

MEDIA REFORM COORDINATING GROUP-SIERRA LEONE
MRCG-SL
NEWSLETTER, 2021
FIRST EDITION



**MRCG-SL
SECRETARIAT**

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“While the country is making progress in press freedom rankings, the general climate for freedom of expression for everybody should be guaranteed”



Statement from the National Coordinator, Dr. Francis Sowa

This edition of the newsletter covers the first part of 2021 (January – June). It has been productive so far at the MRCG in developing, reviewing, engaging stakeholders, conducting training sessions for journalists and implementing other project activities.

In 2021, Sierra Leone's media experienced significant changes in its development. Media organisations saw the introduction of the Cybersecurity and Crime Bill 2021. As usual, MRCG, with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), held a stakeholder engagement on the Bill with media stakeholders and senior legal practitioners to critically understand the Bill so it will not be another law which will hinder press freedom in Sierra Leone. After two engagements on the Bill, MRCG and the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) developed the Media Position Paper and presented it to the Minister of Information and Communications. The position paper captured concerns on provisions of the Cybercrime Bill 2020 on issues relating to free speech, journalism, and press freedom in Sierra Leone to be looked into by the government before the enactment of the legislation to have it consistent with international obligations that seek to enhance protection, security and responsible use of cyberspace, and the protection of press freedom and freedom of expressions.

MRCG and the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), with support from the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), also launched a report on The State of Media Freedom in Sierra Leone. The report tracked press freedom issues in Sierra Leone ranging from 2018- 2020 and contained an overview of laws, policies and institutions governing the media space in Sierra Leone; key press freedom and safety of journalists' issues; summary of press freedom violations recorded over the period, analysis of trends of violations, key perpetrators and victims; status of redress of violations; and recommendations to both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders on how to improve the situation.

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

“Help promote a free world press, media reform and support alternative media sources.”
-Robert Alan Silverstein

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MRCG PARTICIPATES IN MFWA'S TWO-DAY REGIONAL FORUM ON MEDIA FREEDOM AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN GHANA



In March 2021, representatives of national media and civil society organisations participated in a two-day regional forum on Media Freedom and democratic governance held at the Asante Hall, Alisa Hotel in Accra, Ghana. The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) organised the forum with funding support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The National Coordinator of the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), Dr. Francis Sowa, also participated in the Forum.

The MFWA's Executive Director, Sulemana Braimah, spoke about the deteriorating press freedom conditions in many West African States and said even countries doing well in press freedom were beginning to perform poorly regarding press freedom indicators. Participants explained steps taken to address Press Freedom violations in their respective countries.

In Sierra Leone, Dr. Francis Sowa spoke about the government's repeal of the Criminal Libel Law in Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965, which was achieved through intense advocacy from SLAJ and other partners. He emphasised the safety of media practitioners, lack of partnerships, and poor investment in the media landscape as key issues affecting the journalism profession in Sierra Leone and West Africa.

“In Sierra Leone, the usual saying was ‘orders from above’, which some state security personnel used to deal with critical media practitioners”, Dr. Sowa stated. He continued that the country is progressing in press

freedom with the help of the MRCG and other media organisations. Still, more needs to be done to ensure the safety and security of journalists.

He ended by calling on the MFWA and other national media organizations in West Africa to collaborate in fighting for press freedom. The participants supported the need for a coalition to engage ECOWAS on issues of press freedom and democratic governance, and they developed an ECOWAS Engagement Action Plan.

MRCG HOLDS A CONSULTATIVE MEETING ON THE CYBERCRIME ACT 2020



MRCG and SLAJ held a national consultative meeting on 29 March 2021, bringing together key media stakeholders in Sierra Leone to discuss the provisions of the Cybercrime Bill 2020. This meeting followed Parliament’s directive to the Ministry of Information and Communications to engage further on the cybercrime bill being debated.

The bill was said to seek “to provide for the prevention of the abusive use of computer systems; to provide for the timely and effective collection of electronic evidence for investigation and prosecution of cybercrime; to provide for the protection of Critical National Information Infrastructure; to provide for facilitation of international cooperation in dealing with cybercrime matters and to provide for other related matters.”

In the deliberations and consultations, including presentations from lawyers who argued for and against specific provisions of the bill, views and opinions of the stakeholders were sought on the Cybercrime Bill 2020 as they focused on issues relating to free speech, journalism, and press freedom in Sierra Leone. The

media stakeholders resolved that they were not averse to enacting legislation consistent with international obligations that seek to enhance protection, security, and responsible use of cyberspace. Still, they were concerned about specific provisions of the bill.

The National Coordinator of MRCG, Dr Francis Sowa, expressed that the MRCG stands for media reform, promoting press freedom and freedom of speech, and other media development-related issues. He said the MRCG, as an institution, facilitated the meeting to critically examine provisions of the Cybercrime proposed law to better position media practitioners to present a unanimous and solid position paper on provisions in the Bill they think will suppress press freedom and good democratic governance.

Reassuring the government's commitments to the media, the Minister of Information and Communications, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, said as a Government, they were committed to ensuring that the media landscape is reshaped to match international standards and bring reforms that will match international best practices. He continued that previous governments had subscribed to international commitments that would enhance data protection and cyber sanitisation in Sierra Leone and that their government is not on the wrong part of accomplishing it. He allayed the fears of media members and the public that he did not want the excessive powers given to him in the Bill and that no individual should be given such powers.

Media stakeholders agreed to develop a media position on the Cybercrime Bill 2020, which will be submitted to the Minister of Information and Communications. The position will highlight their concerns about free speech, journalism, and press freedom provisions in Sierra Leone. The government will investigate these provisions before enacting the legislation to ensure that they are consistent with international obligations that seek to enhance cyberspace's protection, security, and responsible use and protect press freedom and freedom of expression.

IN-HOUSE MEETING FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION OF A POSITION PAPER ON A BILL ENTITLED 'THE CYBERCRIME ACT, 2020'



On 9 April 2021, an in-house meeting was held, bringing together key media stakeholders' heads/representatives to develop and produce a position paper on a bill entitled 'The Cybercrime Act, 2020'. The meeting specifically sought to make necessary adjustments and input to the draft position paper based on the ideas discussed during the national consultative meeting and suggestions submitted to SLAJ on the Cybercrime Bill 2020.

The President of SLAJ noted that the meeting resulted from the stakeholders' meeting on the Cybercrime Act 2020. In this meeting, legal experts and representatives from national media organisations discussed key issues in the proposed Act that affect journalism and freedom of speech. "We are here again to finally agree on the points in the draft position paper, which we will submit to the government as soon as possible before the bill is enacted into law."

In a PowerPoint presentation, the National Coordinator for MRCG, Dr Francis Sowa, briefed the stakeholders on the previous meeting that led to developing a draft position paper on the Cybercrime Act 2020. He said the paper would be finalised and presented to the government from the standpoint of national media organisations in Sierra Leone.

They all agreed on the following: that the draft document be shared with all constituent representatives for their final inputs before printing and submitting the position paper to the government; a presentation of the position paper to be made to the Minister of Information and Communications, to the House of Parliament and the general public using press releases from SLAJ and

MRCG; and the presentation to be symbolic and must be captured by the media, to let the public know that media organisations played their part in bringing out points which were not clear and for the Bill to conform with the country's international commitments.

MRCG AND SLAJ PRESENT THE 'MEDIA'S POSITION PAPER' ON CYBERCRIME BILL 2020



As part of their collaborative efforts to fight for media freedom and freedom of expression, the MRCG and SLAJ presented a position paper on the Cybercrime Bill 2020 to the Minister of Information and Communication, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, on 13 April 2021.

The position paper captured concerns about the Cybercrime Bill 2020 provisions related to free speech, journalism, and press freedom in Sierra Leone. The government should investigate these issues before enacting the legislation to ensure that it is consistent with international obligations that seek to enhance the protection, security, and responsible use of cyberspace and the protection of press freedom and freedom of expression.

SLAJ President Ahmed Sahid Nasralla explained that the MRCG, in collaboration with SLAJ and other media stakeholders and **with funding support from the National Endowment for Democracy**, held a consultative meeting and an in-house meeting to seek the views and opinions of various stakeholders on the Cybercrime Bill 2020. The meetings focused on free speech, journalism, and press freedom in Sierra Leone. He said the outcome of those meetings led to the development and production of Sierra Leone Media's Position Paper on the Cybercrime Act 2020.

The Minister of Information and Communications, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, appreciated SLAJ and MRCG for putting together a media position paper on the Bill that sought the views and opinions of media stakeholders. He reiterated the government's willingness and commitment to collaborate with media stakeholders in pursuing developmental agendas for the general good of the citizenry.

The National Coordinator, MRCG, Dr Francis Sowa, appreciated the ministry's commitment to making necessary adjustments before the Bill was enacted. He said the MRCG would continue closely following the process until it reached its final stage.

In the presentation of the paper, MRCG and SLAJ urged the Ministry of Information and Communication to look into the valid points highlighted in the position paper and act accordingly. They also noted that all points raised, if acted upon, would promote good governance and guarantee freedom of expression.

<http://mrcgonline.org/index.php/impact-resources/181-media-s-position-paper-on-cybercrime-bill>

MFWA, MRCG-SL AND WIMSAL ORGANISE TRAINING WORKSHOP ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS ONLINE ISSUES IN SIERRA LEONE FOR FEMALE JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS AND ACTIVISTS



The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), together with MRCG and WIMSAL, and with funding support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ghana, trained 40 and 45 female journalists, bloggers, and women's rights activists on Women's Rights Online Issues in Sierra Leone on 20 April and 10 September 2021, respectively. The training

aimed to increase public awareness and respect for online rights, particularly women's rights online in Sierra Leone.

The training workshops were a result of the very many online privacy issues that female journalists, bloggers and activists in Sierra Leone face daily, as over the years, cyberbullying and privacy issues have affected women in the media and led to the silencing of many active female journalists, bloggers and activists online.

The MRCG appreciated that the participants could understand the issues discussed and made several recommendations to the organisers for addressing women's rights online matters in the country. "We are optimistic that this workshop will serve as a foundation in creating an enabling internet environment that respects women's online rights and will increase public awareness on women's rights online issues in Sierra Leone," said the National Coordinator of the MRCG, Dr Francis Sowa in one of his presentations.

"It is obvious that the advent of new media (social media) allows everyone to become digital citizens and saves modern society time by allowing people to interact and share relevant information in record time. As we grapple with it in the physical world, the gender gap and the violation of women's rights, such as cyberbullying and intruding on women's privacy in Sierra Leone's virtual community, are increasingly becoming worrisome. This requires our timely, appropriate and collective actions as Journalists, Activists and Bloggers," said President of WIMSAL, Femi Jarrett-Coker.

According to the MFWA representative, Kweku Krobea Asante, similar training has been provided for female journalists, bloggers, and activists in Ghana and Liberia, with over 300 beneficiaries. He added that the online space has gradually become a handy platform for information generation worldwide.

At the workshop, the participants were introduced to digital rights, social media, online privacy, and how to

identify and Deal with online abuses against women. They were also trained in Digital Storytelling and Digital Content Creation.

MFWA AND MRCG-SL ORGANISE A NATIONAL FORUM ON THE SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS IN SIERRA LEONE



The MFWA and the MRCG, with funding support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ghana, organised a National Forum on the Safety of Journalists in Sierra Leone on 22 April 2021 at Sierra Palms Resort, Lumley Beach Road, Freetown.

The National Forum on Safety of Journalists in Sierra Leone was part of MFWA and MRCG's advocacy on the Safety of Journalists in Sierra Leone, which aimed at Highlighting the safety of journalists' issues in the country, Building the capacity of stakeholders on safety of journalists' standards; Fostering collaboration of stakeholders (media, security agencies, regulatory bodies, civil society etc.) to fight impunity for crimes against journalists and promote the safety of journalists and enhancing understanding of the role of the media, security agencies and how they can work together to promote peace.

Dr. Francis Sowa thanked the MFWA and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ghana for funding the forum and emphasised that such a forum would help identify, discuss, and address issues of journalists' safety and security in Sierra Leone.

"In 2020, with support from the MFWA, the MRCG trained 40 journalists on Safety and Security Issues and also carried out a study on the safety of journalists in Sierra Leone. The MRCG, MFWA, and partners will

continue training more journalists and using the data from the study,” said MRCG’s Dr. Francis Sowa.

The Minister of Information and Communications, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, expressed gratitude to the MRCG and its partners for their efforts to guarantee the safety and security of journalists. He assured journalists of the government’s commitment to press freedom and their well-being.

“Government will not support any politician that attacks journalists,” stressed the Minister as he launched the ‘Study on the State of Safety of Journalists’ Policies and Practices in Media Houses in Sierra Leone.’

MRCG and MFWA believed that an essential step to protecting journalists' safety is for them to become conscious of potentially dangerous situations and learn to defend themselves at all times in the line of duty.

MRCG JOINS SLAJ TO COMMEMORATE WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY



MRCG joined SLAJ to commemorate World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2021, a day set aside for the recognition of journalism across the world. The event was centred on opening the book of reflections on the repealed Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965. The reflections were done by journalists who suffered in the era of Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965 as they shared their bitter experiences with the then-law.

Dr Francis Sowa, National Coordinator for MRCG, appreciated SLAJ and all other stakeholders for standing through all the struggles to see the repeal of Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965. He appreciated NED's continued support of MRCG in press freedom and media reforms in Sierra Leone. “As we celebrate today, let us also know that there are still inconclusive matters on the

arrest and detention of journalists. At the MRCG, we have consistently followed cases of assaults and intimidation of journalists across the country and some matters are neither progressing nor discharged,” Dr Sowa mentioned.

The President of SLAJ, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, appreciated partners and donors for supporting Sierra Leone’s media organisations in achieving press freedom and freedom of speech. He also mentioned the Cybercrime Bill, which he said should be scrutinised before enactment into law. He called on journalists to be professional in discharging their duties.

The IMC Chairman, Mr George Khoyarma, commended the government for its bold step to repeal the criminal libel law and called on SLAJ and all media practitioners to work together in the profession's interest. The Information Minister, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, reiterated the government's commitment to promoting press freedom and promised to work with MRCG and SLAJ to address inconclusive matters dealing with journalists.

MRCG PRODUCES THE SIXTH EDITION OF THE PRESS FREEDOM REPORT



MRCG, in June 2021, produced the Sixth Edition of the Press Freedom report, which covered the period December 2020 to May 2021, under a component of a project titled “Enhancing Press Freedom and Legislative Reforms of Media Laws”, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the United States of America.

The report resulted from monitoring the exercise and legal guarantees of press freedom and freedom of expression issues (invitations, intimidations, attacks,

assaults, arrests, detentions, and prosecutions of journalists and civil society activists) and tracking media performance.

This report covered six significant issues, and MRCG data showed that five were concluded out of the six cases/issues monitored. Emmanuel C. Thorli, a reporter for the *Night Watch Newspaper*, was released following the intervention of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ); the Editor-in-Chief and Proprietor, Joseph Turay and Ezekiel Dumbuya, News Editor of the *Public Review Newspaper*, were released by officers of the Criminal Investigations Department (CID); the murder trial of late journalist Ibrahim Samura concluded as the two accused were acquitted and discharged for murder and conspiracy to commit grievous bodily harm; the matter on the arrest and detention of Hassan Gbessay Koroma, a *Concord Time Newspaper* journalist by the Sierra Leone police had been closed by the police; on the verbal attack, insult and intimidation of *BBC* correspondent, Umaru Fofana, he said he had decided to move on as he receives such threats frequently.

The matter of the arrest and detention of Osman Hardy Jalloh of *TV-News24* was still ongoing.

In addition, this report followed up on cases from the first to the fifth edition, which spanned from June 2018 to November 2020, that were still inconclusive. <http://mrcgonline.org/index.php/impact-resources/201-ned-sixth-edition-press-freedom-report-2021>

MRCG PRODUCES TRAINING MANUAL FOR REPORTING AND PRODUCING RADIO PROGRAMMES ON THE OPERATIONS OF LOCAL COUNCILS

The MRCG in June 2021 produced a training manual as part of a broader project that sought to address the apparent low knowledge and communication gap on the work of local councils in selected districts: Moyamba, Pujehun, Bonthe, Kailahun, Ward C, Kambia, Port Loko and Falaba. Supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the need for the manual was borne out of the concerns about people's

knowledge and understanding of local governance policies, regulatory frameworks, and the functioning of regional councils that promote transparency and social accountability.

The resource person conducted the needs assessment and produced the training manual, which was used to train the journalists and CSOs and to capacitate and increase their knowledge of and understanding of local governance issues. The manual served as a referential guide for journalists and CSOs in reporting and producing programs on local governance issues; helped and supported the raising of awareness on the work, policies, programs and mandates of local councils by ensuring local communities have a clear understanding of policies, programs and procedures of local councils; ensured citizens involvement on the operations of local councils and enhanced their ability to hold councils accountable by promoting accountability and transparency in local service delivery.

MRCG HOLDS A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH CSOs AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS OF EIGHT (8) PROJECT LOCATIONS ON LOCAL GOVERNANCE ISSUES



The Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), with support from UNDP, engaged 27 community stakeholders, including heads of CSOs, chiefs, women leaders and groups, youths, teachers, religious leaders and others from the eight districts project locations on local governance issues in Mile 91, Tonkolili District on 21 June 2021. Through focus group discussions, the community engagement examined and discussed local governance issues from the 8 district project locations ranging from the operations of councils- their understanding of and knowledge of the operations of local councils in their various district, the interaction of council members with their communities and

community access to council members.

The engagement focused on the following topics: Local Governance in Sierra Leone- overview and perspective; local governance in Sierra Leone- experiences, challenges and lessons learnt; and media and local governance. During the engagement, the participants were divided into three (3) groups to explain their experiences with local governance in their respective localities. By so doing, they discussed three (3) key areas: the status/ operations of the council, the role of CSOs in those councils, and the role of the media in ensuring local governance issues are discussed on the radio. The community engagement meeting informed the two-day training workshop organised for journalists and Civil Society activists.

The engagement increased community stakeholders' knowledge of and understanding of council operations. They identified the issues affecting their communities and proffered solutions. They also learnt their roles as community stakeholders in helping the council achieve its mandate. Through the engagement, participants committed themselves to working with journalists, CSOs, the council, and other parties to ensure the development of their communities. By doing so, they would also help promote accountability and transparency in service delivery.

The National Coordinator, MRCG, Dr Francis Sowa, explained that the engagement was basically to deal with local governance issues in the eight (8) project locations and to examine the problems of communication gaps, the interaction of council members with their subjects, and to observe how CSOs and community stakeholders involved in the operations of councils. He added that the workshop would be accompanied by a two-day training workshop for journalists and CSO representatives from the eight project locations in which they would be trained on how to work with their council members to produce programs in their radio stations which would directly deal with local governance issues in all of the 8 locations. He also promised that with funds from the

UNDP, the journalists and radio stations hosting the programs would have some form of support through the MRCG to sustain the program for the project duration.

MRCG ORGANISES TWO-DAY TRAINING WORKSHOP FOR JOURNALISTS AND CSOs ON THE PRODUCTION OF RADIO PROGRAMS ON LOCAL GOVERNANCE ISSUES



MRCG conducted a two-day training for journalists and CSOs from the eight districts of the 12 project locations on local governance policies, regulatory frameworks, and the functioning of local councils. The training was conducted on 25 and 26 June 2021, and local radio programs were produced and presented on the work of local councils. The goal was to support communities in understanding council operations and promote transparency and social accountability.

In the two-day training, brief history of local government, Media and Local Governance; Identification of General Local Governance Issues across the Eight Project District Councils for the Radio Programs; Specific Issues Affecting Specific Councils, Key Provisions of the Local Government Act, 2004; Training on Radio Program Production and Presentation on Local Governance Issues; Practical Session on Production and Presentation of Radio Programs on Local Governance Issues and among others were thoroughly and the participants (12 journalists and 12 CSOs) were capacitated on presenting radio programs on the work of local councils. They were trained to moderate, ask the appropriate questions, use the allocated time, and balance the program by targeting the required sources.

The lead Facilitator, Khalil Kallon, stated that the training was intended to help participants understand the

local council and its relationship with the media. He narrated that local governance was established to promote decentralisation and allow community members to access development without depending on the central government. He added that it was also established to improve service delivery and involve community members in government development projects.

After deliberations, participants agreed that information sharing, accountability and transparency, resource mobilisation and utilisation, and local council operations should be investigated as general issues across all councils. The Head of Programs at MRCG, Usman Bah, advised all participants to work diligently on what the facilitator discussed. He asked the heads of COSs to work with radio stations and journalists to effectively plan and produce programs on local governance issues.