



Sierra Leone Association
of Journalists (SLAJ)



THE MEDIA WE WANT



SLAJ Media Manifesto 2023

**A MANIFESTO FOR
AN EMPOWERED AND
INCLUSIVE MEDIA IN
SIERRA LEONE**



June 2023



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Message From The SLAJ President



This manifesto is to consolidate the significant gains we have made in the last five years, and represents our collective vision and aspiration as journalists for the media we want in the next years.

I acknowledge the contributions of our general membership and heads of affiliate and sub-bodies.

I also recognise the technical support from our various partners in enriching this manifesto: the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), Faculty of Communication, Media and Information Studies, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, Bournemouth University (BU) UK, BBC Media Action Sierra Leone, the Independent Media Commission (IMC), and the Right to Access Information Commission (RAIC); and the consultant, Dr. Francis Sowa.

Finally, a big thank you to the European Union for funding the development of this manifesto through International IDEA.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AS Nasralla'.

Ahmed Sahid Nasralla
PRESIDENT



1. Introduction

Since the end of the 11-year civil war in 2002, the media in Sierra Leone have fulfilled a key democratic function, keeping the public informed, providing a feedback mechanism to the government, and holding those in power accountable. In preparation for the upcoming fifth democratic elections, we have developed this manifesto as a roadmap for an envisioned future media.

Based on a national survey of journalists and several consultations with media owners, journalism associations, and other stakeholders, this manifesto presents eight key priorities:

- i) Media Freedom;
- ii) Safety and Security of Journalists;
- iii) Access to Information;
- iv) Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment;
- v) Media Professionalism and Capacity Building;
- vi) Media Sustainability and Viability;
- vii) Welfare of Journalists; and
- viii) Media Literacy.



2. Context

After years of advocacy and dialogue, the following gains were recorded in the media in recent years:

- **The Government of Sierra Leone in 2020 repealed the 55-year-old criminal and seditious libel law in Part 5 of the Public Order Act, 1965 that hindered media freedom. That was a milestone in the media, as many journalists were jailed under that law and the profession was criminalised. Sierra Leone subsequently made significant progress in press freedom rankings in the world.**
- **In 2020, a bill entitled ‘The Independent Media Commission (IMC) Act, 2020 (Act No. 5 of 2020)’ was passed into law. It repealed and replaced the ‘The Independent Media Commission (IMC) Act, 2000 (Act No. 12 of 2000) as amended. The Act strengthened the Commission’s regulatory powers and provisions to address the perennial problem of conditions of service of journalists.**
- **The National Communications Authority Bill, 2022 was enacted. It repealed and replaced the National Telecommunications Commission Act of 2006 (as amended). The Act contains provisions on the allocation of frequency spectrum to radio and television stations.**
- **In 2023, the Right to Access Information Regulations, 2022; the Independent Media Commission (Print and Electronic Media) Regulations, 2022 and the Independent Media Commission Elections (Coverage and Reporting) Regulations 2022 were passed into law. The Regulations are to ensure right to access information, and outline various codes guiding the coverage and reportage by media institutions.**



- **The Government of Sierra Leone has been giving annual subvention to the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) from 2018 to date.**
- **In 2022, the government, media stakeholders and partners hosted the first Media Viability and Investment Conference in April 2022. The conference was to promote and call for a viable media ecosystem that works in the public interest with the essential tools to advance democracy, prosperity and stability. At the end of the conference, seven key recommendations were made. They are:**
 - **The Government of Sierra Leone should continue to show the political will necessary to drive media market reforms.**
 - **The existing legal and regulatory framework for the media needs to be reviewed.**
 - **The media should commit to re-engineering the industry in order to boost the potential for attracting private-sector investment and public subsidies.**
 - **The Government should take affirmative action to promote community media and the public service broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC).**
 - **A national policy on advertising should be introduced.**
 - **Government and development partners should commit to a national fund for public interest media.**
 - **Stakeholders should seek to address the existing gender imbalance in the media industry.**

Notwithstanding the progress made in some areas, there is need for more work to be done to consolidate the gains and make improvements in other areas.



3. The Media We Want

Although there have been developments in the media ecosystem in Sierra Leone, a lot has to be done to ensure a free, independent, vibrant and viable media. Based on the consultations and analysis from the survey, eight priorities emerged.

i. PROMOTE AND PROTECT MEDIA FREEDOM

Sierra Leone has made significant strides in promoting media freedom. The historic repeal of the criminal libel law led the country to make remarkable progress (46 out of 180) in the global media freedom index for 2022. However, in 2023, the global media freedom index shows that the country's media freedom declined (74 out of 180). There are still pieces of legislation that should be reviewed or harmonised to continue to promote and protect media freedom. SLAJ and MRCG will continue to work with Government and partners on media reforms and capacity building programmes for journalists in the country.

We therefore want the following:

- **The Government should guarantee and ensure media freedom for all practitioners.**



- **The Government should continue to implement and review constitutional provisions as well as other existing legal and regulatory frameworks on media freedom that aid media practitioners in their work.**
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- **The Government should continue to implement and review constitutional provisions as well as other existing legal and regulatory frameworks on media freedom that aid media practitioners in their work.**
- **The Ministry of Information and Communications, SLAJ and MRCG should work with partners, including the Sierra Leone Bar Association (SLBA), to review the civil libel law provisions in the Defamation Ordinance, 1961 (Act No. 32 of 1961) to ensure that they are consistent with international standards and best practices.**
- **The National Communications Authority (NatCA) and the IMC should harmonise the law on spectrum allocation and management.**
- **Government should implement the National Frequency Allocation Plan (NFAP) in consultation with SLAJ, the Independent Radio Network (IRN), the MRCG, and other stakeholders, to ensure transparency and accountability in spectrum allocation.**



- **Government must consider the SLAJ ‘Chapter 12 Campaign’ which advocates a separate chapter in the Constitution of Sierra Leone on media, information and communication issues.**
- **The Government should formulate and implement legal framework to ensure data protection and privacy in the country.**

ii. ENSURE SAFETY AND SECURITY OF JOURNALISTS

SLAJ and the Security Sector signed a Memorandum of Understanding in November 2021, which set forth the understanding and commitment of the two parties to the safety and security of journalists and maintenance of law and order in the country. Safety of journalists is the ability for journalists and media professionals to receive, produce and share information without facing physical or moral threats. In Sierra Leone, just like other parts of Africa, journalists are often soft targets for security services, political actors and thugs. Journalists are victims of attack, intimidation, physical or verbal abuse.

From the MRCG’s monitoring data, since 2018 to 2022, 63 cases were monitored in which journalists were arrested, attacked, beaten or intimidated. Apart from these, media houses lack safety policies and equipment to help protect their reporters in the newsroom as well as in the field. SLAJ and Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL) will work with other stakeholders and partners to develop and implement measures for safety and protection of female journalists against gender-based violence, harassment and intimidation.



We therefore want the following:

- **The Government, Security Sector Institutions, traditional and community leaders, political parties and members of society should ensure the safety and security of journalists, especially in their line of duty.**
- **The IMC should continue to work with SLAJ, MRCG and other institutions to ensure the safety and security of journalists.**
- **The Judiciary of Sierra Leone should take appropriate action against people found guilty of attacking, harassing and intimidating journalists.**
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- **The National Coordination Committee on the Safety and Security of Journalists and Office of National Security (ONS) should implement the MoU aimed at ensuring the safety and security of journalists.**
- **Government and its partners should ensure online safety for media practitioners.**
- **Media institutions should adapt and implement the safety and security policy developed by SLAJ and MRCG.**



iii. PROMOTE MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY AND VIABILITY

Sustainability is the media's capacity to operate effectively under sound political, legal, and economic conditions. Sustainability pressures can also impact on both press freedom and standards and diminish the vital 'watchdog' function of the press in a democratic society.

A lot needs to be done to make the media viable. Various studies that were conducted ahead of the Media Viability and Investment Conference in April 2022 show that majority of the media institutions are not sustainable and viable. Some of the challenges highlighted were lack of sustainable electricity (renewable energy, solar power, etc.), analogue and outdated media equipment, transmitters, mixers, printing presses and printing materials, etc. and improper structured media governance, management and policies in line with international best practices and lack of private sector investment.

In essence, a re-engineering of the industry is imperative, including ensuring structured media governance, management and policies in line with international best practices in order to boost the potential for attracting private-sector investment and public subsidies.



We therefore want the following:

- **The Government of Sierra Leone should implement tax reduction/duty waiver on media equipment for community and small media businesses.**
- **Government and development partners should commit to a national fund for independent and public interest media, in addition to the subvention allocated to SLAJ. This should be legislated to avoid political interference.**
- **The Government should take affirmative action to promote community media and the public service broadcaster, the Sierra Leona Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC).**
- **The Ministry of Information and Communications and IMC should work with SLAJ to develop and implement a national policy on advertising.**
- **Government should ensure that media houses, radio, television, newspapers, etc. operating in the area directly benefit from community development funds and royalty from mining companies, institutions or organisations.**
- **The Government should provide adequate resources to the IMC to implement its mandate.**



iv. ADVANCE GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Results of various studies have shown that although the number of women working in the media has been increasing globally but the top positions (producers, executives, chief editors and publishers) are still very male dominated (White, 2009). This disparity is particularly evident in Africa, where cultural impediments to women fulfilling the role of journalist remain (e.g. travelling away from home, evening work and covering issues such as politics and sports which are considered to fall within the masculine domain) (Myers, 2009).

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) reports that throughout the world, female journalists are more likely to be assigned 'soft' subjects such as family, lifestyle, fashion and arts.

The 'hard' news, politics and the economy, is much less likely to be written or covered by women. In Sierra Leone few female journalists occupy managerial positions, editors and even media owners. A recommendation in the National Action Plan calls for gender equality and women's empowerment in all sectors.

We therefore demand the following:

- **Government and development partners, through the Ministry of Gender, should work with SLAJ and women’s media associations, media organisations and institutions to develop a gender policy that protects and promotes female journalists in accordance with the Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) Act.**
- **Government should work with SLAJ to provide free tertiary education for female journalists.**
- **Government should guarantee the safety of female journalists in the media space as they execute their journalistic duties, and also ensure the full implementation of the GEWE.**
- **Government and media owners should make the media attractive for women by supporting them to reach middle and senior management positions and provide improved conditions of service, including clear policies in relation to annual leave, maternity leave, protection from harassment and abuse, particularly for female journalists.**



v. PROMOTE MEDIA PROFESSIONALISM AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Ensuring professionalism in the media has always been and still remains a challenge for the media industry in Sierra Leone. Some journalists/reporters do not have the requisite knowledge and skills to investigate, report and publish news stories especially on issues of national importance. For instance, a national survey undertaken by SLAJ and Bournemouth University UK to ascertain the impact of Covid-19 on Sierra Leone journalists shows that a significant number of journalists in Sierra Leone have low or extremely low levels of confidence in their ability to carry out their professional duties during natural disasters.

They also suffer from lack of training. Despite Sierra Leone's known vulnerability to disasters, including health crises, most respondents were ill-prepared and ill-trained to face the pandemic. Equally, media organisations in the country lack the capacity to leverage the digital transformation and evolve with advancement in media technology.

Media professionalism is the conduct of media coverage and activities according to high standards of ethics, accountability, legality and credibility, while exercising rights such as freedom of expression and information. Journalists are expected to uphold the standards of responsible and professional journalistic practice; and SLAJ should be bold to call out journalists who are act notoriously unprofessional.



We therefore demand the following:

- **The Government through the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education, Universities and media outlets should ensure capacity building (training workshops/seminars/special scholarship schemes for journalists - both local and international) for journalists, especially on professional, technical and business-related components.**
- **Higher Educational institutions such as the University of Sierra Leone should work with SLAJ and MRCG to ensure the full implementation of the curriculum on media education from certificate to degree level, and offer training for journalists on ICT and multimedia.**
- **Journalism and media institutions should adopt and utilise new technologies and digital equipment in building the capacity of media practitioners for better and quality reporting as well as diversity and inclusion.**
- **The Government through the National Disaster Management Agency - Sierra Leone (NDMA-SL) should work with SLAJ to build capacity for Disaster Risk Reduction. SLAJ representatives must be integrated as key stakeholders in national disaster reduction and response plans.**
- **The Government and partners should promote digital literacy for journalists and create an enabling environment for media organisations to leverage the digital transformation.**



- **The Government should reduce taxes on ICT equipment for independent and public interest media (community media); create opportunities for capacity building for digital transformation.**
- **The Government should provide education for journalists with special needs.**
- **Development partners should support SLAJ to provide specialised training for journalists.**

vi. PROMOTE AND ENSURE ACCESS TO INFORMATION

The right to access government-held information is a critical component of democracy and a foundational pillar of open government. Access to information inherently improves government transparency which can enable the public to participate meaningfully in official decision-making and to hold government actors accountable for their decisions.

In 2013, Sierra Leone Parliament passed the Right to Access Information Law which seeks to protect citizens' right to access information and hold government accountable. In as much as the Right to Access Information Commission strives to ensure access to information, media practitioners still believe that there is still much to be done in that direction.

We therefore want the following:

- **The Government should support the Right to Access Information Commission to fully implement the provisions in the Act and ensure that Ministries, Department and Agencies provide information to journalists in accordance with the provision of the law.**



- **The Right to Access Information Commission should improve on public education for members of the public to understand their right to access public information.**
- **The Right to Access Information Commission should ensure the full implementation of the Proactive Disclosure provisions in its law.**
- **The Right to Access Information Commission and SLAJ should collaborate to provide periodic training on access to information for journalists.**

vii. SAFEGUARD/WELFARE OF JOURNALISTS

In Sierra Leone, there are a good number of journalists that are paid below the minimum wage and those that are not even paid, even when the law demands that journalists are paid at least the minimum wage. A national survey undertaken by SLAJ and BU to ascertain the impact of Covid-19 on Sierra Leone journalists shows that Covid-19 affected the mental wellbeing of a majority of journalists in Sierra Leone with 86% of journalists impacted financially.

The pandemic had a significant impact on the lives of journalists and affected them psychologically.



We therefore want the following:

- **The IMC should fully implement the provisions in its laws relating to minimum wage and social security contributions for journalists and take appropriate actions against defaulting media institutions.**
- **The IMC and SLAJ should support the Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU) to work with the Ministry of Labour and the Sierra Leone Labour Congress to achieve guarantees on improving the working conditions of journalists.**
- **The Government, through the Ministry of Health, should work with SLAJ to ensure the mental and physical wellbeing of journalists and address occupational risks in these areas, especially during and after emergencies.**

viii. PROMOTE MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy is the ability to think critically about what people are seeing, reading, and hearing. It helps to analyse information from a variety of viewpoints, thereby creating various content that meet the needs of the people. Media literacy will help to curb the issues around fake news and mis/disinformation in communities, and create meaningful content that will educate, entertain and promote peaceful coexistence.



We therefore want the following:

- **The Government, through the Ministry of Information and Communication, and partners should work with SLAJ to promote and sustain media literacy campaigns across the country.**
- **Journalism and media schools should incorporate media literacy in all training courses.**



4. Conclusion

This manifesto has set out the demands and key priorities for the development of the media ecosystem in Sierra Leone. It has outlined the key recommendations from the media stakeholders.

Other needs of the media such as an independent headquarters for SLAJ and institutional capacity to enable the Association efficiently and effectively carry out its advocacy function in promoting and protecting free speech and free media are left out of these manifesto (even though journalists mentioned them in the consultations). SLAJ can engage with the Government and development partners to address these issues.

Nevertheless, it is expected that the Government of Sierra Leone would provide the enabling environment for the media to thrive in the country, and donors and media development organisations will support the growth of the industry which is crucial to promoting democracy, national cohesion, peace and security.



How Was This Manifesto Produced?

This manifesto is informed by multiple studies on Sierra Leone's media ecosystem and the recommendations of the first Media Viability and Investment Conference.

It is based on a national survey of journalists, and several consultations with media stakeholders and owners and affiliates bodies of SLAJ. 278 respondents from all the regions took part in the survey. 56.% of the respondents are males and 44% are females. Reporters (35%), station managers (24.4%) and editors (23.5%) accounted for the highest categories of respondents based on their designations.

There was a validation session in which the document was reviewed and adopted by media stakeholders across the country.





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