CIMA — Center for International Media Assistance

Special Report

Support for Independent Media in Liberia's New Democracy

SUMMARY

After decades of civil war and authoritarian rule, Liberia is on its way to becoming a more stable democracy. Yet despite the country's progress over the past few years, hurdles remain before a lasting democracy can take root. A significant challenge for the country is developing sustainable independent media.

Liberia's media are at a crossroads. Three bills in the legislature are poised to determine the future of this sector and without international support, press freedom and freedom of information could be threatened. In addition, organizations supporting media in Liberia are working with little clear strategy or coordination.

The next few years are crucial to the country's media development. Liberia is a prime example of a country in transition, and the media is transitioning as well. Without the coordinated, long-term support of international organizations, Liberian media are unlikely to become an effective, free, and independent sector.

BACKGROUND

On February 17, 2009, CIMA hosted a roundtable discussion at the National Endowment for Democracy on Liberia's media. Approximately 75 representatives of the Liberian media, international organizations, media development implementers, and others discussed the current state of the media in the country and possible future developments for the press.

Presenters included: Philip Sandi, secretary general of the Press Union of Liberia; Vanessa Gezari, an American journalist with experience in Liberia; Michael Keating, senior fellow and associate director of the Center for Democracy and Development at the University of Massachusetts, Boston; Lawrence Randall, executive director of the Liberia Media Center; William Burke of the Mano River Media Forum and Democracy Media; Anne Bennett, country representative for Sierra Leone at Fondation Hirondelle; Paul-André Wilton of the Africa Support Team at Search for Common Ground; and David Sasaki, director of Rising Voices.

The discussion was moderated by Dave Peterson, senior director for Africa programs at NED.

The workshop was divided into three sessions, each consisting of presentations followed by discussion. This report outlines the presentations and discussion in the order in which they occurred.

LIBERIA'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE: VIEWS FROM THE GROUND

Presentations

*Press Union of Liberia:
Past, Present, and Future*

Philip Sandi, Secretary General, Press Union of Liberia:

- The Press Union of Liberia (PUL) was founded in 1964 to help the media community stand up to the harassment regularly faced by journalists.

- There are a number of newspapers, radio stations, and television stations in the country; but having a large number of media outlets does not mean that there is press freedom.

- The government does not adequately understand the need for free and independent media and often tries to directly influence news coverage.

- The PUL has drafted three bills to improve media freedoms in Liberia. They would protect freedom of information; transform the state broadcasting system into a public broadcasting system; and improve the broadcast regulation system.

- A number of factors contribute to the weakness of Liberian media: journalists and editors lack training and professional skills; many are underpaid, which can encourage corruption; and gender mainstreaming is a significant problem.

Gender Matters: Promoting and Supporting Women's Participation in Building an Independent Media in Liberia

Vanessa Gezari, journalist:

- The election of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, while a major step forward for all of Africa, has created a "no problem problem," where people assume that because a woman can get elected president, gender discrimination is no longer a problem in Liberia.

- Women and girls continue to face many difficulties—from fewer education and job opportunities to outright sexual assault.

- Female journalists face the same challenges as their male counterparts and then some. There have been cases where sources have refused to give information to a female journalist unless she performs sexual favors for the information.

- Liberian media seem to be caught in a "conflict loop"—because of the long period of strife, most stories are about conflict at the expense of human interest stories concerning ordinary citizens. Liberian journalists require more training on reporting and writing.

Discussion

Participants discussed the status of the three media bills. Few media outlets have focused on their importance, several participants said, and only one measure that deals with broadcast regulations has made significant progress toward being passed. Several participants also expressed concern that the bills would not limit the government's ability to manipulate the media.

Some participants also expressed concern over the growing involvement of the Chinese government in Liberian media. A recent gift of a $6 million network of broadcasting towers around the country has given the government a powerful megaphone, while allowing the Chinese government to broadcast within Liberia.

The importance of the media sector's self image was highlighted by a number of participants. Because media outlets do not see themselves as businesses with the goal of making money, they do not have enough funds to pay for quality journalism; and because the journalists are paid so little, the media have a poor self-image and lack an understanding of the importance of news. Participants said that more training is needed focusing on the business of media as well as on the craft of journalism.

A number of participants expressed concern over the government's treatment of the media in Liberia. Several reported that government officials have publicly declared support for independent media, while privately working to limit the media's independence.

LOOKING FORWARD: ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY AND JOURNALISM TRAINING

Presentations

Liberia's Fourth Estate: Challenges and Opportunities of the Business Environment

Michael Keating, Senior Fellow/Associate Director, Center for Democracy and Development, University of Massachusetts, Boston:

- There is little money in the Liberian media system. Telecommunications companies are the only firms in Liberia that have much capital. The Lebanese community, which is large in Liberia, could inject capital into the media, but so far has not been involved.

- The UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has the most powerful communications network in the country. But despite the high quality of UN broadcasts, they generally are designed to promote the UN's agenda, and the mission will likely be scaling down its operations after the 2011 election. The influx of UN funds has artificially inflated the media market.

- In some places there are just too many newspapers for the size of the market. They are trying to divide a very small pie.

- Much of news outlets' budgets are tied up in basic resources, such as power generation and paper, which cuts into the resources available for journalism, such as salaries for reporters and editors. This lowers quality and leaves media outlets vulnerable to even small changes in the economy.

- The Liberian media needs significant inputs to prepare it for the next election cycle which will likely begin towards the end of 2009.

Capacity Building and Journalism Training

Lawrence Randall, Executive Director, Liberia Media Center:

- Since the election, there has been a big increase in international support for the Liberian media, yet it is still struggling.

- A number of groups are doing training: the Press Union of Liberia, the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building, the Liberia Women Media Action Committee, the Media Women Center for Democracy, the Association of Liberia Community Radios, and the Liberia Media Center.

- Still the quality of Liberian journalism remains weak. The causes include: a weak business environment; a high attrition rate for skilled journalists, who move to non-media institutions; and a lack of coordination among donors.

- Long-term improvement will require a comprehensive strategy for professional development.

Empowering Communities through Radio: Training Community Radio Managers and Producers

William Burke, Mano River Media Forum/Democracy Media:

- TV and newspapers in Liberia reach few people.

- Radio has the greatest penetration. Community radio numbers at least 50

local stations.

- Community radio stations empower citizens, making them feel a part of the development process.
- For these stations to be effective, the staff needs training in business management and in producing journalism that addresses community concerns.

- The training should be long term and include follow-up activities to evaluate how radio programs affect the community.

Discussion

Several participants complained that a lack of coordination has hindered development efforts. For example, several groups support community radio but do so with no coordination. This includes the UN organizations.

How can donors best spend their money in Liberia? Keating suggested establishing a single, successful media outlet that could serve as a model. Participants agreed that a major problem is that donors have been spreading their funding too thin, and no media outlets can thrive. A number of others commented on the importance of teaching students how to evaluate quality news and to understand the role of the media.

LOOKING FORWARD: LESSONS LEARNED AND NEW MEDIA

Media Assistance in Liberia: Lessons Learned

Paul-André Wilton, Africa Support team, Search for Common Ground:

- There is an incredible demand for

information in Liberia, and people desire to have their voices heard.

- The most effective media projects are bottom-up and horizontal, allowing people to share information with each other.

- Donors can skew the market by deciding where they want radio stations to exist. These stations are more effective if they are driven by the community and are independent.

- International organizations should also encourage the development of a national community radio network that would create a sense of solidarity among stations, help them learn from each other, and allow the development of shared pre-produced programs.

Anne Bennett, Country Representative Sierra Leone, Fondation Hirondelle:

- The increased number of media outlets has not necessarily created new space for citizen dialogue or increased transparency. A single quality news station is better able to do this than a lot of unprofessional stations.

- Star Radio, which began operating in 1997 and was re-launched in 2005 following closure by Charles Taylor, is one of the few success stories. The station is independent, with an annual budget of more than $500,000, 28% of which is raised locally.

- The station also provides training to a number of community radio stations in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Something Old, Something New: Integrating ICT into Liberia's Media Landscape

David Sasaki, Director, Rising Voices (via telephone):

- There is currently no reliable model for a sustainable media business in Liberia, but new media will undoubtedly play a role in the future.

- New media have been used successfully in other post-conflict countries to promote peace—they can be used to improve election monitoring, provide gifts from diaspora groups, or report acts of violence.

- These new tools should also be integrated into projects of non-media organizations, such as those providing humanitarian aid.

Discussion

One representative of the U.S. government explained the difficulties encountered in coordinating funding. Efforts by USAID at "donor harmonization" are limited by its inability to persuade groups to coordinate. Successful coordination will have to be implementer-driven, the participant said.

One participant asked about the safety of journalists in Liberia. Several participants commented that while journalists do not face direct threats of violence like their counterparts in other countries, there are dangers throughout the country that all citizens face.

GOING FORWARD

Liberia's media faces many obstacles before they can be a thriving, free, and independent

sector. Yet participants largely agreed on several recommendations:

- **Liberian media need long-term, holistic support.** Now is not the time for international organizations to be pulling support from Liberia. As the country makes the transition into a more stable democracy, donor support will be needed more than ever. International organizations should coordinate to develop a coherent strategy for improving the media in Liberia.

- **Media development organizations need to "pick winners."** Liberian media are hindered by an overabundance of small media outlets. If international organizations support a few quality stations, these will serve as an example.

- **The media in Liberia are at a crossroads.** The three media-related bills in the legislature need to be strengthened to protect media freedoms and then pushed through to passage. While the current government has been relatively friendly to the media, there is no guarantee future administrations won't use the existing laws to hinder the media.

- **The professional development of the media is a crucial element.** Journalists need more training to better understand not only the basic skills of journalism but also to learn subjects in which their audiences are interested. Station owners and managers also need more training in business management. Journalists' salaries need to be higher.

Summary by: Spencer Hayne
CIMA Staff