

# Sierra Leone: encouraging impartial coverage during the 2012 elections

Sierra Leone held presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in November 2012. BBC Media Action supported election-related reporting by supporting members of the International Radio Network in Sierra Leone to provide appropriate election coverage in the run-up to the elections.

## The project

In October and November 2012, BBC Media Action delivered a week of training in election reporting to participants selected to act as mentors to other journalists. The aim was to encourage impartial, fair and accurate reporting. These mentors trained local journalists working at International Radio Network (IRN) stations. The stations then produced election programming with on-going support from the mentors.

## Research approach

The BBC Media Action research team in Sierra Leone conducted 13 in-depth interviews with journalists, mentors and listeners of four IRN stations (Choice FM, Eastern Radio, Radio New Song and Radio Bankasoka) after the election. The interviews aimed 1) to explore how mentors and journalists felt the stations had

been able to implement the journalism training during the elections and 2) to understand audience perceptions of the role of the media during elections generally and specifically the perception of the election output of the stations that received BBC Media Action training.

“... looking at how they covered the SLPP [Sierra Leone People’s Party] rally... I was on the ground in the evening. When I listened to their [Radio New Song’s] analysis about the rally it was almost exactly the same as what I saw with my naked eyes.”

Male Radio Bankasoka listener

## Key findings

- Mentors and journalists found the training improved their ability to: report elections in a professional way that reduced the likelihood of conflict and unrest; provide objective, impartial and fair coverage of political parties; and incorporate citizen voices in discussion programmes around the elections.
- Listeners appreciated the comprehensive coverage the IRN stations provided and

saw their output as balanced and impartial.

- However, mentors, journalists and listeners reported that coverage would have benefited from more balanced political party presentation. Some listeners wanted to see more representatives from the two main political parties: the All People Party's Congress and the Sierra Leone Political Party.
- Mentors and journalists reported it was challenging to secure political party representatives on the programme due to their negative perceptions of the media. Sometimes those who did agree to an interview or appearance on a show would cancel at the last minute.

## Project context

Elections are an essential element of Sierra Leone's progression towards good governance following years of civil war. Previous elections have been marred by violence and low voter turnout. It was in this context that the National Electoral Commission engaged media partners to broadcast voter education messages. This included voter registration, polling, counting ballots and election results. BBC Media Action supported International Radio Network (IRN) stations to cover elections, report results and observe the Independent Media Commission's election reporting guidelines.

## Implications and impact

Challenges related to election coverage were perceived to be endemic of the media's relationship with the government in Sierra Leone. For example, challenges expressed by journalists indicate that future training would need to address their confidence to interview people in positions of power and adapt to unexpected circumstances in broadcasting.

Many of the mentors and journalists interviewed expressed a need for more training and support post-election, specifically how to

follow up on whether those elected are accountable for and delivering on electoral promises. This desire was shared by listeners who asked for radio stations to follow up on discrepancies and other events that impact the local community after the election.

“The problem is when you call some of these politicians for a programme they will assure you until the eleventh hour [and then] they disappoint you by saying they either have other programmes at hand or they don't want their opponent to know their strategy.”

Mentor, Choice FM Freetown

For more information about our research in Sierra Leone visit [www.bbcmmediaaction.org](http://www.bbcmmediaaction.org)

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