

# THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MEDIA IN SIERRA LEONE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR PRIVATE-SECTOR INVESTMENT

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## 1. Introduction

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BBC Media Action is helping to convene a National Media Viability and Investment Conference in Sierra Leone, aimed at fostering the development of a viable media market and promoting sustainable business models for public interest media. Furthermore, it is envisaged that the conference will contribute to:

- Promoting an enabling environment for investment in the Sierra Leonean media market,
- Promote sustainable business models; and
- Facilitating coordinated actions by multiple stakeholders with the view to collectively providing solutions to the challenges faced by the media in Sierra Leone.

The purpose of this political economy analysis (PEA) is to understand how political and economic factors have affected, or hindered, the media sector in Sierra Leone as well as the potential for private sector investment in the media in order to help inform and shape the discussions between local stakeholders during the Conference.

This PEA is based on desk research, with a wide range of literature studied, to support the conclusions and recommendations provided. It is important to note that one of the primary documents consulted was a study entitled “Political Economy Analysis of the Media in Sierra Leone” commissioned by BBC Media Action. It provided essential information in relation to the actors, context, and the interaction of power, influence, and political and business interests.

The report presents a contextual analysis of the media sector in Sierra Leone: the stakeholders; the financial motivation and incentives for their engagement; and the political and economic factors that influence media independence and viability. It also examines the business climate in Sierra Leone, and the current scope of private investment in the media sector. Additionally, it provides a brief analysis of the legal and structural constraints to the development of a sustainable market as well as the opportunities unlocked by the legal reform processes enacted by the state. This is followed by an examination of the existing skill gaps within the sector, and the interaction between the media sector, civil society and/or local communities.

This report has five sections. The second section elaborates on the methodology used for the report; the third section presents the main findings; the fourth section draws the conclusions of the study; and the fifth section provides the recommendations.

## 2. The context: Sierra Leone

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Since securing its independence from Britain on 27 April 1961, Sierra Leone has had a chequered history characterised by political instability, corruption, nepotism and economic hardship (Koroma 1996). These factors significantly contributed to the outbreak of an 11-year civil war that led to the deaths of over 60,000 people, with more than a million becoming refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) (TRCSL, 2004). The end of the civil war in 2002 marked the commencement of a formal process of democratic consolidation, peacebuilding, and political stability in Sierra Leone.

Since independence, two major political parties, the All Peoples' Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), have dominated politics and governance in Sierra Leone. These parties have also been a major source of political tension and violence, as their rivalry fuels ethno-regional divides in the country.

According to the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) 2019 ranking, 70 percent of the population is estimated to be living on less than \$1.25 a day; adult illiteracy is around 40 percent; and unemployment and underemployment rates stand at more than 70 percent. The life expectancy at birth is 52.2 years, and the mortality rate is alarmingly high (UNDP 2020). The macroeconomy of the country is weak, with limited diversification and high dependence on small-scale subsistence agricultural activities, and mining (Ganson and M'Cloed 2019).

The need to promote economic recovery led to the government of Sierra Leone focusing on encouraging investments in the country, with multiple international business actors expressing interest in investing in the mineral sector (Bender 2011). Among the companies that eventually gained mining concessions in Sierra Leone were African Minerals Limited (AML) in the Tonkolili district, Koidu Holdings in Kono, and London Mining in Port Loko. However, by 2014, among other factors, the outbreak of the deadly Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) combined with the fall in the price of iron ore on the world market led to economic decline.

In addition to these challenges, doing business in Sierra Leone has been clouded by multiple difficulties, stemming from corruption, bad governance, weak and unenforced laws and policies protecting business and political interests. These factors have, over the years, discouraged business interests from investing in the country.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, as noted Ganson and M'Cloed (2019), the economic situation in the country is shaped by seemingly unchecked state influence over all sectors, from mining, to agriculture, to the media while a few private-sector players partner with the government. Running a business in Sierra Leone is often undermined by a wide range of challenges including poor transport infrastructure, a lack of public utilities and telecommunication, high interest rates, corruption, ineffective mechanisms for contract enforcement, poor internet connectivity, and disrupted electricity supplies (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen and Cole 2008).

In 2016, the government promulgated a Local Content Policy, with the aim of promoting the employment of citizens in all business entities with foreign investment. However, the policy has yet to yield the desired outcomes. These impediments are reflected by the World Bank ranking Sierra Leone at 163 out of 190 countries in its 2020 Doing Business Report.

### 3. Traditional and new media in Sierra Leone

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The media landscape in Sierra Leone consists of three major categories of actors — state-owned institutions such as the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC); privately-owned media houses like African Young Voices Media Empire (AYV) and Star TV; and numerous radio stations including Radio Democracy FM 98.1, or the community-owned stations such as the Believers Broadcasting Network (BBN) and Radio Maria. Newspaper outlets like Standard Times, Awareness Times, Global Times, Premier Media, and Concord Times also have wide readerships.

The privately-owned media houses operate television, radio and newspapers that cover a wide range of issues including politics, governance, gender, education, health, and sports. The existing media houses have made investments to update their technology and cater to the changing nature of public

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<sup>1</sup> See the Justice Sector Reform Strategy and Investment Plan III.

demand. However, media houses are usually branded as partisan, with the owners or management accused of being too close to the major political parties.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge described above has been noted by writers such as Wahl-Jorgensen and Cole (2008), who concluded in 2008 that independent media platforms were almost non-existent in Sierra Leone, with media houses failing to invest in investigative journalism or to identify and expose critical issues that undermine social cohesion. A confluence of these factors combined with limited revenue generated through the contract advertising sector means that the media houses focus mainly on producing sensational news that attracts large audiences. Numerous studies have suggested that journalists now resort to using a range of unethical practices such as coasting or blackmailing politicians with the aim of extorting money or favours from them (Wahl-Jorgensen and Cole 2008).

Although the state had a monopoly over media in pre-war Sierra Leone, pressure from development partners and other stakeholders led to a series of reforms aimed at improving the delegation of the regulatory and policy function in relation to the media. This has led to a scenario whereby the relationship among key media policy-makers and regulatory agencies is mixed, and sometimes complex. Analysis of the nature of media and the state reveals that, even though the state has lost direct control over the media, its operations are still the most newsworthy.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, recent years have seen deliberate legal and institutional attempts to curtail media freedom, and discourage non-state actors from getting involved in the sector.

Over time, Sierra Leone has seen a growth of clientelism and patrimonialism in the media community, with elites using their political leverage to control the activities of media enterprises, even those that are privately owned. The ability to survive as a media enterprise depends largely on the organisation's relationship with leading political actors.

In the last decade, there has been a rapid and dominant spread of social media and its activities in Sierra Leone. This came as a result of advances made in expanding internet services across the country accompanied by a dramatic increase in mobile phone ownership. Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram etc. have become the most effective means of accessing and sharing information for all age groups in the country. This development has had consequences for mainstream media and has served to limit its traditional dominance. Additionally, it serves to curb state influence and media capture. The spread of new media has played an essential role in social mobilisation and in giving a voice to those who were previously marginalised and voiceless, particularly young people and women (Kemp 2021).

The following section discusses the current key actors in the media sector, then offers an overview of the business climate in Sierra Leone and explores the prospects for engaging with private-sector actors.

### **3.1. Key actors in the media sector**

This section lists and analyses the respective actors in the media sector in Sierra Leone, both at the state and non-state levels.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on interviews conducted for a previous study for the BBC Media Action.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the literature review conducted.

### 3.1.1. State actors in the media sector in Sierra Leone

The Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) is the highest executive body tasked with making policies and laws related to the media and associated sectors. The Ministry has several media-related regulatory agencies and outlets including the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC); National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM); Independent Media Commission (IMC); Sierra Leone News Agency (SLENA); Sierra Leone Cable (SALCAB); Right to Access Information Commission (RAIC); Sierra Leone Postal Services (SALPOST); and Government Printers (GP).

Through the MIC, the current government has championed a number of reforms, including the repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act (POA) of 1965, the revision of the IMC Act and the reinstatement of the annual grant for the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ). The Ministry's interaction with the media sector goes beyond its regulatory functions. Agencies like NATCOM and SALCAB are also among the key revenue-generating entities for the state with income sources including telecom licensing and fines.

The IMC was set up by an Act of Parliament in 2000, with the objective of promoting professionalism in the media throughout Sierra Leone by ensuring that media institutions achieved the highest standards in the provision of media services as well as protecting the interests of journalists and the public against abuse or exploitation by media houses.<sup>4</sup> The IMC has an obligation to verify the certificates and unique nature of any media house that has already been registered as a business entity with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC). The IMC has certain regulatory functions, including the renewal of operating licences for media companies. The recently promulgated IMC Act of 2020 also states that the Commission has the power to revoke licences and shut down media operations. This has increased the ability of the government's regulatory body to rein in media independence.

The National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM) was established in 2006 as an agency responsible for licensing and regulating telecommunications operators; promoting universal access to basic telecommunication services; and ensuring fair competition for investors, as well as for protecting the interests of users of telecommunication services. The institution is central to the operation of the media sector as it is the central authority responsible for the allocation of the frequencies required for operating all kinds of telecommunication networks. In recent years, the NATCOM is said to have ceased granting new radio spectrums in specific areas in order to limit the number of active media organisations or to prevent new actors from entering the market. Also, in 2019, the spectrum fees for community radio were increased from US\$250 to US\$1,500 (Kamara 2019), a move that would directly influence the operation and sustainability of many radio stations.

An important aspect that needs to be considered here is the empowerment – or lack thereof – of certain actors based on their interpersonal relationships with the political leadership. The actors discussed here wield regulatory and operational power over the media – the end goal of which is to control the content generated by media (BBC Media Action, 2021a).

### 3.1.2. Non-state actors in the media sector

The SLAJ was established in 1971, with the primary aim of promoting freedom of expression and the press. In addition to championing the professional autonomy and working conditions of journalists and media practitioners, it is also a primary actor in the development of the sector. Key engagements include its work with the IMC to improve the standards of journalism in Sierra Leone and the enforcement of a code of practice for journalists in the country (Sierra Leone Association of Journalists

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<sup>4</sup> See the IMC Act of 2020.

2020). There are multiple loose associations within the SLAJ, including the Sierra Leone Reporters' Union (SLRU), Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), the Guild of Editors (GoE), the Association of Journalists on Mining and Extractives (AJME) and the Sports Writers' Association of Sierra Leone (SWASAL).

The Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) is another forum that is influential in the country's media sector. Funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to act as a key driver of the media reform agenda in Sierra Leone, the members of the group consist of representatives from major media organisations and academic institutions. The MRCG is instrumental in organising and coordinating workshops and meetings for journalists in the country. It is also central to the discourse around the need to consolidate peace; strengthen democratic dialogue; and ensure development through an independent and sustainable media sector.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also engaged in reporting and monitoring key events in the country. In a context where the formal media sector is largely underfunded, and lacks the required capacity, a large portion of public interest information is produced by NGOs that specialise in the study and analysis of conflict and that function through the provision of financial and technical support from humanitarian organisations (Bau 2011). Increasingly, these institutions also provide public goods and services to compensate for a national government unable to perform its social role (M'cleod and Ganson 2018). The rise in popularity of religious, community-based media sources serves as a testament to this.

### 3.1.3. International organisations providing support to media houses in Sierra Leone

There are several organisations providing support to media houses in Sierra Leone, with most of this support geared towards strengthening their capacity, and enhancing their neutrality and effectiveness. They include the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID – now part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), the World Bank, the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Media Foundation for West Africa. For instance, OSIWA has been providing institutional and other forms of support to Radio Democracy FM 98.1 for several years (Radio Democracy 2015).

It is important to note that, at the end of the war, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), provided both financial and technical support to the media in Sierra Leone. It also established a radio station of its own, known as Radio UNAMSIL, which supported the establishment and operation of several community radio stations, as they collaborated in promoting peacebuilding efforts in the country (IRIN News 2000).

In a 2019 report, UNDP (2019: 22) stated, “For more than five years, UNDP Sierra Leone has been implementing a series of complementary initiatives aimed at strengthening the democratic role of Sierra Leone's media ecosystem. UNDP has specifically worked to support an enabling legislative and regulatory environment for a free press, develop the professional capacities of the media sector and support media actors to promote dialogue on democracy and development. As of 2019, UNDP is planning to follow up activities to address existing gaps by supporting the financial independence of media actors and expand the reach and quality of reporting.”

Similarly, during a November 2020 meeting with journalists to commemorate the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, the then British High Commissioner, Simon Mustard, stated that his government had been working with key stakeholders, at various levels, to strengthen policies related to the media, and had also been providing technical support to media houses to enhance the quality of their work (*Politico SL* n.d.).



Various studies have recorded the very significant investments made by international actors with a view to assuring free, accessible and impactful media in Sierra Leone. This has been coupled with engagements aimed at limiting political influence and the politicisation of media houses, which undermines the public's confidence in the media.<sup>5</sup>

#### 3.1.4. Private-sector investment and business interests in the media sector

There is significant investment in the media sector in Sierra Leone, however, most of it is small-scale and limited to newspapers and community radio stations. The major investments are those that have been made by the AYV Empire, owned by Anthony Navo Jnr., and Star TV and Radio by Philip Neville, who also owns the Standard Times Newspaper. Other media houses and their owners include *The Exclusive* newspaper, owned by Sheikh Sesay, the *Satellite* newspaper owned by Babatunde Sesay, *Universal Radio* owned by Josiah Paris, Capital Radio, FM 104.9, owned by Adonis Abboud, Colin Mason and David Stanley and the *Awareness Times Newspaper*, owned by Dr. Sylvia Olayinka Blyden. Radio Democracy FM 98.1 is operated by a board comprising civil society organisations and depends largely on the support of donor institutions, as noted above.

There is no known international investment/ownership in the media sector in Sierra Leone, apart from initial investments made by Nigeria's Lington Igbohor, in the Concord Times in 1992. This challenge may have stemmed from a perception of state control/capture of the media, and of the market's limited ability to yield significant dividends. Thus, investments in the media sector are generally minimal while the market is characterised by unhealthy competition among the respective media houses to make profit. Consequently, there have been reports that media house owners use underhand strategies, including blackmail, to secure financial gains (BBC Media Action 2021a). This approach has equally played into the hands of political elites, who develop a patrimonial relationship with the owners of the media houses. The clientelistic nature of such a relationship is primarily of benefit to the political elites. These relationships have significantly tarnished the image of the media and have dented the public's confidence in the sector.

Despite the challenges examined above, private investment in the media has helped to expand access to information in local communities. Despite challenges with their management structures and operations, community radio stations have filled an information void in rural Sierra Leone – where, for a long time, audiences depended on content produced by “remote” media houses – by giving “a voice to the voiceless and marginalised groups” (BBC Media Action 2021b).

### **3.2. Factors influencing the media sector in Sierra Leone**

The relationship between political actors and private media enterprises has been largely clientelistic, patrimonial and tied to the ideologies of political parties. As observed by M'Bayo (2016: 16-17): “In post-conflict Sierra Leone, a polarised media community and environment appear to have emerged in the wake of the transitional political institutions and the ongoing process of building a new political order. This polarity is based on new and old alliances among media practitioners and the various publics and affiliations, overtly or covertly, with one party or another or the adoption of different political ideologies among media practitioners.”

Over the years, the perception of the nature of the relationship between political elites and media houses has undermined public confidence in the media. The sections below examine key factors that influence the media and its activities in Sierra Leone.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on reviews done for this study.

### 3.2.1. Media ownership

Prior to the 1990s, both regulatory and operational power were centred on the political executive and exercised through the Minister of Information and Broadcasting. The only electronic media in the country, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS), was state-run. The media in Sierra Leone operated in a hostile political environment and successive regimes saw the need for stringent media control to accomplish the goals of the state. Even today, media ownership has been a key predictive factor in media orientation and disposition towards news sources, the state, state operatives, other media owners, etc (M'bayo 2013).

In general, media outlets are either government- or privately-owned. Some newspapers are owned by political parties. The current ownership model of media outlets is both a consequence and a source of power. Tracing back the patronage and real ownership of media houses is a difficult task. As Jalloh notes, "Achieving ownership transparency will remain a major regulatory challenge and ownership may, therefore, be open to manipulations by partisan and corporate interests that mostly come against public interests in fragile democracies like Sierra Leone" (Jalloh 2015).

The commercial media houses are motivated primarily by profit. These institutions appear to be more focused on viewership, engagement numbers and the revenue generated through advertising, consequently, there is a high risk that they may resort to unethical means in order to maintain their profit margins. It has also been observed that, with this model of media ownership, there is less interest in the promotion of public interest stories since this is neither the reason for their existence, nor part of their sustainability strategy (BBC Media Action 2021a).

State-owned media has greatly evolved in its nature and its involvement within the media sector. Established as SLBS-Radio in 1934, the national broadcaster was recently merged with the UN radio service to form the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation. The SLBC, as a corporate body, is charged with "the promotion of fair competition based on internationally accepted principles for a public broadcaster, which include independent management, public service ethos, and representation of all viewpoints and sectors of society in a non-partisan and objective manner" (SLBC Act 2009). With the state no longer a key player in mass communications, party functionaries have resorted to creating non-state media outlets in the form of traditional newspapers and online portals. The media environment in the country is polarised along party lines, and pro- and anti-government media organisations.

A recent study noted that the SLBC faces immense challenges including "...the growing need for technological advancement in digital broadcasting" and the need for "modern digital equipment for broadcasting in order to catch up with other media outlets in the country and in the sub-region" (Spencer, n.d.).

Media houses that enjoy political support have been established with the goal of promoting the political ambitions of their patrons or fighting a particular personal cause, including reviving their owners' political fortunes. Here, their organisational practices are geared directly to the interests of their supporters (BBC Media Action 2021a).

With the rise of new media, traditional sources of revenue (such as newspaper sales) are in a state of rapid decline. A study noted that, on average, the largest newspapers sell between 1,500 and 2,000 copies per edition. Readers buy newspapers at SLL 2000 or US\$ 0.19, but vendors take SLL 700 (US\$ 0.06) from the cover price, leaving newspapers with only SLL 1,300 (US\$ 0.12) which is barely enough to cover printing costs. Hence, media houses have to rely heavily on the income derived from advertising. One recent study of the media commissioned by the MRCG found that "advertising is the main source of income for the majority of respondents (56.3%), followed by

sponsorship (31.2%), projects (25%) and other sources (18.8%)". The study noted that "43.7% of respondents say their institution made no profit last year, 18.7% say they made less than 5% profit, and 12.4% said they made between 5% and 15% profit" (Spencer, n.d.). Apart from the media owners themselves, the major advertisers are the Government of Sierra Leone, the betting company, Mercury International, mobile phone companies, UN agencies/diplomatic missions and NGOs/civil society.

### 3.2.2. Capacity and skills

The inability of the media to be critical, and strategically provide a credible and independent voice on key issues – especially those related to corruption, social injustice and political violence – is regularly blamed on a lack of adequate training, skills, knowledge and capacity within the media houses and among their employees.

This challenge stems from the lack of investment in training, and the poor quality of training provided by educational institutions. Recognising this gap, international actors including the United Nations, have teamed up with training providers while high-quality media training benefits from the substantial funding allocated by the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG). The goal is to create an enabling environment for media activity and to produce a new generation of media practitioners as agents of social change, democratisation, and development (M'bayo 2015). This is an opportunity not only to produce skilled journalists, but also to instil the moral values required for the functioning of an independent media sector.

Additionally, very few media houses have sufficient financial capacity to function adequately. This challenge is compounded by the fact that they struggle to attract advertising or other types of paid content. Subsequently, they explore other avenues for making a profit, which sometimes affects the quality of their outputs.

### 3.2.3. Legal reform and incentives

In recent years, there have been multiple reforms in areas such as decentralisation, donor coordination, and anti-corruption (Harris and Conteh 2020). For instance, the merger of SLBS with the UN radio came as a result of lobbying from international development agencies. There have been other instances of international pressure such as the enactment of the RAI law in 2013 which took place a few days before the United States Government's Board of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) was due to make a decision on Sierra Leone's eligibility for a UN Compact, for which the right to access information was a key requirement.

In addition, the incentives for each actor in the sector can be linked to their financial and political patronage. It is, hence, extremely difficult to detach issues of media autonomy and independence from the sources of finance. Coupled with this, trends in media consumption show that sensational reporting continues to attract major audiences and, consequently, there is little incentive to invest in explanatory and investigative journalism.

### 3.2.4. Targeting of and acts of violence against media actors

Acts of violence, or the fear of violence, have served to deter media houses from delivering impartial coverage and have provided power-brokers with a means of exerting control over the media. One of the earliest recorded instances of violence against journalists occurred during the 1980s after which several senior media executives were exiled from the country. Since 1992, 16 journalists have been killed in Sierra Leone by a range of perpetrators including state security forces, rebels and even civilians (Committee to Protect Journalists 1999; 2021).

While acts of violence against journalists have diminished, the threat still remains, as



evidenced during the 2018 elections when one media practitioner was killed. Members of the then ruling party were charged with murder and subsequently acquitted (Thomas 2021). In November 2019, a journalist was alleged to have been kidnapped on the orders of the Chief Minister after claiming that the Minister had received a US\$ 1.5 million bribe from one of the country's mining companies (Thomas 2019). These incidents suggest that threats of violence are still used to silence journalists who cross swords with political actors. At the same time, the authorities do little to protect journalists from violence and, instead, take violent action against them, when their interests are threatened.

#### 4. Potential for investment in the media sector in Sierra Leone

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As indicated in the introduction, Sierra Leone ranks 163 out of the 190 countries listed in the World Bank's Doing Business 2019 report. However, as stated in the report: "Much higher than its overall ranking were Sierra Leone's 2019 rankings in the categories of 'starting a business'(55), where it ranked well above Ghana (108), Cameroon (92) and Nigeria (120); and 'protecting minority investors' (89), where it was ranked on a par or above many developing country markets in sub-Saharan Africa as well as other emerging investment markets outside of the region, such as Vietnam (89) and the Philippines (132). Lower rankings included infrastructure-related criteria, such as 'getting electricity' (178) and 'registering property' (167) and 'dealing with construction permits' (182)" (Herbert Smith Freehills LLP 2022).

According to the report, there are few "specific restrictions, controls, fees or taxes on foreign ownership of companies in Sierra Leone. Foreign companies can own Sierra Leonean companies (including outright) subject to certain registration formalities being completed".<sup>6</sup>

There are no legal or administrative barriers to investment in the media sector for either international and national investors. Additionally, the media sector has vast potential that businesses can explore. This potential has been evidenced by experience of AYV Empire, which has modernised its business, introducing entertainment programmes that appeal to young people and women, and which has progressively spread its network across the country. Similarly, Capital Radio FM 104.9 attracts significant advertising and has a very large following among young people. Capital Radio's success can be ascribed to its popular song-lists as well as its core programming which is both educational and entertaining. These companies have apparently succeeded in understanding the needs of the Sierra Leonean market, and are responding to these needs. Consequently, they turn considerable profits and continue to grow.<sup>7</sup>

It can be concluded that, for any future investment in the media sector to succeed and make a difference, media outlets should:

- Have a modern and appealing approach to a wide range of stakeholders including young people and women;
- Build a reputation for being impartial and professional;
- Extend their activities across rural and urban settings;
- Have a strong commercial unit that can help attract both government and private interests;
- Invest in the training of staff and provide them with the equipment they need to carry out their activities;

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Based on previous interviews with staff of the station.

- Offer staff good salaries and attractive conditions of service;
- Conduct regular assessments on existing gaps in the market and ways of filling these gaps.

Currently, there is minimal competition among TV stations in Sierra Leone, and the quality of services provided is poor. Investments, especially in TV stations, will help to improve quality standards across the board. Currently, only SLBC, AYV and Star TV offer such services.

## 5. Conclusion

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The media sector in Sierra Leone has made significant progress since the end of the civil war in 2002. It currently comprises state, private-owned and community-based institutions, including an increasing number of new media platforms. Nevertheless, analysis of the political economy of the media sector reveals that there are some key areas of concern. Part of the narrative can be explained by the fact that the media sector is nested within the wider political landscape and, therefore, experiences increasing political interference as well as a shrinking space for independence and neutrality.

The media landscape comprises three major categories of actors – state-owned institutions, privately-owned media houses and community-owned outlets. Although media outlets are diverse in terms of their ownership, it is not possible to identify truly independent platforms. This issue stems from a lack of willingness and/or ability to invest in the financial and human resources necessary to achieve full independence.

Although the state had a monopoly over media in pre-war Sierra Leone, following pressure from development partners and other stakeholders, reforms have been initiated for better delegation of the regulatory and policy function across the government. This has led to state actors seeking to control the media, using political influence and other means. Media regulation is still a deeply contested and coveted space – the MIC and the IMC have increasingly started to betray signs of bowing to political influence. In addition, in a context where the formal media sector is largely underfunded and lacks the required capacity, a significant proportion of information is produced by NGOs that specialise in the study and analysis of conflict.

Other key factors influencing the playing field as well as the interactions of key actors in the media sector include: revenue, legal reform, political patronage, journalistic skills, violence and threats to media personnel.

## 6. Recommendations

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This section offers the following set of recommendations that could be beneficial to actors operating in Sierra Leone's media space.

- The upcoming Media Conference should be preceded by extensive consultations among relevant stakeholders to foster a common understanding on the state of the media, and a recognition of what could be done to sustainably address existing challenges. It is important that the conference delivers outcomes that reflect the current needs of the media sector.
- Media actors should seek to address the factors that continue to promote a patrimonial relationship between political and media actors. It is important that state actors are engaged by civil society, media actors and development partners to address the need to depoliticise the media and support the promotion of a free and credible press in Sierra Leone.

- iii. Media actors should be provided with training not only in capacity-related skills, but also in issues of integrity and ethical values. The lack of such training has resulted in ethical and professional shortcomings across the industry. The upcoming conference should be used as a platform to remind media professionals of the ethics that guide their work, and why these parameters should be respected.
- iv. To avoid state capture of the media, there is a need for development partners to work with the media sector to identify alternative means of financing media outlets, so that they can operate without expecting preferential treatment from a specific group. This will help to dismantle the clientelistic relationship that exists between politicians and media actors.
- v. Development partners should build the financial and institutional capacity of the IMC, thereby enabling the Commission to encourage and work with media outlets to prioritise accountability and transparency, particularly with regard to their ownership and financial sources, thereby addressing any linkages that might lead to media bias.
- vi. The government should encourage international investment in the media sector with the aim of expanding services across the country and, at the same time, contributing to the development of a sector that can respond to the wishes and aspirations of the public. Tax incentives and the provision of an environment conducive to investment could go a long way towards improving media viability.

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