

Research Summary

A National Conversation: Governance and media in Sierra Leone



Summary

- In Sierra Leone, BBC Media Action produces *Fo Rod* (Crossroads), a weekly radio show that aims to provide a space for discussion between officials, civil society representatives and the public about issues of concern affecting the lives of Sierra Leoneans.
- Programmes focus on issues such as the rights of marginalised groups, social and economic issues, environmental and agricultural issues and voting.
- The programme has reached 766,040 people across Sierra Leone - nearly 37% of the adult population in the broadcast areas.
- The majority (68%) of regular *Fo Rod* listeners said that the programme plays a key role in holding government to account.
- 96% of regular listeners thought the programme is a useful tool for citizens to air their concerns about how the country is run.



Context

Sierra Leone has enjoyed relative stability since the end of the civil war in 2002. However, the majority of the population live below the poverty line and the country has huge infrastructure needs including roads and energy supplies. Youth unemployment¹ and high infant and maternal mortality² are problems facing much of the population.

Sierra Leone has greater media freedom than many of its neighbouring countries. However, libel laws used by the government against journalists hinder freedom of the press and reports suggest that many journalists self-censor to avoid persecution.³

Project

The project in Sierra Leone is part of the BBC Media Action A National Conversation project. Funded by the the UK's Department for International Development's Governance Transparency Fund, A National Conversation operates in Angola, Sierra Leone and Tanzania and aims to increase government transparency, accountability and public participation by way of the broadcast media. In Sierra Leone, BBC Media Action produces the national discussion programme *Fo Rod* and uses it as a training vehicle to help local partner stations produce their own governance programming. In August 2012, BBC Media Action started broadcasting the national debate programme *Tok Bot Salone* (Talk About Sierra Leone).

Methodology

In 2011-2012 BBC Media Action conducted research with audiences through a national survey in the broadcast areas and qualitative panel discussions. This audience research was complimented by in-depth interviews with partner station staff. All research aimed to explore how media serves as a driver of

¹ UNDP 'UN Support to the National Youth Employment Programme in Sierra Leone' June 2006

² Joint EC/DFID Country Strategy for Sierra Leone (covering the period 2007-2012 for DFID and 2008-2013 for the EC). Retrieved from: http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/scanned_sl_csp10_en.pdf

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14094381>

domestic or institutional accountability and how the provision of platforms that provide information and enable individuals, groups, communities and societies to make more informed choices and hold government and other decision makers to account.

Findings

The national *Fo Rod* programme is popular in Sierra Leone, reaching 766,040 people - nearly 37% of the adult population in the broadcast areas. In addressing issues of national concern, such as the rights of women, the price of fuel and youth unemployment the programme directly speaks to audience needs.

The majority (68%) of regular *Fo Rod* listeners⁴ said that the programme plays a key role in holding government to account. Panel discussions revealed that for some audience members in rural locations, the radio programme was their only source of information on government activities. The programme achieves this by inviting government officials to explain government policy and answer questions on air. Over 90% of national *Fo Rod* programmes have featured at least one official.



Fo Rod gives Sierra Leoneans a voice. 96% of regular programme listeners thought the programme was a useful tool for citizens to air their concerns about how the country is run. The programme achieved this by including audience questions and comments on air that contribute to the discussion of governance issues. The format of bringing officials and citizens together to debate issues of public concern appeared to be effective, with 76% of regular listeners saying the programme helps resolve the local governance issues it reports. Audiences were able to contact the programme through text messages, phoning in and, from November 2011, a Facebook page. The demand for accountability appeared to be strong; while audiences felt the information provided was valuable, some felt that programmes left a lot of unanswered questions.

Implications

The *Fo Rod* example shows that audiences perceive the media as an important mechanism in making government more transparent and responsive. In addressing citizen concerns and providing a platform for dialogue with government officials, the programme has targeted audience information needs and proved successful. To capitalise on this success, in August 2012, BBC Media Action launched the national political debate programme *Tok Bot Salone*. This programme builds on the experience and success of *Fo Rod*, bringing senior politicians and ordinary Sierra Leoneans together and the debates are recorded in front of a live audience.

Contact

For more information about this research please contact media.action@bbc.co.uk, +44 (0)20 8008 001.

Augusto Newell and Trish Doherty, May 2012

¹ A regular listener is defined as an audience member who listens to the weekly show at least twice per month