



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

MRCG-SL SECRETARIAT

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“The spread of information pollution has become alarming globally, posing threat to both national and global peace, economic stability and health.”



Statement from the National Coordinator, Dr. Francis Sowa

This last edition of the 2020 newsletter highlighted activities implemented from July to December 2020. It was during this 6 months period that Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965 was repealed. At the MRCG, we considered this a great achievement for the media fraternity in Sierra Leone.

We were able to implement the following activities outlined under the second objective in the Media Development Strategy 2020-2024. They included:

- ✓ Supporting SLAJ Disciplinary Committee sessions for professionalism
- ✓ Repealing Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965
- ✓ Finalizing and disseminating the National Information Policy
- ✓ The enactment of the Independent Media Commission Act 2020
- ✓ The popularization of the Civil Libel Law-Defamation Act 1961
- ✓ Engaging communities on climate change issues and mitigation measures
- ✓ Conducting a study on information pollution mapping in Sierra Leone.

Let me use this opportunity on behalf of MRCG to thank NED, ATJLF and UNDP for providing the funds used to implement the programs and activities of MRCG in 2020. We continue to look forward to fulfilling the key priorities and objectives of the new MRCG's Media Development Strategy which will end in 2024. Thanks and appreciation to the Board, member organizations and the Secretariat staff for the supports and commitments to the work of the MRCG.

“I believe democracy requires a ‘sacred contract’ between journalists and those who put their trust in us to tell them what we can about how the world really works.”

-- Bill Moyers

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MRCG SUPPORTS THE SLAJ DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE HEARING SESSION TO BOLSTER PROFESSIONALISM



In heightening the campaign to repeal Part 5 of the Public Order Act (POA) of 1965, the MRCG with SLAJ, and other constituent members with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) from 8 to 11 July 2022 held consultative meetings across the country with key stakeholders-journalists, editors, radio station managers, civil society organisations, women and youth organisations, traditional leaders, leaders of local councils, the Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the Ministry of Information and Communication- that solicited ideas, intensified the advocacy and lobbying processes and discussed strategies and tactics that got parliament to repeal Part 5 of the POA of 1965.

The National Coordinator of MRCG, Dr. Francis Sowa, said one of MRCG's key mandates was to lead the process to advocate for the reform of media laws in the country and added that MRCG, in fulfilment of this, had been engaging various partners to ensure that media laws suppressing press freedom in Sierra Leone were being amended, repealed or expunged. He explained that "the MRCG, together with its partners, has engaged government and civil society organisations on the repeal process, but there were still lapses. A bad law is a bad law and needs no replacement in a democratic society but expulsion."

In a backgrounder, Dr Sowa explained that the MRCG had done a national engagement with media institutions and stakeholders across the country in 2016 to have their views and suggestions on the law in which all stakeholders, including the government,

made a firm commitment to repeal the criminal libel law. He said the repeal Bill, a single-page document tabled in parliament in 2019 after so many years of struggle by media practitioners in the country, was an outstanding achievement for the MRCG and partners, giving them hope of a repeal in the not-too-distant future.

The Director of Information, Ministry of Information and Communication, Emmanuel A B Turay, explained that "lobbying and advocacy is what journalists must be doing right now to convince the legislature for a quicker repeal. Let civil society organisations join the campaign by undertaking public engagements as we await the repeal of Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965 by parliament," he said.

As anticipated, the regional consultative meetings unleashed a nationwide outcry for the repeal of the criminal libel laws. People from various walks of life (CSOs, traditional leaders, musicians, actors, market women, business people, politicians) joined the advocacy by releasing statements and videos urging parliament to repeal Part 5 of the Public Order Act 1965. Parliament sped up the process with **the heightened advocacy and clarion call by the citizenry championed by MRCG and SLAJ.**

On 23 July 2020, Parliament repealed the Criminal and Seditious Libel law (Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965) by passing the Public Order (Amendment) Act 2020, which repealed the fifty-five-year-old anti-press freedom legislation. Section 1 of the Public Order (Amendment) Act 2020 provides that "The Public Order Act, 1965 is amended by the repeal of Part V- DEFAMATORY AND SEDITIOUS LIBEL."

MRCG ORGANISES MENTORING, COACHING AND PRODUCTION OF CONTENT ON TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE ISSUES IN SIERRA LEONE



Magburaka Residents urge Government to fulfill TRC Tri-Recommendations for Children's School Education

To engage the media in changing the narrative on Transitional Justice (TJ) issues in Sierra Leone, the MRCG supported a mentorship program that coached six reporters who produced content on TJ issues in Sierra Leone from August 2020 to January 2021. The program utilised the services of media institutions and practitioners to increase public awareness of transitional justice mechanisms.

With the guidance and supervision of a mentor, the six mentees produced two stories monthly. The stories were pitched from the TRC reports and recommendations and the legacy of the special court. At the end of the mentorship, five mentees produced 12 stories, and one mentee (television) produced 10 stories. In total, 70 stories were produced by all the mentees. For Television (online), 10 stories were produced and published on the *Gbla Online TV* YouTube channel; for radio, 26 stories were produced and broadcast on the mentee's radio stations; and for print (newspaper), 34 stories were produced and published on newspapers, blog, Facebook, Twitter and on the MRCG's website.

The mentorship developed the mentees' capacity for reporting on TJ issues. Under the guidance and supervision of their mentors, the mentees improved their reporting skills and produced standard stories rich in content. The mentees were also trained in standard scripting and pitching story ideas. The knowledge gained from the mentorship will go a long way in helping them in their journalistic careers.

Also, the mentorship brought to light issues in the TRC recommendations (sexual gender-based violence, rape, child labour, work of state security and civil society activists, the plight of old people, youth unemployment, mine sector, corruption and among others) that had been forgotten or were hardly reported in the TJ context. Key highlights in the TRC recommendations were discussed, officials responsible were interviewed, victims or persons affected were contacted, and an analysis was made as to whether the issues had been addressed or are still prevalent in society.

The mentorship awakened public discourse on TJ issues and the events that led to the 11-year civil war in Sierra Leone. People participated in the discussions and made genuine contributions to refresh people's minds on the atrocities committed during the war and prevent future occurrences.

MRCG ENGAGES MARKET WOMEN AND YOUTHS IN CLIMATE RISK AWARENESS IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES



MRCG, with support from the United Nations Development Program—Sierra Leone (UNDP), engaged influential market women and youths in Lakka, Hamilton, Tombo, Conakry Dee, Shenge, and Turtle Island to raise their awareness of climate risk. The program targeted 40 market women and youth per community in the six coastal communities.

The National Coordinator, MRCG, Dr. Francis Sowa, stated that the participants were chosen based on their positions in their communities and, as such, were expected to pass on the messages learnt from the engagement to those not there. He added that the MRCG also wanted to learn from their local

initiatives on things they had put in place to address climate change issues in their various communities.

The MRCG screened three video documentaries previously captured from the six coastal communities, showing climate change's causes, effects, and mitigating strategies. The engagements climaxed with discussions of their steps to address climate change issues in their communities and plans to improve on some grey areas.

MRCG AND MFWA HOLD A WORKSHOP ON THE SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS IN SIERRA LEONE



The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and MRCG, with funding support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ghana, organised a capacity-building workshop on the Safety of Journalists in Sierra Leone for 30 senior journalists on 2 September 2020 in Freetown.

They were trained with the requisite skills to protect themselves in their line of duty. The journalists, selected from various journalism fields, were trained on How to produce responsible, fact-based coverage while staying safe; the basics of safety in journalism: risks awareness and physical safety; digital and cyber safety; and identifying safety mechanisms available to journalists. Umaru Fofana, the BBC Correspondent in Sierra Leone, facilitated the session.

The Director of PIAR and Strategic Communication Officer of the Office of National Security, Mr. Francis L. Kailey, facilitated the topics of working with security agencies and identifying safety mechanisms available to journalists. The program ended with participants participating in practical

sessions on covering protests and demonstrations.

MRCG ESTABLISHES CLIMATE CHANGE SCHOOL CLUBS IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES



The MRCG engaged pupils of different schools in the six coastal communities of Lakka, Hamilton, Tombo, Conakry Dee, Shenge and Turtle Island on climate risk awareness and established climate change school clubs. With funding support from the UNDP, the MRCG established seventeen 'Climate Change School Clubs' in the six communities- 20 pupils per community, 120 in total for the six communities. Members of the school clubs were to serve as ambassadors of climate change in their communities.

The engagements took place in Lakka on 13 October 2020, Hamilton on 14 October 2020, Tombo on 15 October 2020, Conakry Dee on 18 October 2020, Turtle Island on 3 November 2020, and Shenge on 4 November 2020. In the engagements, the awareness of hundreds of pupils were raised on climate change risks awareness, the causes of climate change (activities undertaken in the various communities causing climate change), the effects of climate change due to those activities and the mitigation strategies (solutions/adaptation plans).

“With the pupils being engaged in climate risks awareness, they are now better placed in creating awareness and convincing their parents and other community members to stop or reduce activities that they are engaged in leading to climate change as those activities have the tendency to expose their community to risk and destruction,” explained Usman Bah, MRCG Project Officer.

The principals and representatives of the host schools in the six coastal communities thanked the MRCG and UNDP for this initiative. They pleaded with them to prepare materials based on their different engagements and research on climate change to teach the pupils about climate risks.

“The Shenge and Turtle Island communities need such engagements as our communities have many villages affected by climate change. Targeting pupils is the right call as all the villages around Shenge and Cheppo send their children to us to learn. Hence, those children with the right knowledge and awareness on climate change can better take the messages of climate change to their parents, which can create a positive impact,” expressed the Principal of Howard Memorial Secondary School, Hankai Emmanuel.

Pupils of the various school clubs pledged their support and commitment to campaign against climate change activities as they called on the UNDP to support them with badges or tags to identify them as ambassadors, T-shirts for visibility sake, posters and stickers to help in their awareness campaign, megaphone and batteries support and refreshment support for meetings and outreach campaign programs.

MRCG DISSEMINATES RADIO DRAMA SERIES ON CLIMATE CHANGE AWARENESS IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES



The MRCG disseminated a radio drama series produced by Premier Media to increase community awareness of climate risks awareness and engagement to ensure behavioural change in six coastal communities. The public outreach program targeted and increased the awareness of hundreds of

residents of Lakka, Hamilton, Tombo, Conakry Dee, Shenge and Turtle Island through the radio drama series, as the messages were in their local languages. The radio drama series was disseminated in Conakry Dee on 26 October, Tombo on 27 October, Hamilton on 28 October, Lakka on 29 October, Shenge on 1 November, and Turtle Island on 3 November 2020.

“The essence of such engagement is that it provides a platform for you to get first-hand information on climate risks, raise your concerns, and make recommendations, as the MRCG would present those points to the UNDP for their intervention where necessary. This session will create more awareness of climate risks to complement the climate change video documentaries screened in this community sometime last year. Be united and work with the adaptation plan for the interest of your children”, said the National Coordinator of MRCG, Dr. Francis Sowa.

MRCG targeted strategic places in the communities, including marketplaces, parks, community fields and centres. These places are the heart of the communities that host hundreds of people during the day. The drama series touched on the causes of climate change, its effects and possible solutions to address the issue of climate change. After the outdoor outreach in parks, marketplaces, fields and wharves, 45 prominent members of each community were further engaged across the six communities. These individuals resonated with the messages from the radio drama series played in their local languages as they explained what they understood from it and the lessons learnt. “On behalf of my community, let me thank the MRCG and UNDP for raising our awareness of climate change risks. The MRCG is now a household name to the people of Conakry Dee as the public engagements over the months have helped us greatly as our awareness of climate risks has increased, which prompted us to put mechanisms in place to address some of the climate change issues in our community” said Conakry Dee Town Chief, Pa Adekalie S. Sumah.

MRCG RECRUITS AND TRAINS MEDIA MONITORS FOR A STUDY ON INFORMATION POLLUTION MAPPING IN SIERRA LEONE



The Media Reform Coordinating Group, in a bid to screen the country's media regarding fake news about COVID-19, recruited and trained six media monitors, four regional media monitors, and two team leads on 9 November 2020 to monitor and examine fake news about COVID-19 in newspapers, radio and television stations, and online media platforms.

With support from the UNDP to map information pollution in the country, the MRCG conducted a study on the information environment in Sierra Leone to know the possible channels and pioneers of fake news.

The National Coordinator, MRCG, Dr. Francis Sowa, explained to media monitors that their task was to monitor media outlets nationwide to record reports on fake news about COVID-19. He encouraged them to do their best to ensure that they generated accurate information necessary for the overall national study on information pollution in the country.

In writing the report itself, the Project Officer, Usman Bah, explained to the monitors that it should reflect their significant findings from the monitoring. Under the supervision of the team leads, Mr. Bah asked the six media monitors and the four regional monitors (east, south, north, and northwest) to produce their monitoring reports in two phases. The team leads, and media monitors assured the MRCG of their readiness to complete the tasks given to them, as this would boost their portfolio.

MRCG UNDERTAKES QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE STUDIES TO MAP INFORMATION POLLUTION IN SIERRA LEONE



In November 2020, with support from UNDP, the MRCG undertook qualitative and quantitative studies to map primary sources, messages, channels, influencers, and amplifiers of misinformation, disinformation, and misconceptions about COVID-19 in Sierra Leone and possible ways to handle fake news across the country's six regions. The MRCG saw the study as an opportunity to learn about the information environment and map information pollution in the country.

In understanding the information environment and studying information pollution across the country, the MRCG, through a consultant, conducted a baseline survey to map primary sources, messages, channels, influencers and amplifiers of misinformation, disinformation and misconceptions on COVID-19 in Sierra Leone. The baseline survey looked at respondents' characteristics, sources of information, awareness, vulnerability, sources, channels, and measures to tackle misinformation.

The qualitative study used a desk review approach to understand nationwide media penetration and trusted public information sources. It examined traditional and new media institutions to define Sierra Leone's information environment and media penetration. The study also used Focus Group Discussions and key informant interviews with stakeholders (including youth) across the country to identify cases and the impact of information pollution.

The focus group discussions identified and unearthed the nature and impact of information pollution,

mapped primary sources, channels, influencers, and amplifiers of fake news in the fight against COVID-19, identified demographic and geographic hotspots of information pollution, groups frequently targeted with mis/disinformation and possible ways how mis/disinformation could be addressed.

Thirty-six focus group discussions were held in the six regions of Sierra Leone. The discussions, which started on 11 November 2020 in Kenema for the Eastern Region and ended in Freetown on 17 November 2020, targeted pupils/students, all walks of life, women, aged, CSO/media and youths categories to get solidly mixed responses from across the country on fake news. **“We have come this far to make sure we get everyone’s input,”** said the Project Officer for the MRCG, Usman Bah, adding that their responses were needed to have a non-biased report.

Apart from the focus group discussion, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were organised by the qualitative consultant, Victor S. Suma, with stakeholders within the regions and different public groups, which identified the nature and impact of information pollution. The KIIs were done to have stakeholder views on the discourse and suggest possible mechanisms to remedy the fake news problem. Among other things, the respondents recommended massive public education to curtail mis/disinformation.

MRCG VALIDATES NATIONAL STUDY ON INFORMATION POLLUTION ON COVID-19 IN SIERRA LEONE



In its quest to address the issue of misinformation and disinformation in the country, the MRCG, with

support from UNDP, validated a national study on information pollution, specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic, on 11 December 2020. The exercise, organised at the Trivoli Hall in Freetown, represented participants' views from all regions nationwide to ensure a balanced validation process.

In his statement, the National Coordinator of MRCG, Dr. Francis Sowa, said that the study looked at information pollution in the information environment within the context of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone and that the data collected from the survey would be used for future planning and other initiatives. He continued by stating that the study used Covid-19 as a case study to determine the channels, influencers, and amplifiers of fake news in the information environment. He said the study involved qualitative and quantitative methods by two consultants and that views of other persons from the sixteen districts of Sierra Leone were captured, making it reliable and credible. Hence, the findings will be used in future planning.

UNDP’s Media Project Manager, Mr Hassan Jalloh, thanked the MRCG and the consultants for their work and reiterated UNDP’s support for media and national development. Mr Jalloh further explained that the ‘infodemic’, a blend of misinformation and epidemic, has been a serious challenge across the globe, with Sierra Leone no exception.

He said the study would help change the narratives. Both consultants presented their findings to the participants for input and validation. For the qualitative study, Dr Victor Suma said that his research discovered that radio was the most trusted channel of reliable information and that journalists were the most reliable sources of information, as respondents across the country stated. Mr Bartholomew Bockarie, on the side of the quantitative study, revealed that his enumerators found out that respondents across the country preferred traditional media to social media or any other means of getting information. The participants,

after making their inputs, unanimously validated both studies.

MRCG TRAINS JOURNALISTS ON MEDIA REGULATION IN THE POST-CRIMINAL LIBEL ERA: THE INDEPENDENT MEDIA COMMISSION (IMC) ACT 2020 AND THE 1961 CIVIL LIBEL LAW



The MRCG, with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), engaged and trained media practitioners from various media houses across the country on the Independent Media Commission Act of 2020 and the 1961 Civil Libel Law for effective and responsible journalism.

The trainings were held on December 9, 15, and 16, 2020, in Freetown, Makeni, and Bo, respectively, and targeted station managers, editors, producers, senior reporters, and proprietors of media houses nationwide.

MRCG's National Coordinator, Dr. Francis Sowa, underscored the necessity and timeliness of the training, stating that it was to get them abreast with new provisions of the IMC Act of 2020 and refresh their minds on provisions of the 1961 Civil Libel law. "This training is in fulfilment of the promise made by MRCG to continue the capacity building for journalists after the repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965", said Dr Sowa.

The President of SLAJ, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, admonished journalists to be professional and to follow international best practices. He urged them to train their staff, secure a copy of the IMC Act of 2020 and ensure that they were abreast with its provisions to avoid conflict with the law.

The facilitator, Joseph E. Kapuwa Esq., explained significant provisions of the IMC Act of 2020, especially those dealing with registration and compliance with the National Revenue Authority (NRA) and Labor Acts and reminded journalists that repealing Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965 was not a requirement for reckless journalism, adding that there was still the Civil Libel Law which citizens can use to seek redress against journalists.

The training climaxed with journalists pledging their commitment to secure a copy of the IMC Act of 2020, train their staff using the knowledge gained, and abide by its provisions.