



RADIO DEBATE IN SIERRA LEONE: COMMUNICATING ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Project start and end dates: 1st of January 2008 – 31st of December 2009

PIWA Program : Governance program

Partners organizations:

The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ)

The National Forum of Human Rights

An umbrella organization made up of 41 Human Rights organisations

Objectives of the project: The aim was to strengthen the communication capacity of Human Rights organisations, more specifically to give civil society and Human Rights organizations better access to media, to build partnership between civil society and human rights organisations, to develop information and sensitisation campaigns on Human Rights issues and to sensitise the media to Human Rights issues.

Topic of the debate(s): Human Rights

Problems to be solved: During civil war the people of Sierra Leone suffered some of the worst forms of human rights abuse in their recent history. The trauma caused by the atrocities during the conflict affects all categories of the population, but women were one of the most vulnerable groups. Since the war, people, and especially youth, do not have basic notions of human rights.

Opportunities offered by the debates to solve these problems: Human rights organisations play a crucial role in peace building and democratisation in Sierra Leone where Human Rights have been severely undermined in the past years. These organisations are key actors in the good governance process. If these organisations perform their information, communication, advocacy and educational initiatives efficiently, they will be able to create debate on human rights issues and play their role as engines for social change. With increased visibility and communications capacity, the HROs will be better equipped to disseminate information on human rights violations, education and advancement for the ultimate benefit of all Sierra Leoneans.

Media also play a crucial role in raising public awareness of HR issues. If their capacities to work on human rights issues are strengthened, they can generate a

multiplier effect and have strong influence on public opinion and make meaningful impact on the decision makers.

Finally, advocacy initiatives undertaken jointly by NGOs and the media will be mutually reinforcing for the two groups.

If debate is created on human rights issues, the public opinion will be sensitised of the common abuses and the need for a behaviour change. Decision makers will be aware of the need to strengthen the existing juridical framework to protect human rights.

Plus value brought by PIWA: Being in a situation of post-conflict and reconstruction, the capacity of civil society organisations and media was very low. Seen to the numerous abuses during the war and afterwards, a real need to discuss human rights issues existed. Still, there were few tools to address the challenges of human rights. Many civil rights organizations lacked the ability to communicate, both in their role of watch-dogs and in the amplifying of local actors' experiences. Media were not enough aware of human rights issues and did neither have the information, nor the capacity to address them. Panos could intervene on communication and the creation of debate.

Baseline figures:

Media outputs:

- Five radio stations and four newspapers
- A content analysis of the coverage of human rights issues in 7 Sierra Leonian newspapers (of which 2 are part of this project) during the period of January to July 2008 was included in the study of communication activities of human rights organisations. It shows that human rights issues are covered rarely and ad hoc, and generally from the corruption/abuse of office/authority perspective. During election years, political rights are very much talked about. Articles on women's rights are emerging, but still very few.

Description of activities carried by PIWA:

1. Study on communication activities of Human Right organisations (1 study produced): The study, created as an advocacy and capability building tool, was the first of its kind. The methodology of RLC as a tool for creating debate had never been used in Sierra Leone before
2. National seminar on "Communication and Human Rights organisations" (1 seminar organised, 55 participants)
3. Training on a) strengthening the communication and advocacy capacity of human rights organisations b) Setting up Radio Listeners' Clubs (6 radio listening clubs set up) c) Promoting Human Rights with Radio (3 trainings organised, 58 persons trained)
4. Newspaper campaign on human rights
5. National Forum web site

6. Radio Listening Club programmes
7. Film on human rights

Relations between NGOs and media were smacked of misunderstandings and very few alliances exist. It was then relatively new to have these groups collaborate. During the national seminar, focus areas were identified. The collective identification of specific themes for the project engendered a sense of collective ownership and support among the participating organizations. That helped to forge a common understanding and synergy between the two parties in pursuing issues of human rights. In other words, it enhanced the spirit of networking between the HROs and the media on issues of human rights.

The website provides a new platform for human rights organisations, and for media to find information on their actions. Up to the creation of the website, none of its kind existed. (However, a lot of work still remains to fill the website with content. People have been trained to do so, but the capacities are still weak).

Media outputs:

- 26 articles (7 stories) and 21 radio broadcasts produced by 4 newspapers and 5 radios
- 58 persons trained, 55 participants in national seminar.

The newspaper articles are stories which basic aim was to engage the reader through examples that were psychologically close to him or her; a kind of Oral Testimony. Generally it is one person's history that is described. The engaging style of the write ups ensures attraction for the general population. The articles are aimed at creating debate in the sense that they contain stories that people may talk about and comment. Therefore, it is not interesting to count the number of voices or points of view. Generally they relate the lives of marginalised persons such as young women.

The film mainly speaks of the experiences of a young woman.

Outcomes: The training on RLC created avenues for citizens to be active participants of community discourses by influencing the identification of community discourses, structuring the issues, and creating avenues for feedbacks. The RLC all debated human rights issues of the areas defined during the national seminar.

All those who participated recognized its importance in building their capacities, strengthening the networking relations between individual HROs on one hand, and the HROs and the media on the other. They revealed that through this programme, they have acquired new skills, earned extra confidence and developed linkages with new partners to be able to publicize cases of human rights violations and abuses.

Participating HROs are better equipped and organized now to plan, advocate and generally communicate human rights issues in their respective domains. They have been able to reach a wider population based on their new capacities in communications. For example, the New Harvest Development Organization reported being able to reach over 100,000 people in the last one year; Community Action for

Human Security said it has been able to reach over 4000 people through advocacy during the year, while the National Forum for Human Rights estimated that it might have reached over 2 million people during the year.

Outcomes regarding sustainable dialogue/debate and incidence on policy change:

RLC members say that they are willing to sustain the clubs because of the benefits that they derive working together.

Three Radio houses visited reported that they have instituted Human Right Desks in their Newsrooms with specific reporters assigned to such desks. It ensures consistency, regularity and sustained organizational interest in the reporting of human rights issues by the individual media houses. It would also facilitate specialization among the reporters so that they can report the subject authoritatively. In addition, some of the radio stations have introduced specific programmes that cater for HR issues.

The networking created through the activities enable actors to stay in contact, collaborate and keep updated in order to continue sensitizing and creating debate around human rights issues.

How has the debate contributed to solving the problem it was intended to address? Media have tools to address human rights issues and HRO to communicate their advocacy and make marginalised people heard. Through the activities, human rights issues are being talked about in some of the most important communication channels and marginalised voices are being heard in this debate. Through the creation of special human rights desks at some of the radio stations, it can be assumed that these issues will continuously have more space in the radio stations' agenda. That will create debate and awareness on human rights among their audiences.