The political economy of the media in Sierra Leone and the potential for private sector investment

Summary of a study prepared by Dr. Ibrahim Bangura, Lecturer, University of Sierra Leone

The report presents a contextual analysis of the media sector in Sierra Leone, describing the key stakeholders and the financial motivation for their engagement as well as the political and economic factors that influence media independence and viability. It also examines the current scope of private investment in the media sector against the backdrop of new opportunities unlocked by recent legal reforms enacted by the government.

The author finds that Sierra Leone has a broad mix of media, including state-owned outlets, private media houses and community-owned stations. However, the country has seen a growth of clientelism in the media sector with elites using their political leverage to control the activities of key players. Only the rapid growth of social media has worked to limit state influence and political capture of the media as well as to provide a platform to sectors of society that were previously absent from the public discourse.

Furthermore, there is little apparent willingness to invest in investigative or public interest journalism. Instead, media houses fill their schedules with sensational reporting that attracts large audiences. The inability of media outlets to provide a credible, independent voice on key issues is often blamed on a paucity of adequate skills and knowhow. This challenge stems from the lack of investment in training programmes, and the poor quality of education provided by training institutions.

Nevertheless, the report highlights key reforms in the media sector, in particular the repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act (POA) of 1965. Moreover, key actors such as the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and the Media Reform Coordinating Group have been highly effective in driving media development processes and these efforts have been supported by multiple donors including the European Union (EU), the Government of the United Kingdom and the UNDP. However, there are also signs of backsliding in the reform agenda. According to the author of the study, the Independent Media Commission Act of 2020 gives the regulatory body increased opportunities for reining in media independence.

Most of the investment in the media sector is considered to be small-scale and is limited to newspapers and community radio stations. There is no known international investment in or ownership of Sierra Leonean media houses. This situation may stem from a perception that media outlets remain captured by political interests as well as a recognition that the market has limited potential to yield significant dividends. Furthermore, traditional sources of revenue for media (such as newspaper sales or TV advertising) are rapidly dwindling.

However, there are no legal or administrative barriers to investment in the media sector for either international or national players. Additionally, according to the report, investors can draw inspiration from success stories such as African Young Voices (AYV) Media Empire, which has modernised its business and introduced new entertainment channels that attract young people. Similarly, Capital Radio FM104.9 has a very significant youth following and continues to win major advertising contracts.

The author concludes that media seeking to attract investment should focus on developing a modern profile that appeals to a wide range of audiences including young people and other identity groups. This can be achieved by producing high-quality content that is both impartial and professional. He says that outlets should have a strong commercial unit that is capable of meeting the needs of the public sector as well as private advertisers. Such units should conduct regular assessments aimed at identifying existing gaps in the market and finding ways of filling them.

The study urges development partners to work with the media to devise business models which can allow them to operate independently, without representing partisan interests. This, argues the author, will help to dismantle the clientelist relationship that currently exists between politicians and media actors. In particular, the government should encourage international investments in the media industry, with the aim of expanding services across the country while fostering the development of a sector that responds to the needs and aspirations of the public. Tax incentives and public subsidies could go a long way towards creating an environment that is conducive to investment, he says.

Commissioned for the National Media Viability and Investment Conference
Sierra Leone, April 2022

BBC MEDIA ACTION
PRIMED PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT