

# Sierra Leone

## A National Conversation



### Summary

- In Sierra Leone, BBC Media Action produces the discussion programme *Fo Rod* (Crossroads) and the national debate programme *Tok Bot Salone* (Talk About Sierra Leone). Both programmes aim to facilitate discussion and accountability between citizens and leaders. *Fo Rod* does this by presenting a discussion on topical issues with government officials while *Tok Bot Salone* enables ordinary people to question government officials and civil society leaders on air.
- In a recent round of audience research, participants said the programmes: educated them on issues they were previously unaware of; alerted them to the successes and failures of government service provision; and provided a forum for the government to gain ideas and recommendations from citizens on significant national matters.
- However, responses to the programme varied according to the perceived quality of answers provided by the officials appearing on the shows. Participants said not all panellists were appropriate for the topic discussed and several often failed to answer questions properly.

### Context

This research was conducted from August–September 2012, three months before the first free elections organised solely by Sierra Leone since the end of the civil war in 2002. Now a relatively stable country, Sierra Leone has achieved some developmental progress since the end of the civil war. However, it is still ranked near the bottom of the UN Human Development Index, with high youth unemployment and high infant and maternal mortality rates.

### The project

The programmes in Sierra Leone are part of the BBC Media Action project called A National Conversation. Funded by the UK Department for International Development's Governance Transparency Fund and now its Global Grant, A National Conversation operates in Angola, Sierra Leone and Tanzania to increase government transparency, accountability and public participation through broadcast media.

### Research methodology

Audience research was conducted from August–September 2012 with 24 listening groups across Sierra Leone. These groups were organised by six community-based organisations that focus on issues including disability, education and development for women, and youth issues.

### Findings

Audiences feel that both *Fo Rod* and *Tok Bot Salone* provide them with information relevant to their lives and issues that challenge them on a daily basis. For some, programmes provide completely new information, while for others it sheds new light on a familiar problem. For almost all, they provide new ideas they hope to implement in their own communities. The main driver behind this seems to be a relative dearth of public information. A few participants commented on the fact that the information the programme reveals was previously “sacred”, confined to the halls of power and unknown to the ordinary man or woman who cannot read or write. Participants indicated that knowing this information has led to some people's immediate empowerment. One participant spoke of a programme on free health care that had enabled his family to assert their rights:

“Based on the awareness I had from the previous programme (Free Health Care) I had to turn down a request made by some nurses who delivered my brother's

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wife's baby. These nurses demanded... the sum of Le 40,000 for their service. I had to tell them that we are not paying a cent... as this service falls under the free health care package. They handed us the baby and we went home without paying.”

– Audience member

As well as empowering audiences with knowledge, listeners say they are beginning to see the successes and failures in government service provision. For a number of listeners this has been a positive experience, highlighting progress the government has made on matters that affect them. One listener spoke of how happy he was to hear from a government minister on the programme that the Kabala pipe-borne water project had been approved. Another spoke of how the government official had helped people understand the status and practices around mining in Sierra Leone.

Some listeners said they saw the programme as a platform on which government ministers were able to gain ideas and recommendations from citizens on matters of national significance and policy. One listener spoke of government officials being interested in the “grass roots man”, while another commended the police for recruiting disabled people into their force and said he hoped other government agencies would follow the example the police presented on the programme. However, attitudes towards the success of the programmes vary according to the perceived quality and responsiveness of the officials invited on as panellists. While several listeners were happy with the information they received from the guests on both *Fo Rod* and *Tok Bot Salone*, there were a number who felt the programmes left a lot of unanswered questions:

“They actually do not answer the questions I was interested in. I was expecting statistical analysis on the number of people that have so far benefited from the Free Health Care. None of them could give a precise answer to this.”

– Audience member

Listeners suggested that both *Tok Bot Salone* and *Fo Rod* start producing follow-up programmes.<sup>1</sup> For them, follow up programmes would provide an opportunity to get answers on issues they felt were/could not be fully addressed in one programme. One commented, “Secrets are now unfolding and if this continues we will get to know how much government receives from mining each year.”

For some listeners the impact the programmes can make is limited by the power structures within their community. A few of those who listened to a programme on women's empowerment said it would be impossible to apply the values promoted by the programme in their lives as their traditions forbid women becoming paramount chiefs.

### Implications

Both *Fo Rod* and *Tok Bot Salone* are appreciated by audiences. Programming should continue to focus on exploring issues that affect people's everyday lives and ensure guests are appropriate and questioned on what they are doing about the issues. In future, programming should consider doing more follow-up programmes that allow an issue to be explored again and further questions put to those concerned. Listeners expressed an interest in seeing future programmes address issues including the agricultural sector, the role and position of paramount chiefs and issues affecting women including female genital mutilation and domestic violence.

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<sup>1</sup> There are some follow up programmes already, but participants did not comment on this.