

The advertising industry in Sierra Leone: an informed perspective

Summary of a study prepared by Emmanuel Saffa Abdulai, Executive Director, Society for Democratic Initiatives

Although advertising has seen a steady decline over recent years, it still forms the main source of revenue for the media industry in Sierra Leone. However, according to the report, the sector is disorganised, uncoordinated and lacking in substance. Improvements to existing operating practices would not only offer life support to the media industry, they would also provide increased employment opportunities and, by extension, contribute to the economic, social, educational and political development of the country.

The report links the decline of the industry to the absence of a strong and comprehensive policy framework as well as poor quality control. This is compounded by a general perception that contracts are rarely awarded on professional grounds or as a result of market analysis but that decisions are motivated by personal gain or patronage.

Consequently, the author cites the following imperatives for the media advertising sector in Sierra Leone:

Revisions to the advertising policy need to be finalised

The absence of a serious policy for the regulation and monitoring of the industry remains a fundamental challenge. The current policy, which speaks mainly to issues of ethical conduct, is part of the Media Code of Practice of the Independent Media Commission (IMC).

An audit bureau for circulation and audience ratings is urgently needed

One of the challenges identified by both experts and practitioners in the advertising industry is the lack of credible research to measure newspaper circulation and audience ratings. However, it will be difficult to introduce a modern system driven by digital tracking tools as long as some radio and TV stations continue to rely on analogue broadcasting.

The government needs to adopt policies to ensure that public sector advertising is fairly distributed

A policy regulating the distribution of government advertising to the media has never existed in Sierra Leone. Furthermore, without a proper audit bureau for circulation and audience ratings, the process for awarding advertising contracts is thought to be primarily influenced by a system of kickbacks and political patronage. More worryingly, some government ministries, departments and agencies have failed to honour their financial commitments to media houses.

Advertising agencies should be encouraged to register with the IMC and form an umbrella body

Only a handful of advertising agencies are registered with the IMC and there is no umbrella body that coordinates and regulates the work of practitioners. As a result, professional standards are inconsistent while there are no clear regulations to ensure that advertising agencies meet agreed criteria relating to quality and accountability.

Greater professionalisation is needed within the advertising industry

The quality of advertising outputs has been undermined by the migration of unqualified media professionals into the advertising industry. In addition, the media community lacks the skills, particularly at the level of continuity announcers, to handle advertising products on air or on the pages of newspapers.