



MEDIA REFORM COORDINATING GROUP-SIERRA LEONE MRCG-SL NEWSLETTER, 2020 **FIRST EDITION**

MRCG-SL SECRETARIAT

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“For 55 years, a giant has stood on top of the media fraternity and industry. It may be linked to the Police officer who knelt on George Floyd’s neck for nearly 8 minutes”



Statement from the National Coordinator, Dr. Francis Sowa

The first edition of the MRCG Newsletter 2020, covering the period from January to June 2020, indicated that we have a huge task ahead of us regarding engaging, advocating, and lobbying for the repeal of Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965. We will continue to engage the government and other stakeholders in the repeal process.

The MRCG has a new Media Development Strategy (MDS) for the period 2020-2024. The new Strategy is guided by five (5) objectives. They include:

- To promote an enabling media environment through legislative, regulatory and self-regulatory system reforms that are in line with international norms;
- To increase professionalism in the media landscape;
- To promote gender concerns and address women specific issues within the media.
- To support and enhance the sustainability of media institutions, revenue generation and effective and efficient governance and management systems; and
- To encourage democratic dialogue and audience engagement with media that provides a platform for debate, responsible engagements, and national development.

The previous strategy, which spanned from 2014 to 2018, had only four objectives, and it made tremendous achievements in all areas but needed much more improvement for better service delivery. After a thorough review of the old Strategy, it was unanimously agreed by the Advisory Board and Member organizations that the MRCG should continue with its strategic objectives in pursuing the media reform agenda in the country.

We have come a long way, and we still have a long way to go in reforming the country's media laws, attaining professionalism in the media, and ensuring a pluralistic media across the country. One of the reasons for the establishment of MRCG was to push for the reforms of media laws in Sierra Leone.

The MRCG would like to thank its donors for providing the funds used to implement the programs and activities of the MRCG.

“The press is not only free, it is powerful. That power is ours. It is the proudest that man can enjoy.”

-- Benjamin Disraeli

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MRCG HOLDS MEDIA PEER REVIEW SESSION FOR STATION MANAGERS AND EDITORS



The MRCG, as part of its reform agenda to empower and enhance the media in Sierra Leone, held a peer review session on 24 March 2020 for newspaper editors and radio station managers to discuss important ethical issues and concerns facing the media and to propose solutions. Dr. Francis Sowa provided a brief background of the MRCG, stating: “The aim of the MRCG is to ensure that all constituent members are strengthened and empowered, and to ensure that we achieve this goal. With support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the MRCG has implemented projects such as peer review sessions for newspaper editors and radio station managers, advocated for the repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965, and monitored and produced comprehensive press freedom reports documenting assaults, arrests, and detentions of journalists.”

The National Coordinator of Independent Radio Network (IRN), Ransford Wright, explained to participants the need for them to critique their work. He agreed that there were many challenges in the media work. He acknowledged that the peer review session organised by the MRCG was the best platform to discuss such challenges, proffer solutions and implement them to address those challenges. He encouraged newspaper editors and radio station managers to be responsible because they would bear the greatest responsibility if there were violations. Chairman of the Guild of Editors (GoE), Donald Theo-Harding, explained that as an organisation, they critiqued daily publications of their members and that this had helped improve their output. He urged journalists to accept their shortcomings and work on them. During the peer review session, key ethical

challenges affecting the media were highlighted, including accuracy, fairness, deception, privacy and objectivity. It was discussed that media poverty, lack of capacity and training, political interference and influence, adverts, and lack of fundamental professionalism affected media output and drove the media's actions to unprofessionalism. The program climaxed on the need for journalists to be professional and responsible in giving out information.

MRCG SUPPORTS THE SLAJ DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE HEARING SESSION TO BOLSTER PROFESSIONALISM



To enhance professionalism in Sierra Leone’s media landscape and promote the adoption of self-regulatory mechanisms, the MRCG, on 1 May 2020, supported the SLAJ Disciplinary Committee hearing session with their regional executives and representatives of national media organisations.

SLAJ launched the newly constituted Disciplinary Committee in a press release on 29 April 2020. The Committee was mandated to adjudicate matters of indiscipline and professional misconduct involving individual members.

National Coordinator, MRCG Dr. Francis Sowa, stated that the work of the Committee and the enforcement of the SLAJ Code of Ethics are very important as they will help SLAJ regulate the conduct of its members in line with international best practices. "These types of sessions are very important as they send a clear signal to the wider public that journalists are now ready to regulate themselves in their respective media duties across the country," Dr. Sowa indicated.

The President of SLAJ, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla,

thanked the MRCG and appreciated the regional executive members and heads of national media organisations for promoting the work of the Committee. He said that the committee comprised seasoned practitioners from the media, legal profession, and civil society to have a balanced composition and be supported by media monitors at district and regional levels.

The new Committee was expected to help guide journalists to professional reporting and provide a platform where complaints from members of the public against journalists would be looked into.

MRCG CONDUCTS A BASELINE STUDY ON TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE REPORTING IN SIERRA LEONE

In May 2020, the MRCG produced a baseline study on transitional justice reporting in Sierra Leone. The study provided insights into the media's coverage and reporting on transitional justice issues. The nationwide survey encompassed various media forms (radio, newspapers, and television) and measured the extent to which transitional justice issues were reported, while also evaluating media practitioners' (including editors and station managers) knowledge and awareness of transitional justice matters in Sierra Leone.

On the rate at which reporters cover transitional justice (TJ) issues in Sierra Leone, the baseline survey indicated that slightly over half (**51.2%**) agreed they had reported on TJ in the country, compared with **48.8%** who had never reported on it. Among the **51.2%** who claimed to have reported on TJ issues, their coverage was predominantly episodic, concentrating on instances of conflict rather than conducting thematic reporting and providing effective editorial commentary on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) recommendations and the legacy of the Special Court.

Regarding the percentage of journalists who reported on Sierra Leone's Transitional Justice Instruments, the

baseline study **revealed** that **58.4%** had never reported on the work of the Special Court, compared to **51.2% and 49.6%** who had never reported on the recommendations of the TRC and Transitional Justice respectively. An investigation into the frequency of reporting on TJ instruments indicated that **71.4%** had seldom reported on these instruments, whereas only **7.9% and 20.6%** reported on the instruments very often and often, respectively, across the three TJ instruments of Sierra Leone.

According to the survey, **78.4%** of respondents reported that they lacked the necessary training and resources to report on transitional justice, in contrast to **21.6%**. **Additionally**, the survey provided data supporting the need for training, as **80.0% (12.8% agreed and 67.2% strongly agreed)** indicated that capacity-building training for journalists on transitional justice was essential. The findings from the survey assisted the MRCG in shaping their engagement with reporters on transitional justice issues, as the MRCG was better informed on how to engage the media to change the narratives surrounding these matters.

MRCG AND SLAJ CORONA RESPONSE COMMITTEE TRAIN JOURNALISTS ON REPORTING ON COVID 19



In June 2020, the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) and the SLAJ Corona Response Committee (SLAJ-CRC) organised training sessions for 180 journalists throughout Sierra Leone to enhance their capacity to respond to COVID-19.

With funding from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 80 journalists were trained from the Western Area, 50 from the South-Eastern regions, and another 50 from the North-West regions on 4, 6, and 8 June 2020, respectively.

The journalists were trained on the following: facts and key messages for COVID-19; guidelines for reporting during emergencies; understanding, identifying, checking, and debunking fake news about COVID-19; ethical guidelines for reporting on COVID-19; IMC and SLAJ Codes of Practice and Ethics; and integrating COVID-19 into existing radio and TV programs and newspaper publications.

The journalists trained helped to increase the public's knowledge and awareness about protective health measures by sharing accurate information about COVID-19, including how to prevent its spread. This complemented the Government's efforts in the fight against COVID-19.

MRCG'S REGIONAL TRAINING ON TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE ISSUES IN SIERRA LEONE



In June 2020, the MRCG conducted regional training for 50 journalists across Sierra Leone to popularise transitional justice issues. The participants included journalists from radio and television stations, newspapers, and online media platforms.

The training sessions focused on understanding transitional justice (TJ) issues by referencing examples from other African countries, reporting on TJ matters, emphasising them throughout the country, and providing recommendations for the next steps.

The training also included explanations of Sierra Leone's transitional justice mechanism, specifically regarding the TRC's establishment, operations, outcomes, and recommendations, as well as those of the Special Court of Sierra Leone concerning its setup, functions, prosecutions, and legacy. Reporters were informed that after the war, both **the Special Court of**

Sierra Leone and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were established for four reasons: to provide an independent account of the war's causes; to conduct a thorough analysis of the war's nature and effects; and to offer recommendations.

The regional pieces of training capacitated reporters to undertake public education programmes, do thematic reporting and effective editorials on TJ issues in Sierra Leone by tying their stories to the TRC reports, the Special Court and other TJ Mechanisms that discussed issues of bad governance, corruption, human right abuses and violations.

Before the training, journalists reported on TJ mechanisms at a low level. The required capacities for reporting on TJ issues were confirmed to be mostly absent, as most of the participants claimed to not have the required training and resources to report on TJ issues in the country.

The training enhanced journalists' capacity on Transitional Justice (TJ) issues across the country, particularly regarding the TRC report and the legacy of the Special Court of Sierra Leone. All participants (100%) concurred that there was a necessity for capacity-building training on Transitional Justice (TJ) in Sierra Leone. They unanimously recognised that the training sessions were timely and had empowered them to report on TJ issues now.

These trainings were the basis for selecting six journalists across the country to serve as mentees and be trained and mentored on reporting on transitional justice issues in Sierra Leone.