

# Introduction to the Sierra Leone National Media Viability and Investment Initiative

Media that work in the public interest are essential tools to advance democracy, prosperity and stability. When the media is free and professional, it is able to facilitate a much-needed constructive dialogue between government and citizens and across diverse communities. The right to information is an essential human right.

With the growth of the internet and the spread of digital media, independent public interest media matters now more than ever. It is fundamental to countering the malicious spread of mis- and dis- information, to free and fair elections, and ensuring space where civil and democratic norms can thrive.

The assumption that public interest media can survive from commercial income or small grants and continue to do its important role, has already proven to be misguided even in relatively wealthy countries, let alone in weaker. In countries where the economy is weaker, it is even more essential that government, media, the commercial sector and civil society come together, and work together to re-imagine a different media ecosystem, where investment can be encouraged, where government can play a constructive role and where the media raises its game for the benefit of its people.

In Sierra Leone, these stakeholders have congregated in Freetown on 21-22 April in the first National Media Viability and Investment Conference. The conference had one important overarching objective: to explore ways in which all stakeholders can work together to create a healthier information ecosystem where a steady flow of trusted public interest media content is more freely and widely available to the people of Sierra Leone.

Ahead of the conference, extensive consultations were conducted across the country to capture the views across the country. The findings were presented at the conference, along with further analysis and case studies from other countries. Participants, experts and panellists were asked

to consider the principles and the potential solutions and come up with a national action plan to support public interest media that is pragmatic and applicable in Sierra Leone.

The attached draft has now been finalised and is unveiled at this event in World Press Freedom Day. It is in line with the Call to Action in the Windhoek+30 Declaration on Information as a Public Good last year. Sierra Leone has the opportunity to be at the vanguard in implementing these principles, to:

- **TAKE** effective steps to nurture a diversity of viable public, private and community media, and implement specific policies, along with relevant safeguards, to promote the production of independent, quality journalism, with the aim of ensuring people's access to relevant, diverse and reliable information
- **ENSURE** that flows of funding from public sources to the media, including subsidies and advertising, are allocated fairly and overseen in an independent and transparent manner; and guarantee investment in journalism and jobs, while respecting gender equality and promoting decent working conditions;
- **ADVOCATE** with States and digital platforms, as part of their wider protection of freedom of expression and information as a public good, to recognise media viability as a development priority.

More information about the studies undertaken, the national consultations conducted and progress made with regards to the development of a National Action Plan can be found here:

A national conference on the future of media in Sierra Leone - Media Action ([bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk))

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/our-work/media-development/primed-project/sierra-leone-conference/>

The National Media Viability and Investment Initiative is supported by Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED)



## Recommendations for a National Action Plan

### 1. The Government of Sierra Leone should continue to show the political will necessary to drive media market reforms

- The Government should finalise the National Media and Information Policy which demonstrates its commitment to media freedom and unimpeded access to information.
- Government ministries need to simplify and publicise procedures for taking advantage of indirect subsidies and customs duty waivers.
- While reform processes are being enacted, the government should issue clear guidance to public officials on the provisions and the application of existing legislation.
- The Government should finalise the Digital Migration Policy and support initiatives aimed at providing access to standard digital broadcasting and printing equipment.

### 2. The existing legal and regulatory framework for the media needs to be reviewed

- A standalone chapter on media and communication should be added to the constitution, establishing the principles for organising and regulating the sector.
- Steps should be taken to remove or modify any provisions in existing legislation that could act as obstacles to investment.
- The Government should provide a timely operating grant to the Independent Media Commission (IMC) that will enable the Commission to review the national strategy for allocating licences and setting associated fees, thereby easing market overcrowding while ensuring that the public interest is served.
- The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) should take concrete steps to enhance and safeguard its independence, thereby ensuring that it is able to function as a trade union acting in the interests of its members. It should seek to secure its funding largely from

members' fees and play a role in self-regulation and upholding professional standards.

- The IMC and other stakeholders, including duty-bearers and media freedom advocates, need to agree on a definition for public interest content that can inform policy-making on direct subsidies and market regulation.

### 3. The media should commit to re-engineering the industry in order to boost the potential for attracting private-sector investment and public subsidies

- The IMC, the SLAJ, the Ministry of Information and Communications, the Independent Radio Network (IRN) and the Guild of Editors (GoE) should come together to review and strengthen the existing governance and management requirements for media institutions and agree on compliance mechanisms.
- Proper systems for measuring broadcast audiences and newspaper circulation figures should be introduced, thereby ensuring that advertisers and state institutions can make informed decisions based on empirical evidence.
- Media organisations should develop and publish clear editorial policies as well as introduce proper governance structures that ensure full accountability.
- Media outlets should consider mergers and alliances that make them institutionally viable and investment-ready; that enhance the diversity of content; and that offer a framework for collaboration on investigative or public interest journalism projects.
- Media institutions should explore new business and revenue-generating models.
- The SLAJ, the IMC and academic institutions providing media and journalism education should work with the Government and development partners to provide and encourage scholarship, training and capacity-building programmes for all categories of media practitioners.

#### **4. The Government should take affirmative action to promote community media and the public service broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC)**

- New tax incentives and waivers should be introduced for community media (e.g. reduced taxation on equipment) and awareness should be raised of existing subsidies and procedures.
- Local councils should be encouraged to provide support to community media, thereby improving information provision as well as civic engagement around local development policies.
- The SLBC's governance and funding models should be reconsidered with a view to giving the broadcaster greater independence and financial freedom to improve its infrastructure; enhance its content; and devise a longer-term business plan.

#### **5. A national policy on advertising should be introduced**

- The Government should introduce regulations for the fair and transparent allocation of public sector advertising using criteria including adherence to IMC, NATCOM, NRA and NASSIT requirements.
- Media stakeholders should develop statutory market regulations (for example, through the IMC).
- The Government must honour its obligations to pay for state advertising, including agreeing to advance payments of 50% of the total cost.
- The review of Section 4 of the IMC Media Code of Practice should be completed and changes introduced to ensure that professional standards are maintained and to eliminate sharp practices.
- A standalone advertising policy should be considered that includes a monitoring role for the IMC.
- An umbrella body for advertising agencies should be established with a view to regulating pricing and introducing quality control measures based on agreed industry standards.

#### **6. Government and development partners should commit to a national fund for public interest media**

- The Government should allocate at least 3% of the annual national budget to media investment and development.
- The scope and focus of the fund should be established as well as criteria for the allocation of funding.
- A multi-stakeholder governance mechanism and operating guidelines should be developed for the fund.
- The Government of Sierra Leone should engage with development partners to seek complementary support for the fund and to help coordinate the efforts of international actors.

#### **7. Stakeholders should seek to address the existing gender imbalance in the media industry**

- The SLAJ and women rights' organisations should undertake research on the status of gender representation in the media.
- Media houses should encourage women entrepreneurs to enter the industry and should offer women employees clear opportunities for self-advancement in their chosen field.
- Media institutions should devise clear policies that support gender equality, creating the space for women journalists and content creators to thrive and, thereby, achieving greater diversity in the workplace and in the content that is offered to the public.
- The Government and civil society should work with the media to support efforts to improve the gender balance across the sector.

## About Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED)

PRIMED is a 3-year programme to support the provision of public interest media in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone. It is implemented by a consortium of media support organisations with expertise in different aspects of media and development. Led by BBC Media Action, other core consortium members are Free Press Unlimited, International Media Support and Media Development Investment Fund.

At the individual outlet level, public interest media are subject to intense financial pressure. Globally, business models have been eroded by digital disruption, which has seen changing consumption patterns and advertising revenues migrate away from traditional print and broadcast media. The economic impact of COVID-19 has intensified this pressure, particularly in the Global South. Challenges at the environmental level include government pressure through restrictive legislation and regulation, violence against journalists and diminishing trust in media.

PRIMED aims to address the challenges to public interest media at both outlet and environment level. It seeks to build the resilience of media to political and economic pressures that are undermining viability. It supports the development of information ecosystems that enable a better flow of trusted public interest media content in three countries with different media environments: Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone.

In Sierra Leone BBC Media Action is providing a support package to the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation and other community and commercial radio stations. The Programme has also been providing support over the past year to the Independent Media Commission of Sierra Leone, conducting extensive consultation and drafting a new and improved professional code of conduct for the media. It is the success of this initiative that have led the Ministry of Information and Communications to invite BBC Media Action and PRIMED to facilitate this national conference.

## About BBC Media Action

Established in 1999, BBC Media Action is the international development organisation of the BBC. We reach 100 million people each year, working with creative communication and trusted media to achieve positive change. We support the independent media so essential to democracy and development. We bridge divides, challenge prejudice, and ensure people have access to information they can trust. We enable people to have their say, understand their rights and take action to transform their lives.

We have been in Sierra Leone over a decade providing training and equipment support to media houses, mentoring media partners to produce content, producing and broadcasting BBC branded content addressing issues such as health, education and governance, and supporting initiatives to improve media freedoms and professional standards.