 Constitution guarantees that citizens enjoy freedom of expression, '*being fully responsible for the abuse thereof*'. This opaque clause helped the Charles Taylor regime harass the media with a semblance of legitimacy. However, the clause has not been used by either the transition Government or the elected Government of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf with the intent to abuse the rights of journalists.

In October 2004 the PUL organised a National Conference on Media Law and Policy Reform, during which the participants recommended that the GoL create an independent regulatory body and enact into law a Freedom of Information bill. Based on these recommendations, a draft Act has been developed through a consultative process and lobbying is taking place with the National Legislature to pass it into law. Despite this, public and media access to government information, particularly budget and financial issues and other policy documents, remains difficult. This is due in large part to the bureaucratic nature of government, and a lack of the political will on the Government's side to make itself accountable to the people by giving access to public information.

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<sup>16</sup> World Association of Newspapers - World Press Trends 2004.

<http://www.warc.com/LandingPages/Data/NewspaperTrends/PDF/Liberia.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>18</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>19</sup> One 8 page edition, 1,000 copies printed recto verso costs approximately US\$175. A 10 page edition costs US\$205.

Source: key informant interview.

## Ownership

GoL owns and operates the Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS) which runs an FM station. LBS transmits nationally (although it does not cover the entire country), focusing on national news, people and events and periodic special programming related to government or sporting events.

Most other radio stations, newspapers and TV stations are owned privately, by individuals or business consortiums. In the case of community radios they are in theory owned by the communities they serve – although in reality some of the NGOs or agencies which helped set them up retain a controlling interest. Of those broadcasting nationally, Radio UNMIL, the most popular media channel in the country, is owned and run by the UN. Radio Veritas is owned by the Catholic Church and Star Radio is owned by Fondation Hirondelle and INGO.

## Growth of Community Radio Stations

The radio sector has expanded dramatically over the past few years, and there are now around 42 radio stations in total broadcasting in Liberia, of which at least 30 are community radios, owned by either the community, an NGO or an individual.

By 2006 there were 23 community radio stations across the country, many of which were set up and supported in one way or another by one of the following NGOs or organisations; Search for Common Ground (Talking Drum Studio), Fondation Hirondelle (Star Radio), Mercy Corps, International Alert or Radio Netherlands Training Centre.

Community media are non-profit, small-scale private enterprises, and some state owned community-based radio stations, which generally serve the interests of the local communities. This sector was seen by a majority of respondents to have a special role in advancing development objectives, giving a voice to communities, and was recognized for its ability to empower and skill communities. Its principal challenge is financial sustainability and continued dependence on donor funds.

African Media Development Initiative,  
Research summary report, 2006  
BBC World Service Trust

Community radio stations operated for an average of 13.5 hours<sup>20</sup> per day (in 2005, although this may have increased since) and rely on generators for their power. The community radio stations are able to operate largely without government interference, although many are hindered by the irregular power supply, and the cost of fuel for generators. However, the mobile telephone operator CellCom gives space and a constant source of power to many community stations at its antenna sites across the country in exchange for advertising.

With mobile phone systems available practically everywhere, radio stations are now able to conduct call-in programs and initiate more interactive formats such as round tables, panel discussions and feedback sessions using mobile phones, although participation is limited to those who own cell phones. Additionally nearly all of the radio stations broadcast SFCG's Talking Drum Studio (TDS) productions – several of which cover the policy issues relevant to this study - while others relay certain UNMIL programs, and UNMIL itself broadcasts the LBS' monthly *'Conversation with the President.'*

<sup>20</sup> Averaged over a sample of twenty community stations in a listener survey undertaken by Talking Drum Studio in August 2005.

Despite relaying UNMIL programs and that of other national stations, community radio stations are preferred and still widely listened to by community members<sup>21</sup>. The existence of community radio has attracted different international actors and NGOs to partner with the stations. Assessments of community radio stations have been carried out at different times by international partners including Mercy Corps, which provided the bulk of the 50 watt transmitters for these stations - with USAID funding. Radio Netherlands Training Centre, International Alert, World Bank, and SFCG have also contributed. Each organization has its own objectives and the findings of the various organisational assessments are very similar.

Two key issues stood out from the assessment done by SFCG in 2006, as the community radios' main concerns. These are:

- Sustainability – This includes training, wider coverage, production quality, continuity on air, fundraising, and other broader management and governance issues
- Preventing radio stations from being politicised, given their vulnerable nature.

Different organizations have responded differently to the radios needs. For instance, on the issue of training, the most important partnership mentioned by stations during a two day conference organized by SFCG, involving managers and senior producers of 12 stations, was with the Radio Netherlands Training Centre (RNTC). Stations have been told by RNTC that this partnership arrangement can serve as an umbrella organization to coordinate stations and donors as part of RNTC's four-year plan. A needs assessment tour has been conducted, mostly of stations in major population centres. Stations have been told that RNTC intends to do some training-of-trainers by taking some Liberians to Holland. Part of the plan is for RNTC to build a training centre in Monrovia and create a mobile training unit that will go to other stations.

On the issue of increasing coverage, BBC World Service has provided a 300 watt transmitter to Smile FM in Zwedru, widening its coverage to the entire county. BBC has also stated its intention of providing similar transmitters to other community radio stations, such as Super Bongese in Suacoco, Bong County. Development Alternative Incorporated (DAI) with funding from OTI/USAID is also providing 300-500 watt transmitters to Radio Bomi in Tubmanburg, Radio Gbehzohn in Buchanan and Radio Gbarnga in Gbarnga. This support is designed to increase the coverage of the stations. The intention is for these stations to relay some of Star Radio programs while Star Radio plays the role of mentor and supervises the stations. The rationale for this is not clear, although by relaying major news stories from national broadcasters, community radio stations do help to bridge the information gap between central Government and the rural communities.

However, the essence of community radio is to create a platform for mainstreaming the voices of rural communities so as to contribute to and influence the formulation of national policies on governance and development issues. It is not in the interest of decentralization, or in the interest of the rural communities themselves for community radio stations to be relaying programs from Monrovia-based stations. While it is natural that rural communities want to know what is happening in the capital, they equally

"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

<sup>21</sup> *Talking Drum Studio Liberia Listener Survey Final Report*, SFCG, April 2005

want to know what is taking place in other rural sectors of the country. As such, the skills and technical capacity of rural stations need to be strengthened to enable them to share local news and information live on each other's programs and into Monrovia based stations.

In terms of fundraising, three umbrella organizations have been formed to create a network and seek funding on behalf of community radio stations. The formation of these groups has created conflict among community radio stations. *"The idea of us forming together is the biggest problem we have here."*<sup>22</sup> Many stations feel they have been burned in the past by these efforts. *"The centre fell apart and we are left in the hole."*<sup>23</sup> The participants in a 2007 SFCG station managers' conference discussed the historical foundation and objectives of forming these networks. These are summarized below.



- **LICORNET: Liberia Community Radio Network.** Participants at the conference said this organization was linked to the Open Society Institute and has focused on training and capacity building. Ten stations were involved, and the effort linked Liberian stations to the short-lived West Africa Democracy Radio (set up by the Open Society Institute), which was supposed to pay for segments that were produced. The group did not view this as a grassroots organization, but as a conduit to bring international money to stations. Some stations said they've received field recorders, but no money.
- **LICOBA: Liberia Rural Community Broadcasters' Association.** This association was formed by a group of stations that felt the media was too centralized in Monrovia and that rural communities were being left out of the national discourse. A proposal was written to raise money, with no success, and no one is quite sure what is happening now. Meeting participants said LICOBA was paid by a political party to produce and place ads, and many station managers felt abused (even though some took the L\$2,500 to run the advertisement). LICOBA has apparently asked stations to pay to join the association (L\$500), and some managers have therefore refused to sign the membership forms.
- **ALICOR: Association of Liberia Community Radios.** This group was formed by stations which were put on the air by Mercy Corps, apparently as a break-away caucus. ALICOR was not built around programming or a service mandate, but around building sustainability as a group rather than stations working independently. Meeting representatives felt ALICOR focused only on Mercy Corps stations, and that others aren't welcome.

According to SFCG's 2006 report the formation of these groups is influenced to a large extent by a desire to access funding from donors rather than by any desire to establish an independent rural community radio network. Although if it existed such an independent network could:

- Help stations work together to share program development and airing
- Protect stations from political manipulation and interference from influential and powerful individuals, and

<sup>22</sup> Participant at 2007 SFCG Station Managers Conference

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

- Advocate for the collective benefit of the stations, such as seeking lower registration and license fees.

In addressing this gap, the participants at the meeting noted that:

- There is a lack of communication within the networks and a lack of contact with organizations outside the networks.
- There is no money available to run the networks.
- The networks have no visibility and no physical presence and are represented by a few files inside someone's briefcase.
- The associations do not visit the stations or consult the stations on what to do.
- A congress of station representatives should be convened to create a new system or reform ALICOR.
- There were few concrete ideas about what a rural radio association might do, beyond helping to negotiate lower license fees for stations.
- TDS could serve as a guide to facilitate a congress of stations in reshaping ALICOR.
- TDS could create a linkage with international actors who can foster station sustainability.

### **Professionalism**

Journalists and broadcasters are organized into a number of different professional organizations, some of which have become defunct reportedly due to a lack of leadership. The Press Union of Liberia (PUL) is the primary media organization representing journalists in Monrovia and up-country, as well as the media organisations themselves. The PUL created a Code of Conduct and Ethics in 1975 which is still in use. The PUL complains<sup>24</sup> that the GoL doesn't see the media as a partner in development, but at the same time appears to see itself as a journalist and media *defence* structure<sup>25</sup>, in other words as an organisation which protects journalists from interference rather than one which suggests or tries to expand possible roles for the media. Similarly, the PUL says it requested a quarterly meeting with the President in order to discuss 'major issues', but that this has not happened<sup>26</sup>.

The main problems of the media, in general, were identified by the UNDP and others three years ago: 'While journalistic standards may vary somewhat from one newspaper or radio station to another, the general picture is one of low professional quality. Skills in content output, such as reporting, writing, editing and broadcast production, require improvements from the basics to higher levels of handling complex issues and situations by media. These weaknesses affect all aspects of the profession including management and technical aspects.'<sup>27</sup>

As newspaper publication confers both status and a degree of power many owners seem to start newspapers as an extension of their political and/or business ambitions, using the press to discredit opponents, or to bribe and blackmail political and other leaders.

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<sup>24</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>25</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>26</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>27</sup> *The Partnership for Media and Conflict Prevention in West Africa Supporting the Media in Liberia: A Review of the Media Landscape for the Post-Conflict Transition Period*, joint mission led by UNDP, January 2004

## SWOT Analysis

The strengthening of the media sector is essential for the development of Liberia, but also to achieve the good governance agenda which the GoL and donors are committed to. Neither GoL nor the donors seem to have fully recognised the importance of involving the media at all stages of the development process, and of developing media communication strategies for addressing the development agenda and good governance processes. The SWOT chart below captures the main issues for the radio, press and TV in Liberia, as interpreted by this research.

**Table 3: Liberia Media SWOT Analysis**

	<b>RADIO</b>	<b>PRESS</b>	<b>TV</b>
<b>STRENGTHS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trusted</li> <li>• Covers country</li> <li>• Non-educated can understand</li> <li>• Representative</li> <li>• Vigorous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read by opinion leaders</li> <li>• Space to explain complex issues at length</li> <li>• Monrovia-based (access)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influential audience</li> <li>• Pictures are powerful</li> </ul>
<b>WEAKNESSES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business models weak</li> <li>• FMs could lose out to a re-invigorated LBS</li> <li>• State radio is not a public service broadcaster</li> <li>• Lack of training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often very unprofessional</li> <li>• ‘Kato’ (brown envelope journalism)</li> <li>• Little distribution or influence outside of Monrovia</li> <li>• Weak distribution system</li> <li>• Expensive vis a vis incomes</li> <li>• Monrovia-based (cut off from people)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small audience</li> <li>• Expenses of production</li> <li>• No influence beyond Monrovia</li> </ul>
<b>OPPORTUNITIES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Represent the voice of the people to government and others</li> <li>• Create synergy between FMs and national broadcasters</li> <li>• Take up investigative role, holding government to account</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Represent the voice of the people to government and others</li> <li>• Exploit its powerful readership to become a very powerful, positive force</li> <li>• Establish rural network of correspondents &amp; grow readership beyond Monrovia</li> <li>• Take up investigative role, holding government to account</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Come to represent the voice of the people to government &amp; others</li> <li>• Take up investigative role, holding government to account</li> </ul>
<b>THREATS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial weaknesses close many FMs</li> <li>• State broadcaster sees FMs as threat and encourages control/closure/taxes</li> <li>• Government feels threatened and imposes restrictions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could become irrelevant if continues to be dishonest</li> <li>• Government feels threatened and imposes restrictions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State decides it’s too expensive and it becomes purely commercial</li> <li>• Becomes irrelevant to needs of modern Liberia by creating programming for the wealthy few</li> <li>• Government feels threatened and imposes restrictions</li> </ul>

## PRODUCED

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Despite numerous GoL statements to the contrary, there does not appear to be any GoL strategy designed to use the state broadcast mechanism, nor any other media, nor regular meetings, to either enable widespread discussion, or to enhance citizens' understanding and participation in national policy objectives. The following section will present findings about information produced including sources and other relevant details.

### *Information Produced*

#### **Primary Sources of Information**

The Ministry of Information says that it is responsible for coordinating GoL policy communication, but admits that the Ministry is not always used for this function. For example, the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs was given responsibility for developing a communication strategy for disseminating the iPRS document rather than the Ministry of Information. As well, other Ministries and Ministers also sometimes organise their own press conferences and issue their own briefings or press releases without going through the Ministry of Information. For the most part the Ministry of Information provides straightforward information about actions taken, meetings attended, people met, etc. (facts), which is not the same as developing the GoL's strategic communication plan for engaging citizens in a dialogue, nor is it the same as communicating the issues outlined in major policy documents.

To further complicate matters, donors purportedly working on behalf of the GoL sometimes take other approaches to communication. For instance, USAID/OTI contracted an American firm, Craig and Cherney, to assist the Executive Mansion through the Ministry of State to develop a communication strategy. It is not clear whether this strategy was developed or what the role of the Ministry of Information was in the development process.

In May and July of 2006, according to the iPRS document,<sup>28</sup> there were a number of consultative, participatory events with civil society and communities in all 15 counties to discuss the needs and priorities of iPRS. A draft of the policy document was sent to religious organisations, international partners, leaders etc. for comment. In addition, as the GoL's main partner in the iRPS, which has been in operation since July 2006 and runs only until December 2007, the UNDP planned a workshop for April 2007 – rather late in the day - to discuss the media strategy for the policy. For unknown reasons this workshop did not take place.

On the other hand, the Youth Policy, which was largely designed by the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY) and then adopted by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and is supported by UNDP, was put together after a number of consultative, participatory meetings with youth in the counties, and a national meeting which involved 200 youth from across the country. Surprisingly, very few youth interviewed either individually or in the focus groups knew anything about the policy - beyond the simple fact of its existence. So despite the consultative process much more needs to be done.

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<sup>28</sup> iPRS, second draft, August 19 2006

### **Nature of Information - Quality of the Source**

Neither iPRS nor the Youth Policy documents include any form of communication or media strategy beyond the statement of a commitment to an open, participatory, consultative process. Meanwhile state institutions have insufficient funds to be able to do all they should at this level, leaving traditional, top down forms of communication to dominate. While this approach may be appropriate for some forms of communication, it runs counter to the official emphasis on *participation* and, given the history of Liberia over the past 20 years, top down communication isn't well trusted by the people.

This lack of communication strategies has clearly had an effect on the dissemination of information. Transparency and accountability rely on citizens knowing how to access information, knowing that the GoL is committed to them and knowing that their concerns and questions are acted on. The policy documents seen by the researchers (iPRS, Youth Policy, GEMAP and GRC) do not include any plans to help citizens understand how to access or interpret available information.

The top-down, hierarchical approach is inadequate in the new and complex reality of Liberia today. It is ineffective at communicating ideas and is even less effective at gathering or collating popular feedback because hierarchies are designed to issue commands and orders effectively and efficiently, not to respond flexibly and positively to information, ideas or reactions coming from the people (a hierarchy is the administrative expression of the 'top-down' approach). While there is some recognition of this in Government, we came across few ideas or plans for changing the institutional informational landscape. We were, for instance, told that the Association of Liberian Community Radio (ALICOR) met with the Ministry of Information to discuss a conference at which GoL policies could be explained to community radios, but this too sounds like the old, top-down approach to information dissemination<sup>29</sup>.

In addition, in general the media is either not prepared or is unable to seek out relevant information and to present it in accessible, interesting ways. 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. There is little obvious widespread 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 at an early stage in the policy development process. In fact it seems that the media has not been regarded by either GoL or donors as an essential element in the development or in the implementation of policy, but rather as a useful add-on at a late stage. This is key because it means that the exchange becomes a commercial one, rather than a joint effort to bridge the country's many developmental gaps. In that commercial transaction a number of different things happen, not all of them positive, which is why the media should be regarded and treated as a primary stakeholder in the reform process, not as a late addition.

'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.'  
Personal communication, community radio coordinator, March 2007

Media practitioners indicated, and focus groups confirmed, that even the consultative processes for the iPRS and the Youth Policy have not resulted in widespread dissemination of information or discussion about these policies. Community radios use what information they can glean from UNMIL, Star and Radio Veritas, yet even these national broadcasters do not receive regular and informative briefings from the relevant Ministries. While a surprising

<sup>29</sup> Key informant interview

number of people interviewed or surveyed for this media mapping had heard of or seen a theatre troupe perform on the subject of the GEMAP or heard a radio program/drama by TDS about it, they were generally still vague about what GEMAP is.

I got the GEMAP document by going to ask for it. I attended a TRC workshop and documents were distributed there. I don't have the Youth Policy, but I do have some papers sent by the local representative of FLY. I've not seen the iPRS document, but the Planning Ministry mentioned it at a meeting and said it needs to be finalized before distribution.

Hector Mulbah, Station Manager,  
Radio Gbehzohn, Buchanan

As has already been suggested, information dissemination about key national issues is weak, and as one well-placed source said this may be partly because, 'there is competition between the GoL and the UN over who takes the credit'<sup>30</sup>.

As a result while some media is desperate for more information and tries, often with inadequate resources, to build on what it does know and so to inform its public

(see box), others do little beyond reprinting/broadcasting press releases and briefings without investigation or comment. There is, however, a considerable appetite, particularly among the community radios, for reliable information in formats and languages which they can use.

Useful material on the main policy pillars and on the different reforms that the GoL is undertaking is lacking. This is not to say that the media is beyond criticism, but inadequate information from Government and the lack of policy communication strategies compound the media's inadequacies. The situation in Liberia is changing fast and whatever the constraints, realistic communication strategies which reflect the needs of the people are essential for the well-being of the state and its citizens.

In sum, the two main sources of information, the GoL and the media, are unable to deliver a quality product to the people for a number of reasons, not least of which is the lack of a communications strategy.

#### ***Nature of Information - Credibility of the Source***

Media practitioners say that the general public lacks access to real, credible information and is vulnerable to negative news - a situation which is liable to feed a cycle of cynicism and scepticism. Ideas for communication on the various policies do exist, but these do not amount to a strategy. However, the Ministry of Information is operating at less than 25% of its pre-war capacity, and presently lacks funds to implement many of its ideas<sup>31</sup>.

To date information dissemination has largely been personality driven (vertically, from the leaders to the people) rather than issue driven (horizontally from the community of organisations and citizens involved). New information and ideas coming from national leaders is not perceived as credible. Confidence in the information needs to be developed for it to be effectively shared with the other key stakeholders involved in dissemination (the media) and the citizens. Creating this confidence, which will enhance clarity and understanding, requires a strategy.

Focus groups suggest that audiences — both rural and urban — are quite sophisticated, with clear criteria for believing or having faith in a particular source. The three key criteria identified in focus groups are:

- the format – the ability of the public to ask questions
- the messenger – who is delivering the message

<sup>30</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>31</sup> Key informant interview

- the language – whether it is accessible (either ‘simple English’ or a local language)

The focus groups suggest that the most trusted channel is the radio, although newspapers, friends and ‘rumours’ also came high up on the list. The fact that ‘rumours’ comes high up suggests that almost any information has a degree of credibility, although importantly individuals say that they tend to adopt a ‘wait and see’ approach to new information, adding that action is the proof of any information. However, the level of trust does also depend to some extent on who is providing the information, with Radios UNMIL and Veritas coming high up on the list of trusted sources.

Radio provides a certain amount of information on the various policies. Radios UNMIL, Veritas and Star all regularly cover policy issues, as do TDS programs. Equally many of the radio stations both re-broadcast UNMIL and BBC programs as well as TDS productions, and produce their own versions in local languages. Love FM in Monrovia, for example, says that its *Positive Show*, broadcast every day, covers political, social, and religious issues, ‘including the iPRS, TRC and GRC’<sup>32</sup>.

Rural communities derive most of their information from the radio, and they appreciate the simple English and the local language programming of most community radio stations.

**Usefulness and Appropriateness of the Information**

So far sensitisation has focused on broad, uniform messages, which have not been differentiated for the various target groups or different media channels. No communication strategy has been developed which considers the needs and habits of diverse consumer groups. The formats used - advertorials, press briefings, and news releases - don’t consider individual target audiences, resulting in the dissemination of indigestible information about the iPRS and the GEMAP, for example.

The focus group discussions indicate that the audience is sophisticated and weighs the appropriateness and usefulness of information it receives. Information from officials delivered in a lecture or controlled agenda meeting is less useful or appropriate because it fails to capture the public’s trust - as the example in the above text box demonstrates.

A senior TRC official attempted to give a speech explaining the TRC to a large group of citizens awaiting the start of a festival recently, where he was an invited guest. The speaker was long-winded and boring, and after only a few minutes the audience clapped and cheered continuously in order to force him to abandon his speech. The problem was simply that he had entirely misjudged the audience and was attempting to give the kind of explanatory speech he could have given to politicians or intellectuals.  
Personal communication, NGO Official, Ganta, March 2007

The research also indicated a lack of alignment between the information produced and what the consumer wants to know. The focus groups listed development issues as the key issues on which people want action. This should indicate a real interest in the iPRS. Yet the iPRS has not been publicised outside a small group of officials, although the document itself states that without citizens’ participation the policy will simply reproduce the situation that led to the conflict in the first place.

When 147 local government officials and civil servants were surveyed as part of this research in 2007, and were asked, ‘*What is the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy (iPRS)? (Check only One)*’, their responses were as follows:

- a) A document indicating steps through which poverty can be alleviated - 38%
- b) It is a policy document - 11%

<sup>32</sup> Key informant interview

- c) Abolition of poverty - 13%
- d) Don't know - 38%

The significance of this result is that such a high percentage (38%) 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. This finding is to some extent backed up by the same officials' response to the question; *Is the information that you are getting helping you to make informed decisions?* To which 19% said either that the information was unhelpful or that they weren't sure. Of this group, civil servants were the most dissatisfied, with 16% stating that the information they received did not help them make decisions, with a further 11% unsure.

**Clarity of the Information**

As stated previously, new information carries a high level of perceived doubt, particularly new information and ideas that are carried 'downward' from Government (i.e. vertically, in the old hierarchical manner). In order to resolve this uncertainty, audiences attempt to improve their understanding of new information by, for example, combining the content of a new message with things known previously, or by comparing information from a number of different sources. Even community radio stations are forced to adopt this strategy.

Interactive fora where questions are asked by the public and answered by officials, and in which the substantive content of new policies are opened up for exploration and discussion are rare. Such interactive fora are essential to develop understanding.

Horizontal information flows are more inclusive and collaborative and help to improve the clarity of the message. Networking and sharing of information increases comprehension. The horizontal flows are not developed adequately except at a very informal level; only the vertical flows are well developed, and even these could be improved.

This applies as much to local government officials and civil servants as to the general public, as our survey of these officials demonstrates. When they were asked, *'Did the Government in 2006 consult you on the preparation of the iPRS?'* the results were as follows;

- |                 |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| a) Yes          | 22% |
| b) No           | 65% |
| c) I don't know | 13% |

A majority of respondents said they were not consulted even though in the iPRS, broad based consultation is mentioned as part of the development of the document. When disaggregated by location, 73% of officials in the rural areas said they had not been consulted, compared to 62% in urban areas.

**Nature of Information - Quantity**

The Ministry of Information organizes a weekly press conference on the general state of affairs, and these are carried live on LBS. The material, not restricted to any particular topic, 'reflects contemporary issues of national concern'<sup>33</sup>.

Each Government ministry has a Public Information Officer (PIO) who provides information to media institutions (particularly to Monrovia-based radio and newspapers). Invitations to press conferences and briefings are circulated to media houses by the Ministry of Information, and by individual Ministries. So up to now the information available on iPRS has been

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<sup>33</sup> Key informant interview

dependent on what the GoL decides to release, although this may change with the new communication strategy which was said to be being worked out while this research was being done. At present it doesn't seem as though there is much real consideration given to what the public wants or needs to hear. The Youth Policy, which is much more clearly 'owned' by a civil society organisation (FLY) than the other policies, is more accessible, but even so very few people we spoke with had heard of it or had any idea about what it covers or what it is intended to achieve.

Almost all the Monrovia-based media practitioners and journalists interviewed said that they usually attend Government press conferences and briefings in order to inform the public on issues that the GoL wants the public to know about, although it also has to be 'newsworthy'. Whether all PIOs understand that it is their role to ensure that press conferences and briefings are 'newsworthy' isn't clear. And certainly the stated intention of making policy interactive is rather diminished by the Planning Ministry informing some who requested copies of the iPRS that the document would be distributed once it was 'finalised'<sup>34</sup> – see text box on page 14.

The best way for the Government to hear communities would be to create a place where people can put letters about their concerns, and radio stations should agree to broadcast these free of charge. At present, communities have to buy airtime if they want the media to express these concerns.

Imam Yussuf Sherriff

There should be a face to face discussion between the Government and communities so that the latter get a chance to transmit their messages.

Gballey Gray, traditional leader

The Government shouldn't communicate only through media because not everyone listens to radio or has the capacity to understand well what is said. Instead they should transmit the information downward through superintendents, then to parliamentary chiefs, then the commissioners, until it reaches the ordinary citizen.

Prince D. Forkpah, youth leader

Information is also disseminated through council meetings although the research was not able to explore how or to what extent these allow real engagement between Government officials and the community.

Information, we were told by the Ministry of Information, is carried from the people or communities to the policy makers by community radio stations, via vox pops, and talk shows with phone-ins. This assumes that local officials listen to the radio stations and then pass the substance of what has been said on to the policymakers. As one key informant told us, *'It's a lot harder to relay what the people want to Government, than the other way around'*.

There is no direct, formalized feedback mechanism where people can voice their opinions and questions on issues and policies, apart from the important LBS programme, *'Conversation with the President'*. However, even this

programme assumes that the GoL has the capacity to gather, collate, analyse and act on opinions expressed by callers to this program. While this initiative by the President has a value, it also runs the risk of reinforcing a centralized information dissemination process. Ministries may assume that the President will speak on their behalf and citizens tend to rely on this forum to obtain information on the GoL's programs. In fact several rural civil society leaders interviewed for this research asked whether we could pass on a message to the President, requesting assistance. This attitude, that the President is the only person who can get things done, is reflected in the following table, which examines how satisfied local government officials are with the usefulness of existing information. The question asked was; *Is the information that you are getting helping you to make informed decisions? a) Yes b) No c) I don't know*

<sup>34</sup> Key informant interview

XXXXXXXXXX

Among those who stated the information they received from Government was not helpful in making informed decisions, 89% wanted to hear from the President herself, and 89% wanted information from the radio.

However, when local government officials and civil servants were asked a slightly different question; ‘*Who would you like to hear from about different Government policies? (One or more options are allowed)*’, their answers followed a different pattern (as a percentage of the total number of respondents):

Ministry of Information	71%
Radio	58%
President	54%
Newspapers	36%
Minister	14%
Public Relation Officer (PRO)	14%
Ordinary citizens	8%
International organisation representatives	6%
American Embassy	1%
Other	8%

While 71% of respondents want to hear from the Ministry of Information about Government policies, and 58% from the radio, this doesn’t exclude the possibility that the Ministry communicates through the radio. The Ministry says it is now developing a communication strategy to make this possible<sup>35</sup>.

LBS broadcasts the reportedly popular, monthly phone-in discussion program called ‘*Conversation with the President*’ which is broadcast by the Monrovia-based, national stations, and relayed by some community stations. The concept of this innovative program could be replicated in similar programs presented by Ministers or other officials to change the idea that to get anything done it is necessary to approach the President herself. In general, local GoL officials are said to be willing to engage in debates on radio, and several of the local community stations told us that they regularly host the local Superintendents.

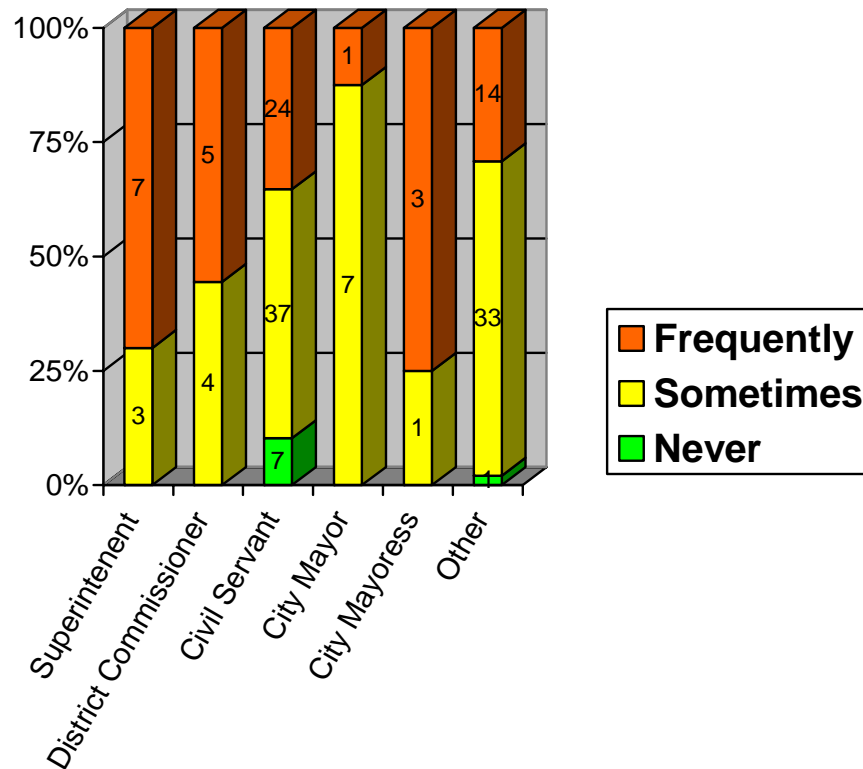
Operating costs are still a major challenge to most radio stations, and present a stumbling block in the GoL’s attempts to disseminate information on its policies through radio. Most stations are dependent on airtime support—payment for the broadcast of programs—to keep them on the air, and they are frustrated by the national Government and local councils’ expectations for airtime without compensation

Some programs are broadcast on community radios where local officials are invited to speak about local issues and/or to explain Government policy. The table below explores how much local officials feel that they receive information about Government policies, in response to the question, ‘*How do you get information from the Government on its policies (iPRS, GEMAP, Downsizing, etc? a) Frequently, b) Sometimes, c) Never*’

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<sup>35</sup> Key informant interview

## HOW GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS RECEIVE INFORMATION ABOUT GOVERNMENT POLICIES



Superintendents and District Commissioners, who are direct appointees of the President, more often said they ‘frequently’ get information on Government policies. City Mayoresses more often said they ‘frequently’ get information on Government policies as compared to City Mayors who more often said ‘sometimes’ – and, as a group, city Mayors were the least satisfied. This contrast between Mayors and Mayoresses is surprising, and the only explanation we can think of is that since there is a national woman leader, perhaps the mayoresses have better access to public information than do the Mayors (men). Also significantly, 89% of civil servants and other local officials, who are actually supposed to roll out GoL’s policies, said that they ‘sometimes’ or ‘never’ get information on these policies.

At the same time, it seems clear from answers to the question below that ordinary people, while willing to give some feedback to government officials, only give such feedback ‘sometimes’:

*Do ordinary people give feedback on how government policies (IPRS, Youth Policy, GEMAP, etc) are developed?*

- a) Frequently 23%
- b) Sometimes 58%
- c) Never 13%
- d) Don’t know 6%

For rural areas, 24% of respondents said ordinary people gave frequent feedback, while this figure was only 20% in urban areas. More strikingly, in rural areas 50% of respondents

claimed feedback occurred ‘sometimes’, while 75% those interviewed in urban areas claimed this kind of frequency.

### **Decision-making**

Government-controlled radio is obliged to broadcast Government press briefings unchanged, but independent media (both print and broadcast) edits these press releases and, according to at least one source, uses them only if they are ‘newsworthy’.

Information flows to Monrovia-based media from up-country are almost non-existent. Monrovia-based FM stations have no or very few informants up-country and are rarely able to report what’s going on outside the capital. Equally, rural community radio stations have little or no access to Monrovia, with a few exceptions<sup>36</sup>, and are never invited to official press conferences, or sent press briefings. However, TDS programs do fill a major gap in both directions, with programs from the rural areas, which are broadcast on the Monrovia based stations, and programs about national issues, which are broadcast on the up-country FM stations.

The lack of information flows from up-country to Monrovia-based media is a major problem as it means that while community stations at county level may be reporting matters of national importance, and carry the all-important opinions of ordinary people, there is no formal mechanism that transmits information from the rural towns and villages to either Monrovia-based media, or to policy makers in Monrovia.

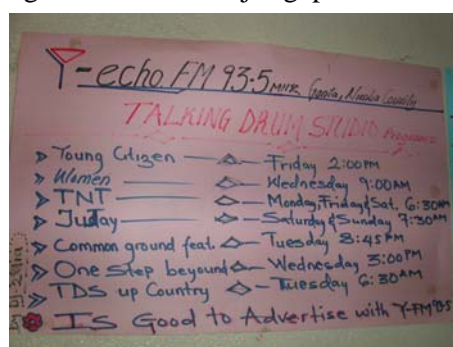


Photo: Y FM TDS program schedule, Ganta  
Credit: (Francis Rolt/SFCG)

It is not clear whether local officials believe it is their role to report the ideas and opinions of their communities to Government – or even whether there is a mechanism to receive and deal with such ideas and opinions if they do get reported.

### **Channels of information - Material**

#### **Radio**

State radio was first set up in Liberia in 1940, and it was quickly followed by a number of other private radio stations. However, shortly after Charles Taylor took power in 1995 he withdrew the shortwave frequencies of the mainstream private radio stations and subsequently banned them. In October 1992 he set up and ran, through the ruling NPP, the Liberian Communication Network (LCN) - a media empire that helped give him dominance in national politics. The LCN ran two FM stations and one short-wave station.

Positive change came only when Charles Taylor stepped down in 2003, paving the way for the establishment of some private or independent radios and an explosion of community stations. Radio UNMIL and Radio Veritas, the two most popular and trusted stations

<sup>36</sup> The station manager of Radio Gbehzohn, Buchanan, for instance, is able to visit Monrovia almost once a week, and makes a point of touring the different Ministries to collect documents and to find out what’s going on. He had acquired a copy of the GEMAP document but he appears to be unique among media practitioners in his determination to get hold of such documents.

broadcasting nationally, were started in 2003 and the 1980s respectively. Radio UNMIL is the only station to reach the entire country, but Radio Veritas comes a close second.

### **Print**

Charles Taylor's LCN had its own printing press and published two newspapers (*The Patriot* and *The Newsbeat*), and the LCN's printing press had a monopoly on printing. All privately owned newspapers had to be printed there. This led to an unofficial form of censorship, by forcing journalists to tread carefully in case the printers reported back to their masters on the content of forthcoming issues.

A handful of private printing presses opened for the first time in 2005, but owing to a lack of significant private funding, most print media are reported to still publish through the state-owned and operated printing facility in Monrovia.

Independent print media have grown significantly since the removal of Charles Taylor, and there are now more than 30 newspapers registered with the GoL (at least seven of which appear on a weekly basis only).

All the newspapers produced daily, weekly, or irregularly are published in Monrovia and are not distributed beyond to a great extent. Only two make it, in very small numbers, to any of the rural towns. Print is therefore a Monrovia-based phenomenon.

### **Television**

There are three private commercial TV stations operating in Monrovia, but few Liberians even in Monrovia have television sets. And, as with private radio and newspapers, some of these are perceived to be partisan, political mouthpieces of either the GoL, the opposition or of business leaders.

### **Mobile Phones**

The emergence of the four main mobile phone companies has increased communication access and provided a medium which could allow for more two-way communication between the Government and the public. Mobile coverage is regularly increasing, bringing in new communities, and has expanded to cover about 75% of the country<sup>37</sup>. Mobile phones are expensive to use, but even as early as 2005, there were an estimated 160,000 subscribers.<sup>38</sup> According to the Liberian Telecommunications Authority, that figure grew to around 500,000 (or 16% of the population) by the end of 2006.<sup>39</sup> The key informant interviews suggest that policy makers believe that mobile phones could be useful for feedback, but only a small number of respondents use them for this purpose and in reality it seems unlikely that officials would welcome or be able to deal with constant calls from ordinary people on major policy initiatives.

The mobile phone network has transformed how information flows in the country. Journalists can get information from around the nation much more easily and radio stations do use them to solicit feedback. Mobile phones present an opportunity that has not yet been adequately explored as a tool to support policy dissemination.

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<sup>37</sup> Source: <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/li.html>, 08/03/2007

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Source: [http://www.telegeography.com/cu/article.php?article\\_id=15949&email=html](http://www.telegeography.com/cu/article.php?article_id=15949&email=html), TeleGeography's Comms Update, 19/12/2006

### **Internet**

Access to the Internet is not restricted by the Government but is severely limited by the dire financial situation of most Liberians.

### **Meetings**

Town hall meetings are traditional forms of communication between leaders and their people in Liberia. These meetings are generally well attended and tend to be dominated by men aged 35 and above<sup>40</sup>.

County development meetings are called by the Superintendents, while District Development meetings are called by District Commissioners, and these leaders - whether men or women - set the agenda of the town hall meetings, and they drive the process. The meetings are called through radio announcements, and/or by a town crier if it is a smaller town, as well as by formal communication from the Superintendents to the Commissioners. Normally they say that all citizens are invited, but most of the attendees are male.

During the meeting, the leader, be it the Superintendent or the Commissioner, will explain the purpose of the meeting and what role they want the citizens to play in the implementation of a development plan. There is a forum for asking questions but the atmosphere is not conducive to a very frank exchange, as these meetings are usually chaired by the most powerful local official (i.e. Superintendent or Commissioner). It is difficult, for example, for ordinary citizens to pose a question about corruption, or even to ask about the way in which county finances are being spent when the official chairing the meeting is also responsible for and manages the county's financial and other resources.

## **CONSUMED**

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### **Radio Listener Survey (2005)**

The Radio Listener Survey, of 453 respondents in seven of Liberia's fifteen counties, including Monserrado (Monrovia), was undertaken by TDS in 2005.<sup>41</sup> Of relevance to this study is the following:

#### *Radio Listening Habits*

- People listen to the radio to stay informed (37%), to be entertained (19%) or educated (18%), or to listen to the national (16%) or local (11%) news.
- 80% of listeners listen to the radio for two or more hours each day. 40% listen for four or more hours per day.
- Almost three quarters of listeners own a radio. Those who do not own a radio usually listen to the radio of a relative or friend.
- **More than 75% of respondents stated a preference for local language programming**, either alone or in conjunction with English programming.

### **Focus Groups**

In order to have diverse views and opinions, participants in the focus group discussions were grouped into different age and educational levels and represented both genders. 12 people

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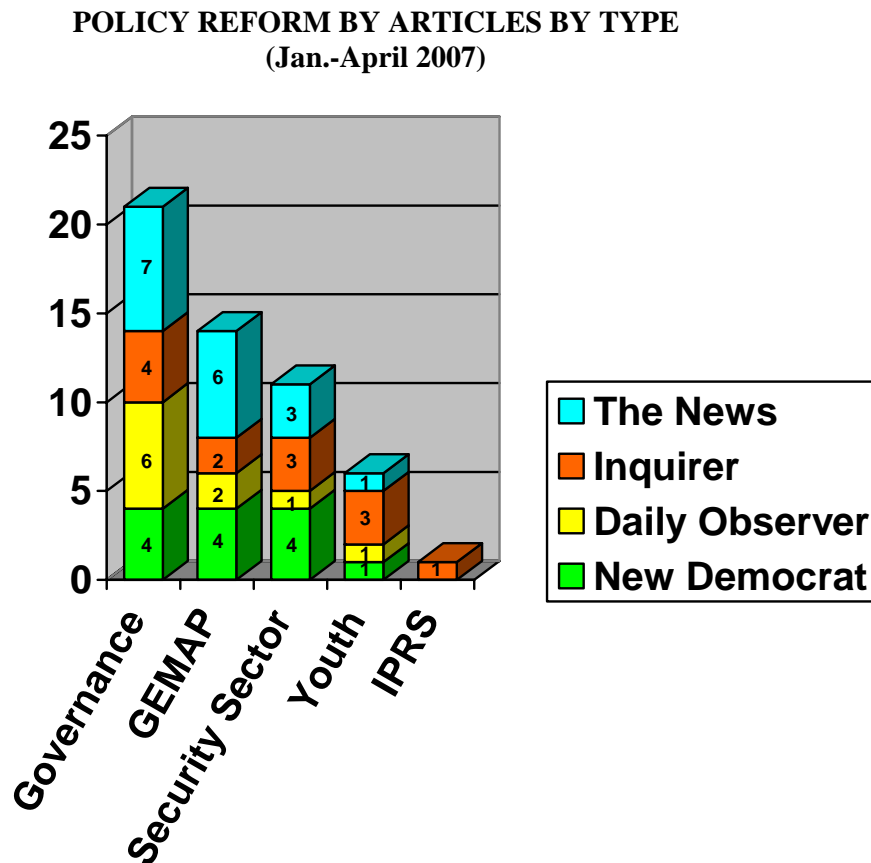
<sup>40</sup> Personal communication, SFCG country director Liberia

<sup>41</sup> Talking Drum Studio Liberia Listener Survey Final Report, April 2005

participated in each of the groups. Discussants were approached one day prior to holding the focus group based on the set sex, age and educational level established in the criteria and were invited to participate. Each focus group lasted for 2 hours and took place in a school building in the target area. The discussions were led by a trained moderator (SFCG staff), supported by a colleague who took the notes. Responses were also recorded on tape, which were later transcribed to aid the analysis.

### *Newspaper Analysis*

An analysis of newspaper articles from four newspapers over a three month period (January-April 2007) by subject-matter relating to any of the GoL’s policy reforms produced the following results:



The number of times the main GoL development policies were specifically mentioned by name during the research period by any of the newspapers was extremely low. The iPRS, in particular, fared badly, featuring only one article in any of the four newspapers over the three month period. Even the best performing newspaper, *The News*, managed a total of only 17 articles on any of these policy issues in a total of 77 editions.

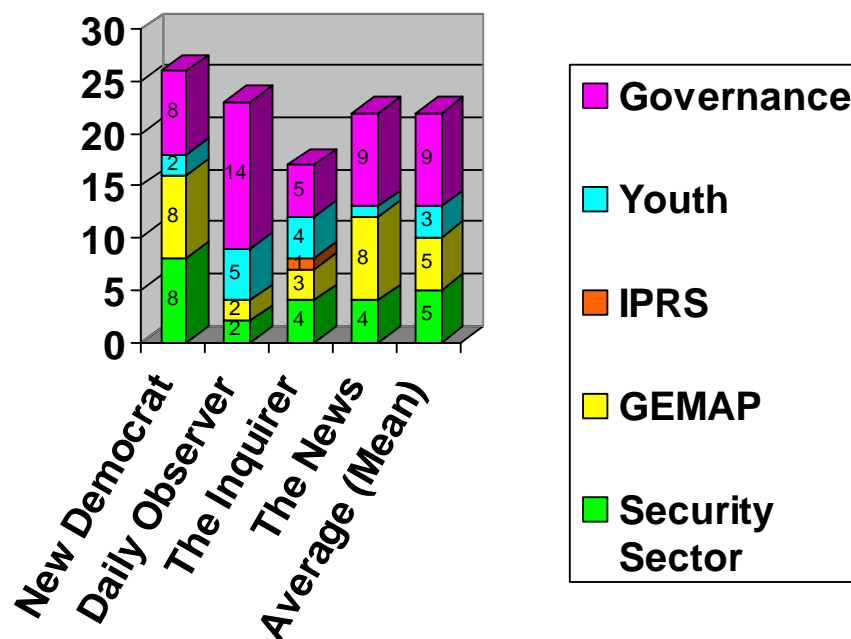
On average, the four newspapers printed articles related to governance issues in 9% of their editions. They printed articles on GEMAP and Security in an average of 5% of their editions and covered youth matters in only 3% of their editions. The iPRS was covered only once, in only one newspaper.

Articles which could be related to the very broad category of poverty reduction, which is the overarching theme of all these policies, but which did not mention a specific policy were excluded. For instance, agriculture, housing, employment, health and education could be included in the iPRS category. Yet even including these articles changes relatively little, as there were a total of only eight mentions of these subjects during the research period.

The lack of information on a major policy document like the iPRS can be attributed in part to the lack of public discourse and discussion led by the GoL. If there are not engagements and interactions on the document, newspapers will have nothing to report. At the same time, each newspaper has its own objective and agenda, which may not coincide with Government priorities.

The same information in the table above can also be expressed as a function of the number of editions of each newspaper produced during the research period (some are weeklies, some are dailies). Doing this demonstrates (see table below) that as a percentage of its output the Daily Observer prints almost twice as many editions containing policy reform stories as the average (mean) - see last column. The Daily Observer comes out three times a week, instead of five times.

**NUMBER OF POLICY REFORM ARTICLES AS A FUNTION OF THE TOTAL NUMBER OF EDITIONS (DURING RESEARCH PERIOD)**



**Survey of Local Government Officials and Civil Servants**

27 locations were visited and a total of 147 people interviewed (110 men and 37 women). 102 of the participants said they were from rural areas, compared to 45 from urban. Professionally, 68 were civil servants with decision-making authority, 9 were

Superintendents, 10 were District Commissioners, 12 were mayors/mayoresses, and 48 were from other civil service positions with less decision-making authority.

110 of those surveyed stated that radio is their preferred primary source of information - 75% of respondents. Radio was the preferred source of information for all groups of respondents except Mayors, of whom five out of the eight (males) surveyed specified 'meetings' as their preferred way of getting information. By location rural areas reported a 76% preference for radio, and 14% for 'the grapevine'. Urban areas were almost identical with 70% choosing radio, but 14% also claimed that policy documents were their preferred source of information.

When it comes to passing information on to the people, local authorities as a whole said that they prefer to use meetings to pass on information on policies. In contrast, ordinary people, represented by participants in the focus group discussions, stated that meetings in which they have little input into the agenda or the proceedings, and in which they are regarded as passive 'receivers' of information are 'not useful'. Focus group participants stated they want to participate in public fora where they can contribute to the agenda and be offered the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarity. Some community radios are broadcasting programmes in which people can participate in this way, ask questions of local officials and contribute their ideas.

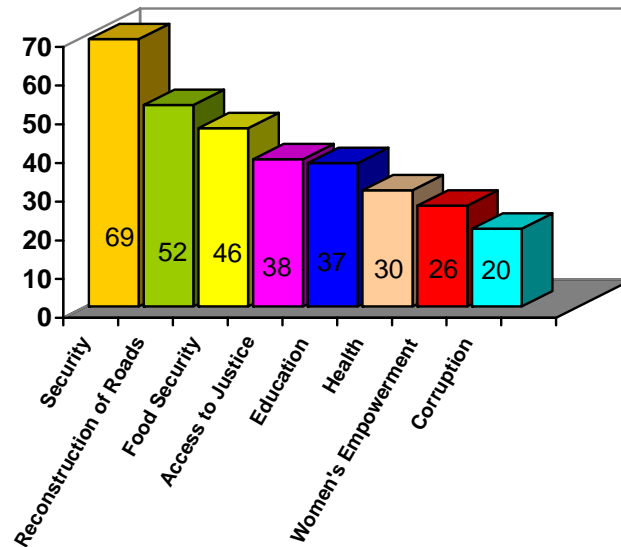
When local authorities were asked about to whom they pass new information, they replied as follows:

a) Radio Stations	40%
b) Women's groups	40%
c) Youth groups	35%
d) Zoes/Elders	27%
e) Individuals	23%
f) Religious Leaders	20%
g) Newspaper	18%
h) GoL officials	18%
i) County Development Team	16%
j) District Commissioner	14%
k) Other	10%
l) NGOs	8%
m) Legislative caucus	3%
n) TV	1%

Most respondents to the local officials' survey report that they pass on information to radio stations and to women's groups (40% each), with youth groups following closely. Over 50% of women surveyed said they regularly pass information on to woman's groups, compared to only 35% of the men.

Citizens' primary concerns, as defined by the 147 local government officials and civil servants who participated in our survey, are explored in the table below. The officials were asked to name (in order) the three most important citizens' concerns.

## CITIZENS' MAIN CONCERNS AS DEFINED BY LOCAL CIVIL SERVANTS



While instructive, it is important to note that the above table may not reflect citizens' real concerns. It is possible, for instance, that 'corruption' figures so low on the list because local officials – those answering the question - are those most likely to be accused of corruption rather than because it really is low down on people's concerns. And if newspapers are better judges of what interests or concerns the urban, reading public (which may not accord with the concerns of rural audiences) then corruption is fairly high on the list, with nearly 10% and 8% of all editions of the News and the New Democrat, respectively, discussing government corruption reforms<sup>42</sup>.

Participants in the focus groups and in TDS' 2005 listener survey identified the radio as the most effective way of disseminating information, but according to our findings, local Government officials do not use the radio as their primary method of informing people. When asked, 'When you get new information on policies what's the main means you use to pass it on? (Check one only)', their responses were as follows<sup>43</sup>:

- a) Meetings (with Zoes/elders/citizens/party) 56%
- b) Radio 33%
- c) Visits 5%

In other words, only a third use radio as their primary means of communicating with the people. But when it comes to getting information themselves about Government initiatives the local officials overwhelmingly chose 'radio' as their main source, as the following indicates<sup>44</sup>:

<sup>42</sup> SFCG newspaper analysis 2007

<sup>43</sup> These do not add up to 100% as only the main responses are included. Remaining responses were: Other; Ministry of Information; Meetings; Press releases; Internet; Grapevine; Newspapers.

<sup>44</sup> The table is an amalgam of answers to two questions: *What is your most preferred way to get information about government policies (GEMAP, Youth Policy, etc)? (check only one)*, and *Aside from your primary choice, what other sources of information do you use (check as many as appropriate)*

*Where do you prefer to get information about Government policy initiatives like the GEMAP or Youth Policy?*

- a) Radio: 90%
- b) Newspapers: 48%
- c) Meetings: 45%
- d) Policy Document: 16%
- e) Visits: 14%
- f) Press Release: 11%
- g) Ministry Briefing: 10%
- h) The Grapevine: 10%
- i) Internet: 5%
- j) Other: 3%
- k) TV: 2%

The vast majority of civil servants polled preferred to use either the radio alone, or the radio and newspapers, to receive information from the GoL, and most find the information they receive this way ‘useful’. The figures are almost identical when newspaper readers are removed, showing that there is no significant additional benefit to be derived from reading the newspaper in terms of acquiring information about Government policy, although without the newspapers the total of those finding the information they received ‘not useful’ did rise significantly. Half of those who receive information from the radio also read newspapers, which slightly raised their perceived ability to gain useful information, but overall there was very little difference in the satisfaction or frequency of news being received.

	Useful (no. of civil servants)	Not Useful (no. of civil servants)
Radio and Newspaper	52	12
Radio <i>only</i>	50	15
Radio or Radio and Newspaper	102	27
Newspaper <i>only</i>	2	2
<i>Neither</i> Radio nor Newspaper	15	-

Of those who read newspapers exclusively, 3 out of 4 get information about government policies only ‘sometimes’. This fits with the findings of the newspaper survey, which indicates that very little is reported in the print media about government reforms, particularly on PRS and corruption issues. A total of 15 respondents gained useful information from sources other than radio or newspapers – just over 10% of the total - and all found the information useful ‘frequently’ or ‘sometimes’<sup>45</sup>.

## DEMAND

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### *iPRS*

There has been little evident, large-scale participation by the people in the process of coming up with the iPRS policy objectives – laudable as they are. As the IMF and the IDA wrote recently in their *Joint Staff Advisory Note on the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper*, ‘In preparing a full PRSP [...] the authorities will need to extend consultations—and delineate

<sup>45</sup> These other sources were the following: Ministry briefing; Press Release; Policy documents; Ministerial visits; Citizens’ meetings; Internet; Grapevine; TV

the committees or entities responsible for conducting consultations that inform the PRSP—so that the various stakeholders can agree on the policy interventions needed to achieve the PRSP’s objectives. The authorities must also continue working to build greater trust among civil society, the government, and Liberia’s development partners.’<sup>46</sup>

Distribution of the policy document itself, and of information about it and its aims is lacking at nearly all levels, from local officials (only 38% in our survey could define the iPRS with any accuracy), to media, to the wider community. Among some there is a feeling that the Government doesn’t wish to distribute the documents<sup>47</sup>, while others recognize that Ministries have limited budgets and so limited copies. On the other hand, a lot more could be done to inform the media.

As the manager of one national radio station put it, ‘The government tries to communicate about crucial issues like poverty reduction and governance, but until now little is known.’<sup>48</sup>

It is still not too late to start a communication process and a dialogue with the Liberian people about a policy which is expected to have a significant impact on their lives, which must involve them, and of which they should have ownership if it is to be successful.

### **Youth Policy**

Less than a quarter of the focus group participants (23%) had heard of the Youth Policy despite the initial conference involving 200 young people from across the country, and the subsequent publication of the policy itself in 2006. This clearly remains a problem, as it seems that very few of those who need to know about the policy, and should be participating in a national debate about it actually do so. One focus group member complained that the FLY gave a copy of the policy to the local youth leader who has kept it to himself – which suggests that it isn’t clear to all the youth representatives what they should or could do with the document once they receive it.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports and the FLY organised a debate between 1,000 youth from all of the local high schools on the Youth Policy, and whether it should be enacted. The group that argued against it won the debate. They said it shouldn’t be enacted because it hadn’t been properly explained, no one had seen a copy, no one had taken part in developing it, and no one had heard of it before the debate.

Nyahn Flomo, Coordinator  
Radio Kergheamahn, Ganta

Participants in the focus groups were asked about their knowledge and awareness of the Youth Policy, which had an extensive participatory development process, and on the issue of debt cancellation, which had been in the news a lot over the few weeks previous to the focus groups. The majority (about 73%) had heard nothing of the Youth Policy, and had no idea what it was. The focus groups were slightly more informed about debt relief in that the majority had at least heard about it, although details were sketchy.

The Ministry of Youth and Sport is aware that not enough young people know about the policy, but still puts those who do know about it at a high 50%<sup>49</sup>.

### **Other**

<sup>46</sup> *Joint Staff Advisory Note on the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper*, IMF/IDA, April 2007

<sup>47</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>48</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>49</sup> Key informant interview

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, except on a one-off basis, although the Monrovia-based Love FM does claim that its daily, *'The Positive Show'* is designed to explain GoL policy on different matters. At the same time, the FM stations seem more able than LBS to use formats such as interactive talk shows and phone-ins, which support better understanding by improving horizontal information flows.

Apart from a few specific programs, such as TDS' series of eight short dramas designed to inform people about the GEMAP and its objectives, few radio stations produce regular programs on the two main policies (iPRS and Youth Policy), or on any other policy. Characterized by discussion on contemporary issues, many of the FM radios' programs relate instead to the changing and challenging circumstance of governance. For the most part neither the iPRS nor the Youth Policy is explained except in the broadest terms. One reason is that the stations themselves lack information. Most of even the Monrovia-based FM stations admit to relying on newspapers for much of their information.

Although LBS feels that it does a good job of disseminating official information it acknowledges that it faces critics at 'the bottom'<sup>50</sup> who believe that it does little but broadcast propaganda for the GoL. LBS does broadcast programs which are prepared and supported by TDS, by other NGOs, and/or by institutions involved in the different processes, but apart from the successful *'Conversation with the President,'* it has developed few new program initiatives.<sup>51</sup>

For the GEMAP sensitisation campaign, a drama group was engaged by Development Alternatives Incorporated (DAI) with support from OTI/USAID to give performances across the country, and for many key informants and participants in focus groups this was the source of the only information they had on the GEMAP. TDS also produced a series of eight dramas which were broadcast by collaborating community stations and Radio UNMIL, and these too were mentioned by many respondents.

## **SUMMARY**

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In Liberia the media serves a rapidly expanding and overwhelmingly youthful urban population. Radio dominates the mass media, with Radio UNMIL commanding the biggest audiences, followed closely by Radio Veritas and Star Radio.

The state-owned electronic media, the Liberian Broadcast Service (LBS), is in dire need of investment – and the Chinese are reported to have obliged with a complete re-build, which will give national coverage 'within nine months'<sup>52</sup>. With such reach the LBS could theoretically rival or replace UNMIL as the preferred source of information. However, shortages of trained personnel and the potential pro-Government bias are significant obstacles to be overcome before the population at large is likely to give LBS the same degree of trust they apparently place in Radio UNMIL. In fact, what the AMDI report says about Africa-wide state media services in general applies specifically to the state owned media in Liberia,

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<sup>50</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>51</sup> Key informant interview

<sup>52</sup> Key informant interview

‘Their principal challenge is to serve all sections of the population and to become genuine public service broadcasters, impartial and free from Government interference.’<sup>53</sup>

Private media is a growing phenomenon, in both the electronic media and newspaper worlds. It is to the GoL’s credit that it has allowed this growth, with few overreactions. The 40 plus community radios are very popular up-country, and are a vastly underexploited resource. National radio and all the newspapers, however, are concentrated in Monrovia. Newspapers, despite low circulation figures and minimal print runs, are important as they have an impact on key interest groups, opinion leaders and other media, and are a source of primary material even for some Monrovia-based radio stations.

Television is available in Monrovia, but hardly anywhere else, and few people have the necessary sets, generators and fuel. In the new media sector, the adoption of mobile phones has been the most spectacular, far exceeding uptake of the Internet, which remains almost non-existent. The potential of mobile phones as an element of communication between Government and people remains unexplored.

Information dissemination and awareness-raising campaigns are crucial to the implementation and the success of the two main development policies of the GoL; the Youth Policy and the iPRS. Yet the majority of citizens are uninformed about them, and inclusive strategies to encourage knowledge of and participation in these policies need to be developed as a matter of urgency.

While the identified actors have made significant gains in empowering the people in participating in these two processes, the results suggest that the level of awareness and understanding of the fundamental tenets of the Youth Policy and of the iPRS are sadly still practically non-existent.

Most of the activities undertaken to date to raise public awareness on the Youth Policy and the iPRS have been restricted to youth leaders, and to senior local officials, such as the Superintendents at county level. Meaningful channels of communication and information dissemination, both vertical and horizontal, have been underemployed and/or not used appropriately. Equally, these policies have not been developed with integrated communication strategies, despite the repeatedly stated need for public involvement. Some implementing agencies are only now beginning to develop such strategies.

Implementing agencies complain about limited resources (financial and material), but the policies are going ahead with or without communication strategies, so there is a real need to work with what is available rather than waiting for the situation to improve first.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, development issues are a key agenda item to the citizens of Liberia. Linking this consciousness to the Youth Policy and the iPRS requires a well-articulated strategy linking vertical and horizontal information flows with built-in feedback mechanisms. The development of such a strategy could provide an opportunity to engage a whole host of media practitioners and other key stakeholders, spurring their commitment to help the processes move forward.

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<sup>53</sup> *African Media Development Initiative, research summary report, 2006 BBC World Service Trust*

Desire for democratic reform and significant attempts by the new GoL to be transparent and accountable, allied with a recognition of the need for citizens' participation in Government, means that the media sector is undergoing, and will continue to undergo considerable change. However, systematic and reliable data on the sector is underdeveloped or non-existent.

In general, the GoL and agencies need to utilise all the diverse media resources available – and in particular radio - in order to properly publicise the various policy initiatives, and to encourage feedback. At the same time the GoL needs to set up systems to be able to deal with feedback in a positive fashion. In the long term the Ministry of Information may be in a better position than it is now once it has built a proposed network of offices across the country. Until such time, it has little choice except to work with the existing media, and to develop communication strategies for each one as it is, rather than how it should be.

Neither community nor independent radios are linked to a strategy, although they are using appropriate formats to foster information flows horizontally within the communities they serve, and from the people to different levels of Government. Little of the information which is developed and distributed by the GoL is designed for different media channels, and community radios in particular are very badly served despite the key role they could play.

Community radios are largely left out of the informational loop by the GoL, both in terms of delivering information to them, and of using them as a resource for getting information from the rural areas. Apart from occasional meetings at which journalists can talk with the President, the GoL doesn't really engage journalists, beyond press conferences. One reason for this may be the tradition of 'kato', which goes against all professional journalistic ethics and which should be addressed by professional bodies such as PUL.

At the same time the GoL does not deliver much information to the media in a reader- or listener-friendly way - leaving interpretation of complex information on the different policies, and even the translation of what material is available into local languages or simple English, to the different media themselves. While the large radio stations and some newspapers have the ability to interpret this information, others in the media are less able and the message will inevitably sometimes be lost, confused or simply wrong.

The media is the key to both horizontal and vertical communication in Liberia, and is an underused resource in this regard. Much of the media, and media institutions, as well as the GoL, seem to be unaware of the potential role they could play. This mutual suspicion – a hangover from the days of Charles Taylor – needs to be dissipated if Liberia is to take full advantage of the chance it now has, in the words of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, 'to break from past government misrule, violence, divisiveness, human rights abuses and economic mismanagement, all of which shattered the lives of Liberians.'<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *iPRS*, Foreword by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf