A STUDY ON INFORMATION POLLUTION MAPPING IN SIERRA LEONE

Produced by the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG)

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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This is the final report of studies undertaken by the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) through consultants and support staff on information pollution mapping in Sierra Leone. The MRCG benefitted from the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre through its support to UNDP country initiatives to counter COVID-19 information pollution. The project was implemented in Sierra Leone from October to December 2020 with particular reference to information pollution in the fight against COVID-19 under the supervision of the UNDP country office in Sierra Leone.

This study, which utilized quantitative and qualitative approaches, has provided an in-depth understanding and documentation of the major sources, messages, channels, influencers and amplifiers of misinformation, disinformation and misconceptions on COVID-19 in Sierra Leone and has identified trusted sources of information.

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We believe that this study will be useful for further engagements on issues of information pollution in the country.

MRCG Secretariat,

December, 2020.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The spread of information pollution has become alarming globally, posing threat to both national and global peace, economic stability and health. Despite awareness on the spread of information pollution, there are paucity of data and literature on it in the country. This report is one major step towards providing data and literature on information pollution mapping in Sierra Leone. The studies have been informed by quantitative and qualitative methods. Both the qualitative and quantitative studies investigated and mapped the ramifications of *Information Pollution (IP)* with particular reference to the fight against COVID-19. They have provided an in-depth understanding and documentation of the major sources, messages, channels, influencers and amplifiers of misinformation, disinformation and misconceptions on COVID-19 in Sierra Leone and have identified trusted sources of information, and proffered recommendations on how the issues discussed could be addressed.

The research processes and instruments included a desk review, key informants interviews, focus group discussions and documentary analysis. For the assessment of the **Information Environment (IE)** in Sierra Leone, data from the records of the Independent Media Commission (IMC), the Media Use Survey Sierra Leone (2010) and the Communication in Sierra Leone: An Analysis of Media and Mobile Audiences were analyzed because they contained useful data on media penetration in Sierra Leone. Focus group discussions (FDGs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) were organized with stakeholders to identify the nature and impact of information pollution, major sources, channels, influencers and amplifiers of misinformation and disinformation in the fight against COVID-19. There were 36 focus group discussions held across the country in full compliance with COVID-19 protocols with participants divided into groups comprising the 'aged, women, youth, pupils and students, civil society organizations, media practitioners and general (various sectors of society)'. 56 interviews were conducted with online/offline influencers. They included health officials, local authorities, religious leaders, women leaders, celebrities, editors and radio station managers across the country. Two team leaders and six monitors engaged in media monitoring of COVID-19 contents of newspapers, radio and television stations and online media platforms. The review of the contents covered the period of January to November 2020 to see if there were publications and broadcasts (both online and

offline) containing misinformation, disinformation or misconceptions within the context of COVID-19 management in Sierra Leone. Initiatives of organizations and groups countering and fact-checking information in Sierra Leone were also catalogued. There was also a baseline study, a perception survey, which assessed the spread of information pollution in Sierra Leone. The samples were drawn from five districts (one district randomly sampled from each region). The survey focused on estimating the rate of information pollution, exploring the channels used and the persons or categories of persons involved in the spread of information pollution in the country. The analyses were from the perspective of why respondents thought about information pollution in various ways. The choice of sample size is always informed by the level of confidence and margin of error that the study can tolerate based on a given population size which, in this case, is 4,181, 960, the adult population of Sierra Leone (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017). The sample size was purposively divided into two: 400 samples were allocated to the household survey component and 200 for the online self-administered questionnaire. The Kobotoolbox was used to design and deploy the questionnaire while its related data collection application (Kobocollect) was used to collect data. Data were collected from individuals and heads of households using web based self-administered and enumerator led face-to-face interview respectively with a total sample size of 504. The SPSS, a renowned quantitative data analysis tool, was utilized.

In terms of media penetration, there are 445 media institutions across the country. Access to new media platforms is low principally because the spread of internet across the country is very minimal. The Internet World Statistics shows that internet penetration rate per Sierra Leone's population of 7,976,983 is still low at 13.1% in 2020.

The data show that the spread of COVID-19 misinformation was viewed as a serious problem in Sierra Leonean communities and by extension the country as a whole. Over 90% of the discussants and interviewees agreed that there were misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19 in their communities and that people were disseminating misinformation. Political leaders, supporters and loyalists and the youth were reported to be the greatest influencers and persons engaged in spreading mis/disinformation. The aged (mostly over 50 years) and youths (between 18 and 25 years) were considered the more vulnerable to mis/disinformation in the country and those in the

rural villages were identified as most vulnerable. The social media and word of mouth were viewed as the top two main sources of mis/disinformation in the country. With respect to the social media platform, Facebook and the closed messaging App, WhatsApp were the most common platforms for spreading misinformation and disinformation in Sierra Leone.

The study, recommends among others, that government and its partners should develop programs that promote media literacy campaigns on misinformation and disinformation. Government should support initiatives which are aimed at dispelling rumors. The government, its partners, CSOs and the media should organize "think before you share" public awareness campaigns and support fact-checking initiatives that would help in addressing misinformation and disinformation. Political actors must take the lead in discouraging their party members, supporters and sympathizers from engaging in spreading misinformation and disinformation, and publicly dissociate and condemn such acts by their supporters.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2019-Covid outbreak and response was accompanied by a massive 'infodemic' - an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it (WHO, 2020). This is exactly the case in Sierra Leone. Prior to the announcement of the index case of COVID-19 in the country, the **information environment (IE)** was already affected by lots of information pollutions occasioned by mis/disinformation. Mis/disinformation on COVID-19 led to the death of an individual even before the first person died of COVID-19.

The spread of information pollution has become alarming globally, posing threat to both national and global peace, economic stability and health. According to Waszak, et al. (2018), the spread of information pollution which they regarded as 'misinformation and falsehood' is a potential threat to the public health. The spread of information pollution continues to be a serious problem in Sierra Leone. According to Sesey (2020), a certain group of persons solidly denied the reality of the Corona Virus (COVID-19), stating that it was a hoax. That is, they claimed that the virus does not exist in this country and that it was a calculated ploy by the Government to gain access to funding opportunities. The outcome was an increase in the number of infected persons as a result of non-compliance to the COVID-19 safety guides. In the words of Tom Vens (the European Union Ambassador to Sierra Leone, 'disinformation and fake news in times of the Corona virus can kill'' (Ibid, 2020). According to Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, the President of Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), fake news and misinformation serve as obstacles to the fight against COVID-19, as well as the peace and security of the nation. This shows how serious the issue of information pollution is viewed in this country. The consequences have ranged from politically motivated demonstrations to health hazards in the case of Ebola Virus Disease and COVID-19 (Concord Times, 2020).

Despite awareness on the spread of information pollution, there are paucity of data and literature on it in the country. However, various efforts have been instituted to address the spread of information pollution. For instance, The BBC Media Action in Sierra Leone has already developed audio visual messages to help Sierra Leoneans identify and stop bad information going viral. Similarly, EU is supporting SLAJ on a nationwide radio and

television program to address fake news and misinformation around COVID-19 social media platforms (Concord Times, 2020).

The studies undertaken by MRCG therefore sought to address the paucity of data and available literature on information pollution in Sierra Leone. This report contains summaries of the most comprehensive studies on informational pollution mapping in the country. The studies have been informed by quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative aspect investigated and mapped the ramifications of **Information Pollution (IP)** with particular reference to the fight against COVID-19. It first assessed the **Information Environment** (**IE)** of Sierra Leone to ascertain the key channels, influencers and amplifiers of misinformation and disinformation. The quantitative aspect assessed the spread of information pollution in Sierra Leone with samples from five districts (one district randomly sampled from each region). It focused on estimating the rate of information pollution, exploring the channels used and the persons or categories of persons involved in the spread of information pollution in the country. It was entirely based on primary data collection method.

2. METHODOLOGY

The studies summarized in this report have been informed by quantitative and qualitative methods. Both the qualitative and qualitative studies investigated and mapped the ramifications of *Information Pollution (IP)* with particular reference to the fight against COVID-19.

On the qualitative method, there were desk reviews of media penetration of trusted public information, including traditional channels and sources. The data from the records of the Independent Media Commission (IMC) were collected from the Secretariat, processed and analyzed. The Media Use Survey Sierra Leone (Mytton, G. 2010) and the Communication in Sierra Leone: Analyses of Media and Mobile Audiences Research Report, May 2016, BBC Media Action (Wittels, A. and Maybanks, N. 2016) were also examined and analyzed because they contained useful data on media penetration in Sierra Leone.

Focus group discussions (FDGs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) were organized with stakeholders to identify the nature and impact of information pollution, major sources, channels, influencers and amplifiers of mis/disinformation in the fight against COVID-19. Thirty-six focus group discussions were held across the country in full compliance with COVID-19 protocols. They were held in Kenema for the Eastern Region, Bo for the Southern Region, Makeni for the Northern Region, Port Loko for the North-West Region, Waterloo for the Western Rural and Freetown for the Western Urban. The participants were divided into groups comprising the 'aged, women, youth, pupils and students, civil society organizations, media practitioners and general (various sectors of society)'.

Interviews were conducted with online/offline influencers and leaders of influential groups. They include health officials, local authorities, religious leaders, women leaders, celebrities, newspaper editors and station managers. 56 key informant interviews (KII) across the five regions[1] of Sierra Leone within a period of 2 weeks, with an average of 10 interviews per region. The sample for this KII has come from a carefully selected category of government ministers, civil authorities, tribal authorities, authorities in the

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[1]Sierra Leone is divided administratively into four regions (south, east, north & northwest) that are administrated by Resident Ministers and the Western Area where the capital is situated. For the purpose of this study, we will refer to them all as regions of Sierra Leone.

fight against coronavirus (NACOVERC/DICOVERC[2]), medical experts and practitioners, traditional healers, media house administrators (editors and station managers), university lecturers in journalism and media studies, religious leaders, artists and performers, petty traders and social media bloggers. Our assessment therefore of the effect of information pollution (IP) on the fight against COVID-19 will follow the pattern of first ascertaining its prevalence and its effects on happenings in and around the country, critiquing the forms of mis/disinformation, their effect on the work of policy makers in the field of communications, effect on governance and the maintenance of law and order, effect on the fight against coronavirus, effect on the work of medical practitioners, on religious practices and livelihood patterns in general.

Two team leads and six monitors engaged in media monitoring of COVID-19 contents of newspapers, radio and television stations and online media platforms. The review of the newspapers' contents covered the period of January to November 2020 to see if there were publications (both online and offline) containing misinformation, disinformation and misconceptions within the context of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone. The monitors reviewed the newspapers at the archives of the Independent Media Commission (IMC) through content analyses of over eight thousand two hundred and seventy five editions of newspapers were published within the periods of January to November 2020. Out of those numbers, there were about six hundred and five stories on coronavirus from the different editions of newspapers published within that period.

The radio and television monitors also went through major television and radio stations' programs (including online) on COVID-19 to look for misinformation, misconception and disinformation on COVID-19 within the Western Area. The team focused on both online and offline radio and television stations and monitored the contents of over one hundred and fifty COVID-19 programs.

For the online monitoring, the monitors searched and reviewed the contents of websites, Facebook pages and WhatsApp forums of individuals and institutions, to check for mis/disinformation. Over 300 Facebook sites, 50 WhatsApp forums, 250 twitter pages and 1000 websites were analyzed for the spread of misinformation on COVID-19.

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[2]NACOVERC & DICOVERC.

Initiatives of organizations and groups countering and fact-checking information in Sierra Leone were also catalogued, providing information on countering mis/disinformation and fact-checking in Sierra Leone

For the survey, primary data were collected with the use of structured questionnaire covering key topics on the spread of information pollution. The questionnaire was administered online (self-administered) and also by 10 field staff in a face-to-face interview in sampled households. The study instruments were administered in both English (for online data collection) and Krio or other local languages (in the case of face-to-face interview to create a more familiar and less official atmosphere). In consonant with the report writing practices typical of Sierra Leone, the final report was prepared in English for official and wider use. The study targeted heads of households in the face-to-face household survey component and individuals from various occupations for the online interview. Individual respondents were drawn from categories of professional groups such as journalists, lecturers and students, teachers, medical practitioners (nurses, medical doctors, and pharmacists), farmers, business people including petty traders, fishermen and women, local authorities and politicians. The sample size was purposively divided into two: 400 samples were allocated to the household survey component and 200 for the online self-administered questionnaire. This distribution ensured that potential errors introduced by the online self-administered surveys were minimized.

The multi-stage sampling technique was used to select the study districts, enumeration areas and respondent households for data collection. In the first stage, 5 districts, representing 31% of the districts, were sampled randomly from among the 16 districts in the country (that is, one district from each region). The sample size (400) allocated for the household survey, was proportionally allocated to the sampled districts. In the second stage, two enumeration areas, one urban and the other rural, were randomly selected using the national sampling frame developed by Statistics Sierra Leone based on the 2015 Population and Housing Census of the country.

Table 1: Household Survey - Sample Size Allocation by Region						
Sr. No	Region	Adult Population	% share	Total Sample Size		
				Total	Rural EA	Urban EA
1	East	965166	23%	92	46	46
2	North	757745	18%	72	36	36
3	North West	653155	16%	62	31	31
4	South	815556	20%	78	39	39
5	West	990338	24%	96	48	48
Total		4, 181960	100%	400	200	200

The final stage involved serial listing of all households within each sampled Enumeration Area (EA) and then subjecting the list to a simple systematic sampling using a range obtained from dividing the total listed household by the sample size of the EA (Total Households Listed/Sample Size of EA). The total household surveys completed in each of the sampled EAs ranged from 31 to 48 respondents shown on Table 1. The study adopted sampling with replacement to ensure that the sample sizes of 400 respondents were interviewed. That is, if the target respondent in a sampled household was not available, the household was replaced with another one on the list.

The approach to data collection was two folds: the first approach involved a face-to-face interview conducted in the four regional cities of Kenema, Bo, Port Loko and Makeni. Owing that most of the web-based questionnaire respondents targeted are in the Western Urban city of Freetown, the second approach would essentially help in creating regional balance relative to the number of study respondents interviewed from each region. The second approach was an online data collection using Kobotoolbox server and its related Kobocollect Application. This mostly targeted users of social media who have internet or mobile data connectivity and were users of WhatsApp application. The study tool was configured in a manner that permitted an online completion by the respondent. That is, the survey link was shared on WhatsApp to targeted respondents who completed the form by clicking on the shared link to the survey tool. A structured questionnaire was prepared in line with the study objectives and focused on capturing key variables such as awareness of the concepts of mis/disinformation; the mediums/channels used in the spread of mis/disinformation; the persons involved in

the spread of mis/disinformation and strategies used to tackle mis/disinformation among others. The entire questionnaire is attached as an annex. The Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) was used for data analysis.

3. FINDINGS

The findings are presented under the following headings:

3.1 MEDIA PENETRATION AND TRUSTED INFORMATION SOURCES

3.1.1 Media penetration (traditional media institutions)

Media penetration was divided into two key areas: the traditional media and the new media (including social media) platforms. The IMC's data provided the main source of information on media penetration in terms of the spread of media institutions in the country.

The data show that there were 216 registered newspapers, 24 magazines, 179 registered radio stations; 15 television stations and 11 Direct to Home (DTH) services in the country.[3] While newspapers are generic in their coverage with just a handful specialized in health, commerce and education, radio has morphed into classes of being Public Service, Commercial, Community, Religious and Teaching with international relay stations being a separate category. The proliferation of the media, backed by post-war policies[4] aimed at restoring lasting peace to Sierra Leone has not met its democratic distribution across the country, neither did it guarantee total press freedom until the Criminal Libel law was expunged from the law books of Sierra Leone on July 23rd 2020 and signed into law by President Julius Maada Bio on October 28th 2020.[5]

The table below shows the number of media institutions in the country within the period under review which stands at 445.

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[3]IMC Data -2020

[4]Post War Media Policies emanating largely from the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) attracted a lot of media-friendly NGO's who invested massively in the establishment of community radio stations right across the country in many districts and chiefdoms to serve rural people deprived of information on the national Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme in the country. Key amongst these NGO'S were Search for Common Ground: Talking Drums Studio, Informotracc, Fondazione Hirondelle, OSIWA, etc. who lent a very massive hand in the healing and reconciliation process.

[5] The Criminal Libel Law was signed into law by the regime of Sir Albert Margai on December 31, 1965 and it has defined the press of Sierra Leone until it was repealed on July 23rd 2020 by the Sierra Leone parliament and signed into law on October 29, 2020 by President Julius Maada Bio. As a safeguard to repeal the Criminal Libel Law, The IMC Act 2020 was also enacted and given the presidential assent.

Table 2: Distribution of traditional media outlets in Sierra Leone	
Responses	**Number**
Radio	179
TV	15
DTH	11
Newspaper	216
Magazines	24
Total	**445**

The next table shows the operational status of registered media institutions as at the end of October, 2020.

Table 3: Active and Inactive Distribution of traditional media outlets in Sierra Leone		
Responses	**Active/ Operational**	**Inactive/ Not operational**
Radio	143	36
TV	13	2
DTH	7	4
Newspaper	89	127
Magazines	10	14
Total	**262**	**183**

Although there are many registered newspapers in the country, the figure above shows that there are more operational radio stations in the country.

On the issue of media penetration, the data show that there are media institutions spread across the country.

Responses	Eastern Region	Southern Region	Northern Region	North-West Region	Western Region Area	
					Urban Area	Rural Area
Radio	35	31	31	14	56	12
TV	3	2	3	0	6	1
DTH	0	0	0	0	11	0
Newspaper	1	3	3	1	208	0
Magazines	0	0	0	0	24	0

Table 4: Distribution of traditional media outlets in Sierra Leone per region

In comparison to all other forms of the media (traditional and social alike), radio remains the most popular, most accessible and most used with 81% of the population having access to it, 47% listening to it on a daily basis, with 84% of males and 78% of females having access to it (BBC Media Action, 2018)[6].

18% of households in Sierra Leone have television which is closely linked to the availability of electricity. While 38.7% of television viewers are urban dwellers, 1.5% are rural. Of the 45% of the population who have access to TV, 74% are urban dwellers while 31% are rural dwellers, with the younger generation having more access to it in comparison to the old folk (BBC Media 2018).

3.1.2 Media penetration (new media)

The new media is growing but at a snail pace. The spread of internet across the country is very minimal. The Internet World Stats shows that Internet users grew rapidly from only 5000 internet users in December 2000, to 1,043,725 in September 2020. The stats showed that internet penetration rate per population of 7,976,983 is still low at 13.1 %

[6]BBC Media Action, *Sierra Leone Media Landscape Report, December 2018*

in 2020. Internet growth from 2000-2020 is 20.774%.[7] The Facebook subscribers are 693,400.[8]

Access to mobile phones is high, now achieving a similar reach to radio: 83% of people report having access to a mobile phone. There is significant potential for leveraging this reach and the opportunity offered by 2G and 3G mobile phone platforms as a means of distributing media content to audiences. More than half of mobile phone owners (52%) have a basic feature phone without internet or app capability. It should also be noted that a quarter of mobile phone users need help to operate it to make calls or send texts, especially women, older people or those from rural areas. Usage of mobile phones is often limited to basic tasks. Almost all mobile phone users (99%) say that they use their phones to make calls, but only around a third (33%) use them to send text messages and just 13% use social messaging services such as Facebook messenger and WhatsApp. In 2017, 65% of men and 45% of women owned a mobile phone, according to the MICS6, Statistics Sierra Leone survey.[9] However, the young people with access may be playing a key role in transferring online information (and disinformation) into the offline realm. They can act as gatekeepers – determining what online information to put out into their communities. They may also be perceived as important and trusted information sources by their communities, though the quality of the information they share may not always be great.

Use of social messaging in Sierra Leone is a growing phenomenon but still small – overall only 13% of those with phones report using them for social messaging. Social messaging use is also limited to specific demographic groups – notably young people (those aged 15–24) and those in Western Area. In contrast, young people are the group least likely to listen to the radio (39% of those aged 15–24 listen each day, compared to 47% of the population as a whole). Usage of Facebook Messenger was mentioned by 2% of the population, and the same proportion report using WhatsApp. Internet usage is only slightly higher than social messaging, at 16%, and is similarly dominated by young people and those in the Western Area (Ibid).

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[7] Internet Penetration in Africa- https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm
[8] Ibid.
[9] Communication in Sierra Leone: An Analyses of Media and Mobile Audiences. Research Report, May 2016, BBC Media Action

The advent of the mobile phone has significantly changed the way people relate with the media generally. With 83% reporting access to a mobile phone, while some 52%[10] having developed features of smart phones, a lot of the common traditional media is converging on the mobile phone that is changing the dynamics of human interaction powered principally by internet connectivity significantly. While 65% of men own mobile phones 45% of women also own it, having 37% using it to send SMS messages, 13% for social media messaging on Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp.[11]

The advent of the social media in Sierra Leone, driven solely by internet connectivity has equally brought about some telling continuities and discontinuities in the media landscape of Sierra Leone. The advantage of easy access and rapid dissemination of information across wide spectrums of society has brought about the attendant problem of social media content influencing the content of mainstream media and adulterating it. While the demographic distribution of print media is strictly tied down to the rate of literacy which stands at 48.1% as of 2019[12], social media penetration has had three dominant variables responsible for its penetration in the country: internet connectivity, the rate of literacy and the availability of electricity.

3.1.3 Trusted Information Sources

Respondents were asked to name three key sources of information in their communities and the results of their responses are presented in Table 5. The three most popular sources of information were identified by all respondents as Radio (82.3%), Word of Mouth (58.7%) and Social Media (51.6%). Among these, the radio was the most popular means of getting information in the country. Television and community meeting as sources of information were also relatively important with 49.8% and 32.3% respectively of the respondents recognizing them as important. While the radio was the most important source of information for Eastern (94.4%), North-western (98.7%), Southern (94.3%) and Northern regions (89.6%), the Television and Social media were observed to be the most popular sources of information in the Western Region. The Word of mouth (87.0%) was also very popular in the North. However, in all the regions,

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[10]BBC Media Action, 2018
[11]ibid
[12]https://www.indexmundi.com/sierra_leone/literacy.html

Newspaper, WhatsApp, online News media and other sources of information were not very popular sources of information.

Table 5: Key sources of News/Information						
Source of Information	East	North	Northwest	South	West	Total
Radio	94.4	89.6	98.7	94.3	55.8	82.3
Television	40.7	37.7	19.7	29.9	87.8	49.8
Newspaper	11.1	5.2	1.3	12.6	10.9	8.9
Social media	49.1	23.4	48.7	36.8	76.9	51.6
Meeting	43.5	46.8	56.6	42.5	0.0	32.3
Online news media	3.7	5.2	6.6	6.9	9.0	6.5
Messaging App (WhatsApp)	5.6	5.2	1.3	16.1	11.5	8.5
Word of mouth	49.1	87.0	67.1	57.5	48.1	58.7
Other	2.8	0.0	0.0	3.4	0.0	1.2

Similar to the general source of information, the radio (82.3%) was observed to be the main channel of information on COVID-19 followed by word of mouth (58.7%), television (49.8%) and social media accounting for 51.6% (Table 5). Newspaper, Messaging Application and online news media were not a popular source of information for COVID-19 for majority of the study respondents. Radio was found to be the main source of COVID-19 information in all regions except Western Area where Television (87.8%) was the main source of information on COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Equally, Newspaper, WhatsApp, online news media and other sources of information were not known sources of information for majority of the respondents. The result has indicated that the social media became more useful as a source information on COVID-19 than it was previously. This could be due to the extensive usage of social media among Sierra Leoneans in recent years.

Table 6: Who are the most trusted sources of information?						
Trusted Sources	East	North	Northwest	South	West	Total
Local councils	40.7	59.7	64.5	27.6	40.4	44.8
Local chiefs	55.6	32.5	61.8	51.7	1.9	35.7
Journalists	38.0	94.8	57.9	25.3	94.9	65.1
Politicians	7.4	0.0	1.3	9.2	3.8	4.6
Civil society	22.2	7.8	9.2	40.2	39.7	26.6
Friends	22.2	1.3	3.9	24.1	5.8	11.5
Family	11.1	0.0	1.3	10.3	11.5	7.9
Other	2.8	3.9	0.0	11.5	1.9	3.8

The table above shows that journalists were generally the most trusted sources of information, followed by local councils.

As seen in the table below, radio was observed to be the most trusted information source for COVID-19 pandemic in the country as noted by 55.4% of the study respondents. The second most trusted source was television which was recognized by 32.7% percent of the study respondents. All the other sources of information were not considered as trusted sources by the respondents especially online Media (0.2%) and Newspaper (1.4%). While the pattern is similar across the regions, there were more respondents in the Eastern and Southern regions that trusted Radio as trusted source of information on COVID-19 in the country with 87.0% and 73.6% respectively of respondents that recognized it as such.

Table 7: What is the most trusted information source on COVID-19 in Sierra Leone?						
Source	East	North	Northwest	South	West	Total
Radio	87.0	62.3	68.4	73.6	13.5	55.4
Television	4.6	33.8	9.2	3.4	79.5	32.7
Newspaper	2.8	1.3	0.0	0.0	1.9	1.4
Social media	3.7	1.3	6.6	9.2	1.9	4.2
Online media	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.2
Community Meetings	0.9	1.3	15.8	10.3	1.3	5.0
Other	0.9	0.0	0.0	3.4	1.3	1.2

The discussants also ranked them in this order: radio stations/journalists, health workers, including those in the response team on COVID-19, and religious and

traditional leaders (local chiefs). They said those sources are trusted because of their credibility and past records, specialization and professionalism, and provision of information with evidence. They said the medical officers are well organized, trained and qualified and have expertise to pass on information on COVID-19. They are well established and people expect much from them since they are professionals and people trust them. The radio stations investigate their stories before broadcasting. The religious and traditional authorities are their immediate leaders and they believe they would not give information with any tendency to harm people. These views were summarized by two discussants: "I trust radio because they release information after investigating it," a teacher stated. "We trust our Religious leaders because they are spiritual heads ordained by God," a CSO explained.

3.2 MAIN COVID-19 MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION MESSAGES AND TRENDS

All the discussants (100%) agreed that there is misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19 in their communities and that people were sharing misinformation and disinformation. When news broke out in Kenema that local herbs, lemon, ginger, alcohol and 'bitter cola' could cure COVID-19, many people spread that message. The demand for those commodities increased and people started looking out for them," a trader said. They gave the following examples of misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19.

- All deaths in the country were caused by COVID-19.
- Coronavirus does not exist.
- Government brought COVID-19 to make money.
- Ginger, garlic, local herbs, alcohol, honey, lime cure COVID-19.
- Coronavirus is just like any other sickness because we are used to coughing and sneezing and therefore it is not dangerous.
- Coronavirus is asthma.
- Coronavirus cannot survive heat (where the sun is hot).
- Coronavirus does not kill black people.
- Coronavirus is to reduce the number of retirees so that their pensions will not be paid.
- Coronavirus is worse than Ebola because it is airborne.

- Coronavirus is man-made.
- COVID-19 is not in Africa.
- 5G Network is the cause of COVID-19.
- The spread of COVID-19 is because scientists want to reduce the world population.
- COVID-19 is as a result of China and USA fighting for super world power.
- COVID-19 does not affect young people.
- Working very hard work kills the virus.
- A certain experiment went wrong in China and caused the spread of the virus.
- Coronavirus can kill in less than 24 hours.
- Face masks from China have chemicals that can kill Africans.
- All Sierra Leoneans have COVID-19 because all of the signs of coronavirus are in the country.
- If you touch anything you will have coronavirus.
- Plenty sex can stop coronavirus.
- The first phase of coronavirus is for White people; the second is for Black people.
- If you use hot rub, chew garlic and onions, coronavirus won't come your way.
- United States of America has sent money to purchase facemasks for every citizen and the money has been 'chopped'.
- Facemasks supplied at hospitals are COVID-19 infected.

The results from monitoring of newspapers show that over eight thousand editions of newspapers were published within the period of January to November 2020. Out of those numbers, there were about six hundred and five stories on coronavirus from the different editions of newspapers published within those periods. The findings show that majority of the newspaper publications on COVID-19 within the period did not contain misinformation, disinformation or misconceptions on the novel coronavirus in Sierra Leone. They were mostly on issues like public education/ sensitization on the nature and transmission of the virus and prevention methods, donations of medical supplies to the government, workshops and trainings for healthcare workers, fines for defaulters of COVID-19 rules, and the need to audit COVID-19 funds.

However, there were few stories that contained misinformation. One local newspaper publication in October 2020 has part of a sentence that reads "...observance of human rights can result in the spread of COVID-19." Another story published in October 2020 contained a quote with the following expression "...COVID-19 is a human tragedy and it is the deepest recession of our life time but it has an expiry date…." In the same October, 2020, there was a news article with this excerpt "The symptoms of the novel COVID-19 are similar to Malaria and Diarrhea and other common diseases."

The results from the monitoring of contents of radio and television stations show that there were stories with misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19 in Sierra Leone. Some of the pieces of misinformation were spread through phone calls and text messages aired on radio and television programs.

In March 2020, a television station broadcast that "a woman died because doctors refused to treat her saying she has coronavirus." The said incident occurred prior to Sierra Leone having its first index COVID 19 case which was on March 31st 2020. In March 2020, there was a rumor which was broadcast as a text message on a television station that 'people were vaccinating pupils with trial corona vaccine.' This rumor led to the death of one woman. In April, there was a broadcast in which "some women in Bonthe Island are encouraging others to stay faithful to their partners to prevent the transmission of the coronavirus." The women said COVID 19 is a sexually transmitted disease like HIV/ AIDS.

There were lots of misinformation on mainly radio stations about the proper use of facemasks and other issues relating to coronavirus. Some of those comments were read as text or WhatsApp messages on programs. Examples are:

- COVID-19 does not exist in Sierra Leone; it's just an excuse to kill people.
- COVID-19 doesn't kill young people only the aged.
- COVID-19 only exists in cold places and Sierra Leone is always hot so we won't have COVID-19.
- If you drink alcohol and bitter cola, it won't affect you.
- If you eat 'garlic' it won't affect you.
- If you drink 'raw palm oil', COVID-19 won't affect you.

- Smoking 'jamba' (Marijuana) will prevent someone from getting COVID-19.

The findings from the online monitoring show that Sierra Leone was already faced with the problem of misinformation about the coronavirus even before the outbreak of the disease in the country. There were online postings, audios, videos and stories about the virus in the country at the time there was none. There were headlines and excerpts of posts/stories:

- "Sierra Leone confirms first case of coronavirus."
- "Vaccination of children in schools with coronavirus."
- "COVID-19 can't survive over 27 degree Celsius."
- "People should not to get out of their houses after 10 p.m. and stay in till 5 a.m. as they will be spraying medicine in the air in order to kill COVID-19."
- "Boxes arrived in Sierra Leone from China containing 5G network and materials which can cause the spread of the coronavirus, because it sucks the oxygen out of your lungs".
- "Coronavirus is bioweapon engineered by the Chinese government, the US government or Bill Gate's foundation either deliberately or accidently released in a bid to gain super world powers."
- "Tell my people I did not bring corona virus, technology is at work many will die and it is the enemy doing this to achieve their goals in controlling the world, its politics and economy."
- ❖ "Mouthwash can kill coronavirus within 30 seconds of exposure, a study has found."

91% of respondents of the Key Informant Interviews (KII) admitted that misinformation and disinformation in Sierra Leone, which was largely spread by social media, prevalently through WhatsApp and Facebook, was a grave concern. "Fake news' strongest attack is on systems and establishments which it extends to authorities in positions of trust through character assassination.... While the biggest influencers of social media also largely involved in the spread of fake news are largely political in provenance, a negligible number do spread fake news for the fun and just for mischief", opines Mohamed S. Kargbo, Provincial Secretary of the Eastern Region. "Even the

electronic media has the habit of hiding under the veneer of call in programs to peddle fake news," he further continues. Traditional media is often a vector and amplifier of disinformation, either just by trying to debunk or through various "non-news" programs.

Since social media is the province where mis/disinformation of all sorts thrive the most, effort is being made to put policies in place to pass a cyber-crime bill in parliament by the Minister of Information and Communication, Mohamed Rahman Swaray "to enforce responsible use of social media. The focus of this bill is on data protection, pornography, organized crime and false news." Even at the local council levels where power is devolved from the central government, authorities like city mayors and district administrators find it difficult to administer as mis/disinformation unduly heightens citizens expectations, puts them in a bad light by making insinuations of corruption and there are times they wake up in the morning and find themselves countering mis/disinformation making the rounds on social media instead of focusing on the task entrusted to them.[13] That same level of distrust in systems has extended to even health workers that respondents intimated me of nurses being rounded and flogged for doing routine sensitization on immunization while the public around them was busy fomenting conspiracy theories of them going round to vaccinate their children with the COVID-19 virus. [14] It was very common for irate youths to be routinely following immunization teams in their tracks, polluting the minds of ordinary people against them and making them get very hostile reception in places like Kenema, Port Loko and Karene districts. "The youth went even to the extent of warning people not to accept these drugs from the nurses as they were aimed at spreading the coronavirus," according to the Medical Superintendent of Port Loko Hospital, Dr. McLean.[15]

While the medical field was battling with huge waves of doubts, suspicions and conspiracy theories around their operations, it was very common to see waves of unscientific prescriptions afloat social media that are normally within the operational

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[13]Interviews with the Mayor of Kenema & the Abdul S. Mansour - Deputy Administrator of the Makeni City Council

[14]In Lunsar, nurses were rounded up at the Guadalupe Secondary school and badly handled for allegedly going to the school to inject their children with Covid-19, in Rogbere, a village very close to Port Loko, a group of irate youth beat up nurses when rumours reached them that they were on a mission to spread Corona virus. In Freetown central, a lady had a heart attack and passed off just when rumours reached her that health workers were at her school injecting the children of her school. In Kenema, two young men in the lorry park argued about the existence of Corona to the extent of going into blows until the police take them into custody to settle their dispute. That evidence of Corona deaths practically nonexistent with official figures giving a paltry 3.6% fatality rate mostly with aged people having underlying health problems,

[15]Interview with Dr. McLean, Medical Superintendent of the Port Loko Government Hospital.

areas of traditional healers, like ***gbangba, bitter cola, hot bath, garlic*** etc. and added to these were equally doses of superstition that flew back and forth[16].

As the unit vested with the authority to contain the spread of the coronavirus across the country, NACOVERC has equally struggled with the huge wave of mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories that have characterized the medical profession in the wake of the outbreak of coronavirus epidemic. "Information is one of the key drivers in the fight against COVID-19, but the rate of denial is unprecedented and that is being fueled by mis/disinformation, especially on social media. We have had real life situations in which certain homes identified for quarantine as a result of lab tests vehemently refused with the counter-accusation that they were being targeted because they belonged to the opposition party."[17]

As presented in the table below the aged are the most vulnerable to misinformation as almost half (45.2%) of the study population accounted for this group followed by the youth accounting for 34.5% of the respondents. This could be attributed to the fact that the aged have the tendency to accept information as they receive be it true or false since they do not have the awareness or skills required to validate the authenticity of information. The youths on the other hand maybe vulnerable to misinformation as they lack the patience to screen through information and because they are sometimes naïve, they are normally misled. Furthermore, in that the youths are versatile in the use of information technology and rely extensively on messaging applications such as WhatsApp and online media platforms for information, backed by their curiosity and lack of patience to fact check information, they can be easily misinformed by what they see, read or hear on the web.

Table 8: Who in your community is most vulnerable to believing mis/disinformation and spreading of it?						
Category	East (108)	North (n=77)	Northwest (n=76)	South (m=87)	West (n=156)	Total (N=504)
The aged	33.3	53.2	44.7	43.7	50.6	45.2
Middle-age	10.2	2.6	3.9	5.7	4.5	5.6
Youth	46.3	24.7	42.1	41.4	23.7	34.5
Children	10.2	19.5	9.2	9.2	21.2	14.7

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[16]Prescriptions on the internet of all sorts of cures for Corona have appeared with no scientific basis.
[17]Interview the **DICOVERC** Bombali District Quarantine Officer, Captain Daniel Saio Samura

With respect to locations, the people living in villages were most vulnerable to misinformation. There were 79.6% of the respondents who stated that those in the villages are most vulnerable compared with only 10.3% in the capital cities like Freetown. Again, this can be linked to the limited number of trusted information sources especially television and even radio stations in smaller villages and towns. It could also be as a result of high level of illiteracy and deprivation that prevent them from having assets like a functional radio hence rely on hearsay that is likely to be misinformation.

3.3 KEY CHANNELS FOR DISSEMINATION OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

The discussants stated that misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19 were mostly shared on social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp. They are mostly shared by motor ('okada') riders, motor drivers, youth, and market women/business people. The young people and political party loyalists/activists are the ones mostly targeted with mis-/disinformation. The country is so divided between the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the opposition All Peoples Congress (APC) to an extent that people easily believe what their political parties and leaders tell them, most discussants remarked. The young people are mostly unemployed and spend most of the times in ghettoes, 'ataya' bases' and other social gatherings. WhatsApp groups are the breeding grounds for most of the mis-/disinformation. However, some of the political leaders in the FDGs denied spreading fake news and stated that any responsible political party would not promote the spread of fake news.

There are diverse sources of mis/disinformation just as there are many sources of information available to people. The most popular source of misinformation was identified as word of mouth followed by social media and messaging application mainly WhatsApp. The data also show that 75.4% of respondents identified word of mouth as one of the major sources of misinformation. Similarly, 71% and 27.2% of respondents said social media and messaging application respectively were other major sources of misinformation. The word of mouth misinformation as explained in the FGDs normally emanates from the social media platforms in which one person who accesses them shares the misinformation with others who spread it across communities. Discussants

explained that the actual spread of the false information is through interpersonal communication (word of mouth) in which the few people who have access to the social media platforms share/disseminate the information widely.

Table 9: From your experience, what are the top two main sources of mis/disinformation?						
Action	East	North	Northwest	South	West	Total
Radio	13.9	2.6	0.0	9.2	1.9	5.6
Television	6.5	1.3	0.0	2.3	3.8	3.2
Newspaper	3.7	1.3	0.0	5.7	2.6	2.8
Social media	72.2	58.4	98.7	23.0	89.7	71.0
Meeting	10.2	1.3	1.3	18.4	0.0	5.8
Online news media	9.3	6.5	2.6	13.8	3.2	6.7
Messaging App (WhatsApp)	27.8	35.1	3.9	48.3	22.4	27.2
Word of mouth	55.6	93.5	93.4	66.7	76.3	75.4
Other	0.9	0.0	0.0	12.6	0.0	2.4

The two most popular sources of misinformation and disinformation on social media platform and messaging App as seen above are known for spread of misinformation are WhatsApp and Facebook.

As indicated from the table below, 97.8% and 90.3% of the study respondents confirmed that WhatsApp and Facebook respectively were the major social media sources of mis/disinformation. This was confirmed during the FDGs as "Facebook and WhatsApp messenger are the key channels of disseminating mis-/disinformation." The other social media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube were not popularly known for spreading misinformation. The pattern is replicated at the regional level with Facebook and WhatsApp being the most popular social media platforms for spreading misinformation.

Table 10: On which social media platforms is mis/disinformation mostly spread?						
Action	East	North	Northwest	South	West	Total
Facebook	99.1	98.7	98.7	95.4	97.4	97.8
Twitter	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.3	0.0	0.4
LinkedIn	1.9	0.0	0.0	2.3	0.0	0.8
Instagram	0.0	1.3	0.0	3.4	0.0	0.8
Snapchat	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
YouTube	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.3	0.0	0.4
WhatsApp	84.3	98.7	98.7	69.0	98.1	90.3
Other	0.0	0.0	1.3	4.6	0.0	1.0

3.4 INFLUENCERS AND THEIR ROLE IN COMBATING OR CONTRIBUTING TO MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

The survey findings revealed that the people influencing the spread of mis/disinformation are believed to be political leaders/members/activists as 85.9% of the respondents accounted as stated in table 11. Conspiracy theorists accounted for 49%. The case of political leaders, supporters and loyalists influencing the spread of mis/disinformation is common in that political rivals often spread false information about their opponents with the intention to win the love and trust of the masses and in the end tarnish the reputation and decrease the support of their rivals. Conspiracy theorists (those who generate the false and misleading narratives) are also believed to be a major source of mis/disinformation as most of them are normally politically affiliated. It is also worthy to note that youth leaders play a crucial role in influencing the spread of mis/disinformation as according to the study, 37.3% accounted for this group. The least among the groups identified were celebrities representing 1.2% and activists representing 1.8%. Also, journalists who are supposed to be trained in presenting information to the public are also believed to be amplifiers of mis/disinformation with a fair proportion of 9.7%. This could be a concern as it should be one of the main sources to verify or validate information.

Table 11: Who are the people influencing the spread of mis/disinformation?						
Category of Persons	East	North	Northwest	South	West	Total
Political leaders/activists	81.5	93.5	96.1	75.9	85.9	85.9
Youth leaders	67.6	26.0	10.5	48.3	28.8	37.3
Traditional healers	15.7	1.3	2.6	26.4	9.0	11.3
Conspiracy theorists	7.4	75.3	86.8	20.7	62.2	49.0
Celebrities	1.9	1.3	1.3	0.0	1.3	1.2
Activists	2.8	2.6	0.0	1.1	1.9	1.8
Journalists	14.8	0.0	2.6	23.0	7.1	9.7
Other	8.3	0.0	0.0	4.6	3.8	3.8

The persons believed to intensify the spread of misinformation according to the study are political party supporters as they represent 87.5% of the responses followed by youths representing 64.9% (see table below). Political party supporters are often

believed to exacerbate the spread of mis/disinformation which often leads to clashes and in some cases the destruction of lives and property. Youths are also believed to be a group of people that are often used in promoting the spread of mis/disinformation as they are technologically savvy.

Table 12: What are the categories of persons engaged in amplifying the spread of mis/disinformation?						
Persons	East	North	Northwest	South	West	Total
Political Leaders	62.0	6.5	6.6	43.7	19.2	28.8
Political party supporters	90.7	94.8	96.1	79.3	82.1	87.5
Celebrities	0.0	1.3	0.0	2.3	1.3	1.0
Activists	2.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	1.0
Journalists	20.4	0.0	2.6	11.5	5.1	8.3
Conspiracy theorists	7.4	39.0	28.9	16.1	17.3	20.0
Business people	9.3	1.3	5.3	34.5	26.3	17.1
Community leaders	3.7	2.6	0.0	10.3	3.2	4.0
Local authorities	2.8	1.3	1.3	31.0	2.6	7.1
Youth	72.2	62.3	81.6	58.6	56.4	64.9

Regionally, the North West, North and Eastern regions reported political party supporters as being the major persons amplifying mis/disinformation as each of these regions represented over 90% for this group while the South and West reported a little less (79.3% and 82.1 respectively). It is also observed that business people in the South and West are somehow significant in intensifying mis/disinformation as they accounted for 34.5% and 26.3% respectively. Another group that draws attention is the local authorities in the South as they accounted for 31%. Local authorities are often revered in the rural areas hence the tendency to accept and believe them is great.

Table 13: Who are the persons sharing mis/disinformation?						
Persons	East	North	Northwest	South	West	Total
Political leaders	11.1	6.5	3.9	32.2	10.3	12.7
Political party supporters	75.9	97.4	97.4	69.0	87.2	84.7
Youth	50.9	33.8	47.4	64.4	46.8	48.8
Ordinary people	54.6	63.6	51.3	33.3	54.5	51.8
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.3	0.0	0.4

The persons believed to share mis/disinformation according to the study are political party supporters as this group accounted for the highest proportion among all the regions giving it a national proportion of 84.7%. This is followed by ordinary people and the youths accounting for 51.8% and 48.8% respectively.

At the FDGs, on the question of those that spread and influence misinformation and disinformation in their communities, the following were named: politicians (political party activists, spin doctors/operatives/ loyalists/propagandists, youth, aged, students, bike riders, local authorities, Disc Jockeys, celebrities, market women, traders, and business people.

3.5 MEASURES TO TACKLE MISINFORMATION

The study explored the measures that would be employed to help tackle mis/disinformation and its effects in the country. To help achieve this, the respondents were asked what would help them to better detect mis/disinformation and their responses, as summarized in Table 14, indicated some useful strategies. The most popular was public education as a useful tool in detecting misinformation. According to findings, 96.2% (see table below) of the respondents identified this as a good strategy in detecting misinformation in their society. This was closely followed by checking the information through trusted sources such as radio broadcast or Television which 82.7% of the respondents agreed on. Furthermore, checking social media platforms to get additional information on the suspected misinformation was third strategy identified as a useful measure in detecting mis/disinformation in our society accounting for 57.1% of all respondents. Reading newspapers and checking online media were mentioned but were comparatively less popular strategies. The regional analysis suggested that similar pattern across the five regions with very minimal differences. For instances, checking social medial platforms was more popular in the Northwestern (93.4%) and the Northern (71.4%) regions than other regions.

Table 14: What would help them to better detect disinformation?						
Measures	East	North	Northwest	South	West	Total
Public education	97.2	97.4	98.7	94.3	94.9	96.2
Checking radio broadcast or TV	93.5	96.1	80.3	98.9	60.9	82.7
Reading newspapers	25.0	13.0	7.9	14.9	46.8	25.6
Checking online media	51.9	22.1	15.8	13.8	26.9	27.6
Checking social media platforms	18.5	71.4	93.4	39.1	69.2	57.1
Other	13.9	0.0	3.9	39.1	1.3	10.7

The discussants suggested that misinformation and disinformation could be addressed through the following ways:

- Massive media literacy campaign
- Civic/adult education, outreach and sensitization in various communities
- Development and enforcement of Cyber/social media laws
- Regional bye-laws against fake news developed and implemented
- Develop fact-checking apps/mechanisms
- Crosschecking information before sharing
- Government to be proactive and release information on time
- Train journalists on misinformation and dissemination
- Engaging local tribal heads and train them on the dangers of mis/disinformation

4. CONCLUSION

This report has summarized the qualitative and quantitative studies conducted by the MRCG. The studies have investigated and mapped out the ramifications of *Information Pollution (IP)* with particular reference to the fight against COVID-19. The key channels, influencers and amplifiers of misinformation and disinformation have been identified and outlined. Through a qualitative mapping exercise, the study has provided an in-depth understanding and documentation of the major sources, messages, channels, influencers and amplifiers of misinformation, disinformation and misconceptions on COVID-19 in Sierra Leone and has identified trusted sources of information, and proffered recommendations on how the issues discussed could be addressed.

The data show that the spread of COVID-19 misinformation is a serious problem in Sierra Leone. The respondents for the studies agreed that there were misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19 in their communities and that people were disseminating misinformation. They stated that social media platforms, prevalently through WhatsApp and Facebook, were mostly used to spread mis/disinformation. They named politicians (political party activists, spin doctors/operatives/ loyalists/propagandists), youth, aged and drivers as the key influencers and amplifiers of misinformation. Health workers, media practitioners and traditional/religious leaders were cited as the most trusted sources of information on COVID-19 in their respective districts.

Therefore, the study concludes that misinformation and disinformation are serious problems in the country. The report recommends, among others, that there should be a national conversation on misinformation and disinformation; media literacy campaigns should be conducted on the use and misuse of social media platforms and provision of support for ongoing studies on the influencers and amplifiers of misinformation and disinformation as the information environment keeps changing from time to time. Effort should be made by policy makers to define the parameters for the regulation of social media that has still not been determined in the country.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Therefore, the study concludes that misinformation and disinformation are serious problems in the country, mainly influenced by political party supporters and leaders, undertaken for deceit, economic and political gains. The problem is promoted through social media mainly and by word of mouth in rural communities. The problem of misinformation and disinformation is grave as people repost stories without checking whether they are correct, factual or accurate.

Consequently, the following are key recommendations to help alleviate the problem of misinformation and disinformation in the country:

Government of Sierra Leone

The government should develop programs that promote media literacy campaigns on misinformation and disinformation. Public education programs will help to discourage the misuse of social media platforms. Government should support fact-checking initiatives which are aimed at dispelling rumors.

The government, its partners, CSOs and the media should organize "think before you share" public awareness campaigns to help address misinformation and disinformation.

Political actors (party leaders)

The political actors must take the lead in discouraging their party members, supporters and sympathizers from engaging in spreading misinformation and disinformation. The political leaders should publicly dissociate and condemn acts of misinformation and disinformation by their supporters.

United Nations

The United Nations offices in Sierra Leone should provide more technical and financial resources into studies and programs on information pollution. They should continue to support initiatives that address issues of information pollution.

Lawmakers

The Members of Parliament should resist any urge to enact bills and policies on misinformation and disinformation that may impact on the rights and freedoms of individuals. They should scrutinize any law or policy in that direction.

Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, Media Organizations and Civil Society Organizations

They should engage in massive sensitization and public education on misinformation and its impacts on peace and democracy in the country. They should provide or expand community radio stations and television networks to reach out to rural areas that are not currently covered by such services so as to get information from trusted sources. They should train media practitioners on misinformation and disinformation.

Other key stakeholders

The youth, business people (particularly market women), commercial vehicle drivers and motorbike riders should learn to crosscheck information before posting them on online platforms. They should know where and how to crosscheck information before disseminating it to others.

Community and religious leaders

Community and traditional leaders and religious authorities should ensure proper rumor management; they should develop and utilize community information sharing mechanisms.

The community leaders should encourage people to only pass on accurate information through their 'word of mouth' communication which is one of the major sources of spreading misinformation. The local residents should be advised against spreading unverified information.

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