



**MEDIA REFORM COORDINATING GROUP-SIERRA LEONE  
(MRCG-SL)**

**MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE 24 JUNE 2023 GENERAL  
ELECTIONS IN SIERRA LEONE**



**JUNE, 2023**

**SUPPORTED BY: NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY**



**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**..... 3

**ABOUT MRCG**..... 4

**1. INTRODUCTION** ..... 5

**2. METHODOLOGY** ..... 6

**3. MEDIA AND ELECTIONS**..... 6

**3.1 MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE VOTER REGISTRATION** ..... 6

**3.2 MEDIA'S COVERAGE ON ID CARD DISTRIBUTION AND NOMINATION** ..... 7

**4. ELECTION MONITORING (WEEKLY AND MONTHLY) REPORTS**.. 7

**5. OPERATIONS OF THE MEDIA SITUATION ROOM** ..... 7

**6. SUCCESSES/IMPACTS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION** ..... 8

**7. RECOMMENDATIONS** ..... 8

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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## **ABOUT MRCG**

The Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) is the coordinating Secretariat for media reform, research and capacity building. It comprises Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Independent Radio Network (IRN), Guild of Editors (GoE), Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU), Sport Writers Association of Sierra Leone (SWASAL), Faculty of Communication, Media and Information Studies (Fourah Bay College), Ministry of Information and Civic Education (MoICE), Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone conducted its Presidential, Parliamentary, and Local Councils elections on 24 June 2023. Elections in Sierra Leone are held every five years. The Constitution of Sierra Leone, Act No. 6 of 1991 mandates the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) to conduct elections. Section 33 of the Constitution provides that:

“Subject to the provisions of the Constitution, the Electoral Commission shall be responsible for the conduct and supervision of the registration of voters for, and of, all public elections and referenda; and for that purpose shall have power to make regulations by statutory instrument for the registration of voters, the conduct of Presidential, Parliamentary or Local Government elections and referenda, and other matters connected therewith, including regulations for voting by proxy.”

The role of the media in covering and reporting electoral activities remain apt for the entire electoral activities. With renewed support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the MRCG was able to monitor and document the media’s coverage of the electoral processes leading to the June 24 elections. NED provided a four month grant support with its core objective that focuses on promoting professional media coverage and conflict sensitive reporting of the 2023 elections in Sierra Leone. The grant had activities including; regional training of 200 journalists on promoting professional media coverage and conflict sensitive reporting of the 2023 elections, media monitoring and reporting on the performance of the media in elections coverage and establishment of the Media Situation Room (MSR).

The main activity for the grant was the training of journalists on the theme ‘Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the 2023 Multi-Tier Elections.’ On diverse dates in March and April 2023, the MRCG trained 200 journalists (80 from the Western Urban and Rural Areas, 60 from the Southern and Eastern regions, and 60 from the Northern and Northwest Regions). The training was a Training of Trainers (TOT) and participants largely included editors and station managers who in-turn held in-house trainings with their members of staff. The participants were introduced to topics including: conflict sensitive reporting, reporting on elections in Sierra Leone, elections preparedness and the Proportional Representation (PR) systems, Independent Media Commission Elections (Coverage and Reporting) Regulations 2022, and the safety and security of journalists during elections. The sessions were conducted by senior lecturers from the faculty of communication and media studies – Fourah Bay College (FBC) and IMC and ECSL staff.

The MRCG in collaboration with Africa Check, transcribed and distributed media literacy contents on the various topics aimed at addressing mis/disinformation on the elections. The contents were transcribed into six local languages that are widely spoken in Sierra Leone and were broadcast in different radio stations across the country. There were also various posters with topics on elections that were published through various social media platforms.

The MRCG recruited media monitors who were responsible to effectively monitor the mainstream media in all the regions of Sierra Leone. The monitors on a daily basis sent reports on the general

media situation in the regions using the monitoring checklist. The reports were sent to the MRCG's Media Situation Room, compiled and analyzed to produce real time situation report of the media's coverage of the June 24 general elections on weekly and monthly bases at the start of the electoral period and on a daily basis during the week leading up to the election, on the day of the election and after the election.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The various reports utilized a mixed method approach. Data were collected from documentary analyses and qualitative content analysis of media publications and broadcasts. MRCG also deployed media monitors in all regions across the country from March to June 2023 to specifically monitor the performance of the media in covering and reporting on the election related activities.

## **3. MEDIA AND ELECTIONS**

Sierra Leone is a democratic state that has held democratic elections since 1996. Sierra Leone had held four elections (2002, 2007, 2012 and 2018) since the end of the war. In all of the elections, the media's role has been pivotal in enabling the electorates to understand the entire electoral processes and their civic rights and responsibility. The media played a crucial role during the just concluded June 24 general elections, including reporting on the activities of political parties, citizens, elections management bodies like the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL), Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) and elections observers.

Free media have long been recognized as a cornerstone of democracy and play an important role in influencing political discourse during elections. When free and balanced, traditional media (print and broadcast) foster transparency and the dissemination of important electoral information. The rise of new media – such as social media sites, blogs, email and other new media platforms – provides further avenues and possibilities for participatory citizenship, information, knowledge sharing, inclusion and empowerment. Both traditional and new media can play a vital watchdog role, and serve as a campaign platform, a forum for public debate and as a public educator, ultimately strengthening democracy (Samer and Gallagher 2015).

### **3.1 MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE VOTER REGISTRATION**

After the announcement of the June 24 General election by ECSL on the 14 March 2022, the ECSL on the 24 August 2022 launched the voter registration exercise at the New Brookfields Hotel. The voter registration, which commenced on the 3 September to the 4 October 2022, was divided into two phases. The first phase was from the 3 to 17 September and the second phase was from the 20 September to the 4 October. During the phases, the MRCG closely monitored the media coverage of the entire exercise and published reports of how the media covered the registration exercise; the challenges faced, and proffered recommendations for election management bodies (EMBs) to work with journalists and media houses so that real time information could be promptly communicated to the public. The reports showcased the role of the media in the voter registration process as an important phase of the electoral process (See

**Appendix 1 (a) and (b)-media's coverage of voter registration-first and second phases- for details).**

### **3.2 MEDIA'S COVERAGE ON ID CARD DISTRIBUTION AND NOMINATION**

In April and May, 2023, the ECSL commenced the distribution of voters ID cards to voters across the country and the nomination process of candidates for the various elections. As per the first published timeline of the electoral activities for external stakeholders, the distribution was supposed to have commenced from 17 to 26 March 2023. However, in a press release dated 13 March 2023, the ECSL stated that the date for voter ID card distribution was rescheduled to commence from the 7 to 16 April 2023.

In a press release dated 17 April 2023, the ESCL announced that 2,613,655 voters across the country had collected their voters ID which represented 77% of the total number of registered voters. The release also mentioned that a total of 5, 205 ID cards were without photos or photo less registrants, 502 cards were mismatched and 9,061 were misplaced.

The nomination of candidates for the various elections for councillors, members of parliament (MP), mayoral candidates, and presidential candidates commenced on the 19 April to the 9 May 2023. For each of the said elections, ECSL requested the various political parties to submit lists of their approved candidates that they have internally agreed on (**See Appendix 2 -media's coverage on ID card distribution and nomination- for details**).

### **4. ELECTION MONITORING (WEEKLY AND MONTHLY) REPORTS**

After the national journalists' training, MRCG started a monitoring exercise of the media to ascertain their performance in covering and reporting on the elections. The MRCG had four media monitors in the regions who on a daily basis provided information on the general media coverage of electoral activities. The monitors used a checklist to aid their work in collecting data for the weekly and monthly reports (March to June 2023) (**See appendix 3-elections monitoring (weekly and monthly) reports- for details**).

### **5. OPERATIONS OF THE MEDIA SITUATION ROOM**

The setting up and establishment of MRCG's Media Situation Room (MSR) was to monitor the country's media's performance during the 2023 general elections. The MSR relied on raw information from print and broadcast media contents from around the country gathered by the MRCG. The data were processed and analyzed to provide real-time information on the performance of the media in reporting on elections and conflict sensitive issues. The data added to earlier MRCG's reports to show the media's coverage and reportage on the elections and their adherence to ethical standards set out in the Independent Media Commission (Print and Electronic Media) Regulations, 2022 and the Independent Media Commission Elections (Coverage and Reporting) Regulations, 2022). Media situation room daily reports were produced by media professionals and academics, headed by veteran journalist and lecturer at the University of Sierra Leone, Mr. Joshua Nicol (**See appendix 4- media situation room reports- for details**).



## **6. SUCCESSES/IMPACTS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION**

The activities above are related to the grant's objectives. The impacts created are however listed below.

### **THE REGIONAL TRAINING ON PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE ELECTIONS**

- The regional training increased the capacity of 200 journalists, including editors and station managers to professionally report on the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.
- Journalists were able to professionally report the 2023 general elections with few breaches of the existing media laws, including the Independent Media Commission (Print and Electronic Media) Regulations, 2022 and the Independent Media Commission Elections (Coverage and Reporting) Regulations, 2022).

### **MONITORING OF MEDIA**

- The monitoring of the performance of the media's coverage and reportage on the 2023 elections in Sierra Leone helped MRCG to measure the level of professionalism in elections coverage after the regional trainings.
- It tracked the media's coverage and reportage (radio, television, newspaper and social media) of the electoral processes in Sierra Leone.
- Through the monitoring of the media's performance, MRCG was able to produce monthly, weekly and daily reports.
- It created a means for MRCG to assess the impact of the regional trainings in accordance with existing media laws and regulations.

### **OPERATION OF MEDIA SITUATION ROOM**

- The Media Situation Room enabled media professionals and seasoned practitioners to assess the performance of the media in covering the elections, during and after the elections.
- It helped to produce real time information on the media's performance during the elections.
- It provided a forum for peer review, coaching and mentoring of journalists.
- International and local organizations, Embassies, Elections Observer Missions made reference to MRCG's daily situation room reports.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The MRCG should continue to work on elections programs even after the announcement of results.
- Journalists and other media workers should continue to professionally cover and report on conflict sensitive issues in the country.
- Election Management Bodies should continue to work with the media to help ensure the peaceful conduct of elections.



- The security sector should always ensure the safety and security of journalists and media institutions before, during and after the elections.
- The Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) should continue to regulate and call to order journalists and media institutions flouting the codes of practice and ethics.
- Donor organisations should continue to support the media to do their in all phases of the electoral process.