



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

**MRCG-SL
SECRETARIAT**

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“The State cannot guarantee press freedom without freedom of expression”



Statement from the National Coordinator, Dr. Francis Sowa

This edition of the MRCG Newsletter covers the second half of 2021 (July – December). It has been productive in terms of accomplishing set goals.

We continue to monitor and report on press freedom issues, the implementation of the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021, review journalism /media /communications curriculum, strengthen the MRCG and some of its constituent member organisations, and comply with the ethical standards of media houses and journalists.

The MRCG also produced and published a Policy Brief on the Post-Criminal Libel Era in Sierra Leone. The Brief advocated for key issues to be considered by government and media stakeholders to attain freedom of speech and the press.

We have ended our activities by embarking on an international experience-sharing trip to Ghana, where we will learn best practices for structuring advocacy campaigns and media reform engagements with media professionals and civil society groups.

The MRCG would like to thank NED for providing the funds to implement its programs and activities. We look forward to fulfilling the MRCG's key priorities and objectives in the first phase of the Media Development Strategy, which will end in 2024.

I want to express my gratitude to the Board and Secretariat staff for their support and commitment to the MRCG's work.

“The media's power is frail. Without the people's support, it can be shut off with the ease of turning a light switch.”
-- Corazon Aquino



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MRCG AND MFWA PRODUCE AND LAUNCH ‘THE STATE OF MEDIA FREEDOM IN SIERRA LEONE’ REPORT 2020



The Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) and Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), with support from the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), launched a report on The State of Media Freedom in Sierra Leone on 2 July 2021.

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 National Coordinator, MRCG, Dr Francis Sowa, stated that the report reviewed the arrests and detentions of journalists over the years using criminal and Seditious Libel Laws in Part 5 of the Public Order Act (POA) of 1965. “Before the said laws were repealed, Part 5 of the POA served as an obstacle to the media in terms of fulfilling its democratic roles due to increased fear of incarceration arising from the provisions of the law which undermined freedom of expression guaranteed by the Constitution of Sierra Leone, Act No.6 of 1991 and extension, international best practice and standards, those events spawned negative media coverage internationally and somehow smeared Sierra Leone’s democratic credentials especially in press freedom rankings”, said Dr. Sowa.

He also called on the government, politicians, organisations, institutions, members of society and media owners to support media freedom and the safety and security of journalists in Sierra Leone.

The Executive Secretary of IMC, Khalil Kallon, thanked the MRCG for its continued advocacy and campaigns to achieve press freedom in the country. He added that the Commission would always support the MRCG in any of its media projects and advised journalists to maintain the peace the repeal of Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965 has brought to Sierra Leone's media landscape.

The SLAJ President, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, mentioned that in 2020, the media landscape witnessed one of the historic moments related to the repeal of the Criminal and Seditious Libel Laws. “Freedom is not absolute, but rather it comes with tremendous responsibilities. We have repeatedly informed journalists that even though the Criminal and Seditious Libel Laws have been repealed, the Civil Libel Law of 1961 still exists, and it’s even more dangerous”, Mr. Nasralla said. The event ended with the report's official launch by SLAJ’s president.

<http://mrcgonline.org/index.php/impact-resources/180-mfwa-press-freedom-report-sierra-leone-2018-2020>

MRCG JOINS THE DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS, FBC, TO REVIEW THE JOURNALISM/ MEDIA/ COMMUNICATION CURRICULUM IN A TWO-DAY WORKSHOP



MRCG, with funding support from NED, joined one of its constituent members, the Department of Mass Communication, Fourah Bay College, at Culture Radio Complex-Grafton in Freetown on 5 and 6 August 2021 to review the curriculum for journalism, media, and communication in Sierra Leone.

The review was geared towards rebranding and advocating for professional journalism by supporting media and journalism departments to effect reforms in their curricula.

The National Coordinator for MRCG, Dr Francis Sowa, noted that the Secretariat supported the curriculum review process to fulfil one of the Department's key mandates. The process would be adopted by all media and journalism departments in all public universities and colleges.

The Head of the Mass Communication department at Fourah Bay College, Dr. Williette PRO James, stated that the new review would transform the Department into the Faculty of Communication, Media, and Information Studies, which aligns with international best practices.

The president of SLAJ, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, explained the entry criteria and modules to be studied at the certificate and diploma levels. He highlighted modules they suggested be included in the curriculum, including health reporting, sport, and environment, which they believe would be beneficial, especially to journalists wanting diploma and certificate qualifications in certain specialised areas of reporting.

PRODUCTION AND PRESENTATION OF RADIO PROGRAMS ON THE OPERATIONS OF LOCAL COUNCILS



The MRCG recruited and trained 12 journalists and 12 CSOs to produce and present 72 radio programs, each with six editions focusing on key topics related to the council's operations in 8 districts (12 project locations).

These radio programs increased the knowledge and understanding of locals of the various project locations

about council operations. They learnt how councils mobilise and utilise resources, how they can access information from councils, and their roles as communities. They also increased their capacity to hold councils accountable for their service delivery. These programs also helped bridge the communication gap between councils and their communities and clarified many misconceptions that strained their relationships.

The significant recommendations from the engagements that cut across were for the UNDP and MRCG to continue supporting the radio programs, as accountability and transparency in service delivery will be achieved through that.

MRCG MONITORS AND EVALUATES THE RADIO LOCAL GOVERNANCE PROGRAMS



MRCG-SL visited the eleven (11) project locations from 2 to 14 August 2021 and conducted monitoring and evaluation meetings with local community members, council members, CSO representatives, journalists, and station managers. The meetings evaluated the radio programs produced and presented, ascertained communities' knowledge of and understanding of local council operations, the impact created, and challenges faced, and captured recommendations from the above categories of persons.

The outcomes of the monitoring and evaluation meetings included, among other things, the following: the journalists and CSOs produced and presented radio programs on the council's operations; the councils were cooperative, although there were initial challenges and misconceptions; the meetings helped clarify issues of misunderstanding relating to the council's work and increased the spread of information in hard-to-reach areas, etc.

The key recommendation from all the categories that were interviewed was for the UNDP and MRCG to continue supporting the program through which accountability and transparency in service delivery will be achieved, and the different station managers committed themselves to continuing with the radio programs on the council's work. They, however, called on the UNDP and MRCG to continue supporting them as their support means a lot, and that can even force the council to talk to them when they know the MRCG and UNDP are the ones supporting the programs.

MFWA DONATES ACADEMIC AND LEARNING MATERIALS TO THE DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION, FOURAH BAY COLLEGE



The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), through the Media Reform Coordinating Group—Sierra Leone (MRCG-SL), donated academic and learning materials to the Department of Mass Communication—Fourah Bay College on September 10, 2021.

Kweku Krobea Asante, a representative from the Media Foundation for West Africa, noted that the donation was made to boost journalism in Sierra Leone. Because of our partnership with MRCG, we will always be glad to support any of its member organisations or academic institutions. "

The National Coordinator of the MRCG, Dr. Francis Sowa, thanked the Media Foundation for West Africa for supporting journalism in Sierra Leone. He stated that the MRCG would always ensure that the country's media landscape develops by international best practices.

The Head of Department, Mass Communication—Fourah Bay College, Dr Williette PRO James, on behalf of the

department, expressed her gratitude to both MFWA and MRCG for the donation. “We have just reviewed our curriculum, and I am happy you are here to help with these. The reviewed curriculum has been submitted to the university curriculum review committee. Upon approval, we would ask for institutions like MFWA for adjustments for better journalism”, said Dr. James.

MRCG INTENSIFIES CALLS FOR THE SAFETY AND SECURITY OF JOURNALISTS ON INTERNATIONAL DAY TO END IMPUNITY FOR CRIMES AGAINST JOURNALISTS.



The Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) joined other organisations to observe the ‘International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists’ on 2 November 2021. The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2nd November as the ‘International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists’ in a General Assembly Resolution. The Resolution urged Member States to implement measures countering the present culture of impunity. It also encourages Member States to do their utmost to prevent violence against journalists and media workers, bring to justice perpetrators of crimes against journalists and media workers, and ensure that victims have access to appropriate remedies.

Since 2018, the MRCG, with support from NED in the United States of America, has been monitoring and publishing reports on press freedom and freedom of expression issues in Sierra Leone, including invitations, intimidations, attacks, assaults, arrests, detentions, and prosecutions of journalists and civil society activists.

According to Dr. Sowa, the last Biannual report on ‘Press Freedom in Sierra Leone’ in May 2021 noted that the MRCG had so far monitored 35 cases; 26 had been concluded, settled, resolved, dropped or abandoned

because of lack of progress; three were in court; and six under police investigation/inconclusive/stalled. He added that although there were no criminal and seditious libel law provisions today in the country's law books, the reports showed that there were still active libel cases in court. However, libel-related cases under police investigations have reportedly been closed since the law was repealed.

“As we observe the ‘International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists’ today, the MRCG reminds the Hon. Minister of Information and Communication, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, of a petition sent to him by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and MRCG to respectfully seek his intervention to end the ongoing prosecution of journalist, Fayia Amara Fayia of the Standard-Times newspaper,” said Dr. Francis Sowa.

The MRCG also noted that issues relating to the safety and security of journalists go beyond politicians and the police, as there are reports of attacks on journalists from local authorities, youth and members of the public. The MRCG reminded media owners and managers that one of its reports shows that most media houses lacked a safety and security policy, and there were concerns about addressing the welfare of journalists. These are all safety and security issues, the organisation adds. The MRCG, therefore, called on the Government, politicians, media organisations, media owners and managers, civil society associations and members of the public to ensure the safety and security of journalists across the country at all times.

MRCG WITNESSES THE PRESIDENTIAL ASSENT TO THE CYBERSECURITY AND CRIME ACT 2021



The MRCG witnessed the presidential assent ceremony to the Cybersecurity and Crime Act 2021 at State House, Freetown, on 17 November 2021.

In March, the MRCG held a national media consultative meeting on the Cybercrime Bill, during which it developed a Sierra Leone Media Position paper on the bill, which was presented to the Ministry of Information and Communication. The paper outlined the media's concerns about specific provisions of the bill. In May and June 2021, the MRCG and SLAJ followed, monitored, and participated in Parliament's proceedings, Committee Stage readings, and debates to ensure their position was reflected so that no new laws would be created that stifle press freedom and freedom of expression.

During the ceremony at State House, the Minister of Information and Communications, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, stated that the Act complies with regional bodies and international committees of which the country is a member. He added that as the internet space improves every day, the Act enables electronic evidence to be tendered in courts for crimes committed on the internet after a warrant from the court. “In drafting the law, we had several engagements with media stakeholders and local and international partners to make the law a consultative one that matches international best practices,” he noted.

Before assenting to the Cybersecurity and Crime Act 2021, the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Dr Julius Maada Bio, in his address, said that setting laws that guide digital technologies and the internet systems is of great importance, adding that digital reforms are also part of national development. “This law is not for political gains but to compete with other developing countries worldwide in tracking cybersecurity defaulters and to send a signal to international partners, of which Sierra Leone is a signatory. We will continue to work with our international partners to ensure the smooth implementation of this law,” the President said.

MRCG SUPPORTS WIMSAL, SLRU AND GOE FOR THEIR PROGRAMMATIC CAPACITY-BUILDING



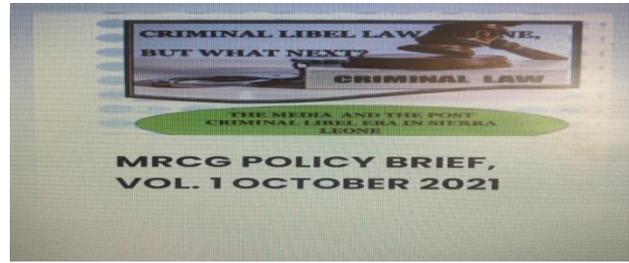
With funds from the National Endowment for Democracy, the MRCG supported the administrative and programmatic capacity building of three of its constituent member organisations, Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU), and the Guild of Editors (GoE).

The three organisations were given funds to hold executive and planning meetings nationally and in the regions, develop databases, and recruit program staff to help improve programming.

In one of the events hosted by WIMSAL, the President of WIMSAL, Femi Jaret-Coker, urged all members, primarily regional executive members, to nurture WIMSAL as their ‘baby and personal property’; only then did she say WIMSAL would be cherished and respected by all members and the public. She stated that they are gathered to discuss what they all did in 2021 and to suggest possible ways for 2022 to implement WIMSAL activities across all regions, adding that she understands that there is evidence of challenges. Still, there must be love from all members, and they must always see themselves as sisters.

MRCG’s National Coordinator, Dr Francis Sowa, expressed appreciation to NED for providing the funds and stressed that MRCG has always desired to support and equip member organisations to build their programmatic capacity to carry out media-related projects independently.

MRCG PRODUCE ITS FIRST EDITION OF THE POLICY BRIEF

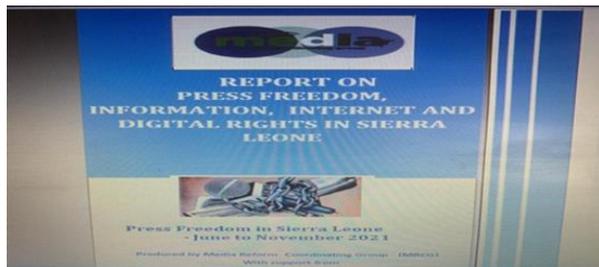


The year 2020 was a remarkable period for media freedom in Sierra Leone. On July 23, 2020, Parliament passed the Public Order (Amendment) Act 2020 (Act No. 40 of 2020), which repealed the fifty-five-year-old anti-press freedom legislation. Section 1 of the Public Order (Amendment) Act 2020 provides that “The Public Order Act, 1965 is amended by the repeal of Part V-DEFAMATORY AND SEDITIOUS LIBEL.”

The repeal was expected to create an enabling environment for media practitioners and civil society activists to hold the government accountable and promote good democratic governance. It was also expected that many private-sector institutions would invest in the media and more women would venture into the journalistic profession. To a large extent, that has not been the case.

With funds from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the United States of America, MRCG October 2021 produced a Policy Brief on the Post Criminal Libel Era in Sierra Leone and captured topics including Libel cases still in courts after the repeal of Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965; Intimidation, harassment, arrest and detention of journalists, safety and security of journalists; Media poverty; Political party ownership and politically-aligned media and their influence on editorial independence; and The need for continuous media capacity building training <http://mrcgonline.org/index.php/impact-resources/208-mrcg-policy-brief-vol-1-october-2021>.

MRCG PRODUCES SEVENTH EDITION REPORT ON PRESS FREEDOM, INFORMATION, INTERNET AND DIGITAL RIGHTS IN SIERRA LEONE



In December 2021, MRCG produced the Seventh Edition of the Press Freedom report, covering June to November 2021. The report is a component of a project titled “Enhancing Press Freedom and Legislative Reforms of Media Laws”. It covers issues on Freedom of Expression and the Press, the Right to Access Information, and Internet Freedom and Digital Rights in Sierra Leone, with support from 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. In addition, it follows up on cases from the first to the fifth edition, which spans June 2018 to November 2020, that were still inconclusive.

Six issues were captured in this edition, and MRCG’s data showed that three were concluded out of the six cases/issues monitored. The case on the alleged verbal attack on **BBC’s** Sport Journalists, Mohamed Fajah Barrie, had been concluded as the Sports Writers Association of Sierra Leone (SWASAL) and the Minister of Sports intervened and resolved the matter; the matter of the dismissal of Phebean Swill-Randall from the Board of Entertainment and Investment had ended as she accepted her dismissal and never deleted nor apologised for her post. The online intimidation of journalist Sallieu Tejan Jalloh by anonymous callers ended as the anonymous callers contacted him and

apologised.

The matter on the arrest and detention of Osman Hardy Jalloh of **TV-News24** was still inconclusive as Mr Jalloh had forwarded a complaint to the Human Rights Commission Sierra Leone regional office east for ‘unlawful detention’ which the Commission was looking into the matter on the arrest of the ten (10) journalists of **Star Radio’s Media One Center** was still inconclusive as the journalists were released on bail and the matter is still in court. The matter of the Editor of **Voice of Salone Newspaper**, David Johnson, is still in court.

<http://mrcgonline.org/index.php/impact-resources/207-mrcg-s-seventh-edition-press-freedom-report-2021>

MRCG EMBARKS ON A WEEK-LONG INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE-SHARING TRIP TO GHANA



In its efforts to learn and implement best practices for structured advocacy campaigns and media reform engagements, the National Coordinator, Dr Francis Sowa, and Head of Programmes, Usman Bah, conducted a five-day observation mission in Ghana with the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) from 6 to 10 December 2021 on behalf of MRCG. The visit capacitated and exposed MRCG to new perspectives that have advanced its knowledge in media reform, advocacy campaigns, and project implementations.

The trip aimed to learn best practices for structuring advocacy campaigns and media reform engagements with media professionals and civil society groups. While in Ghana, MRCG learnt and observed host country’s perspective and strategy in advocacy campaigns, observed and learnt host’s media reform engagements best practices and techniques, learnt and observed

project implementation best practices, learnt and observed host's work on freedom of expression, internet, digital and online rights, and safety and security of journalists programs, created partnerships and networks with like-minded organisations, learnt and observed best practices on Fact Checking in the campaign against fake news and misinformation as the Sierra Leone 2023 general election is around the corner.

The team achieved all the outlined activities and objectives of the trip. Upon returning to Freetown, the MRCCG staff held a three-day end-of-year retreat from 15 to 17 December 2021, during which the National Coordinator, Dr Francis Sowa, and Head of Programmes, Usman Bah, gave an update on their visit to Ghana and explained the best practices they had learned from the MFWA.

At the end of the retreat, it was agreed that most of the best practices currently applicable would be implemented immediately, and other practices would be implemented later.