

## **Challenges Faced by Local Media in Covering Corruption During Emergencies: Liberia as a Case Study**

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### **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the role of the media generally and the challenges the media in Liberia confronted in its attempts to cover corruption during the post-conflict transition period, from 2003 to 2005. Although the paper uses Liberia as a case study, many of the manifestations in Liberia will also be applicable in varying degrees in other emergency situations in Africa.

### **Background**

Following a military coup in 1980, Liberia was plagued for two and a half decades by political, economic and social crises, with intermittent periods of civil unrest and violent conflicts. These were characterized by widespread killings, including among the civilian populations, forced disappearances, torture, rape and sexual assault against women and children, arbitrary detention, forced recruitment and widespread use of child soldiers, etc.

After a peace agreement signed in 1995, former warlord and rebel leader, Charles Taylor, led the National Patriotic Party (NPP) to win the presidential and parliamentary elections held in July 1997. This resulted in a three-year period of relative calm. But hostilities resumed in 2001, culminating in a violent uprising throughout the country, particularly between June and August 2003. The fighting between rebel forces and government troops during this period in which thousand of people died, is frequently described by Liberians as the three “World Wars”, with World War I taking place around June 4, World War II around June 25, and World War III around July 18, 2003.

An internationally supervised peace process was brokered leading to a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in Accra, Ghana, between the government and rebel groups on August 18, 2003, which resulted in a power-sharing arrangement under a transitional government headed by Mr. Gyude Bryant as Chairman.

In September 2003, the UN Security Council established the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) by Resolution 1509 with a mandate to deploy 15,000 troops and 1,100 international civilian police officers. Mr. Jacques Paul Klein was named Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and Coordinator of the UN Mission in Liberia (SRSG).

In the face of the failure by relief agencies and the transitional government to restore basic social services in Liberia such safe water, electricity and a healthcare system, there have been

widespread charges of corruption in the management of donor assistance to Liberia, leading in early 2005 to a decision by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) send a team of auditors to Liberia to conduct a comprehensive and systematic audit of the transitional government.

However, despite such widespread charges and recrimination among government officials and some international actors of massive corruption, the local media was not able to effectively cover the issue of corruption in the management of donor assistance to Liberia for a number of reasons. These include:

### **Lack of Access to Information about Activities of Humanitarian Agencies**

The opaque nature of many humanitarian assistance programmes makes it extremely difficult for local media to access information about their operations and unveil corrupt practices, where they might exist. Although many relief agencies hold regular and frequent press briefings, these usually focus on disseminating humanitarian information or public diplomacy. There is usually no mechanism for the local media to access other critical information while there is little tolerance within such agencies for probing questions.

In Liberia, for instance, in February 2004, the United Nations, the World Bank and the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) published a joint “Joint Needs Assessment”, which was designed to focus on the highest priority requirements during Liberia’s transition “from relief to recovery”, including the conduct of local and national elections in October 2005.

The Needs Assessment covered 13 priority sectors grouped into nine clusters, namely Security; Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Rehabilitation (DDRR); Reintegration of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Returnees and Refugees; Governance and Rule of Law; Elections; Basic Services, including Health and Nutrition, Education, and Community Water and Sanitation; Productive Capacity and Livelihoods; Infrastructure, including Power, Transport, Communications, and Urban Water and Sanitation; and Economic Policy and Development Strategy. Priority Attention was also given to seven cross-cutting themes, namely Gender, HIV/AIDS, Environment, Human Rights, Shelter, Forestry and Media.

The Needs Assessment estimated that the sum of US\$243 million would be required in 2004 for the provision of priority needs with a further \$244.7 million required during 2005, making a total of \$487.7 million for the two years. The allocation of these sums to the different sectors and for specific activities was detailed in a “Results-Focused Transition Framework” (RFTF).

At the Liberia Reconstruction Conference held in New York in February 2004, donors pledged a total of US\$520 million in aid for reconstruction of Liberia.

However, throughout the relevant period, no allocation was made to some of the sectors and the proposed activities were not implemented. The explanation for this is that no contributions were received from donors for these sectors or activities. In addition to this, it was claimed that the contributions received from donors were far less than the pledges made.

But local media did not have access to information about what contributions were made by donors towards the pledges they made at the New York conference in February 2004 or howsoever. It was therefore impossible for the local media to monitor receipts and track expenditure or effectively cover any corruption in the process.

Even the RFTF Implementation and Monitoring Committee (RIMCO), which was the body charged with monitoring the implementation of the RFTF did not have adequate information to give a true and complete picture of the situation. In a report it issued in September 2004 on the progress of the implementation, RIMCO said: “The report is based mainly on information captured through RFTF Activity Tracking Sheets (RATS), devised to report on progress against the RFTF benchmarks. It does not attempt to report on the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) or UN Security Council Resolution 1509, which have their own processes and institutional frameworks. The second source of information is the Informal Tracking Sheet, which tracks pledges and contributions to the RFTF from all sources. Information gathered from the tracking sheet is meant to follow on sources and analyse the status of pledges for the RFTF. ***It is important to stress that these figures are informal and do not represent actual disbursement or delivery figures. Furthermore, the sheet does not indicate the contributions for ongoing programmes of partners, including most UN Agencies and INGOs<sup>1</sup>.***” (Emphasis supplied).

The report goes on to say that: “Authoritative and precise information on the quantum of actual contributions, disbursements and delivery by sources, by timing and by RFTF clusters must be made available. This information is essential to inform decision making by all partners working within RFTF structures. The scope of activities covered through the Informal Tracking Sheet must also be increased. To succeed, efforts will need to have the support and cooperation of donors. This is an important part of the two-way mutual accountability under the RFTF.”

In the absence of precise information within the system itself, it would be extremely ambitious to expect the media to monitor and report on the process accurately. Local media practitioners frequently expressed their frustration at not being able to access information about contributions made by donors, when they were made and for what purposes. This obviously resulted in their inability to effectively monitor the process and track any corrupt practice.

In response to this gap, at a consultative meeting held in Monrovia in December 2005 to discuss, among others, a draft Freedom of Information Act for Liberia, media practitioners present insisted that in addition to applying the proposed act to Liberian government institutions and agencies, it should also be applicable to international organizations and institutions operating in Liberia.

Although such a proposal is potentially problematic and unrealistic, it is imperative that there should be a mechanism through which journalists can access information about what pledges

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<sup>1</sup> See “Results-Focused Transition Framework (RFTF) Progress Review Report”, September 2004, issued by the RIMCO (RFTF Implementation and Monitoring Committee) Support Office in the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs in Monrovia, Liberia.

have been redeemed, how much has been received, to what aspects of the reconstruction programme they were being applied, what has actually been spent and by what institution or agency.

One area that generated considerable interest in the post-conflict situation was the UN-supervised Demilitarization, Demobilization, Reintegration and Rehabilitation (DDRR) programme. One year after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Mr. Jacques Klein, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General and Coordinator of the UN Operations in Liberia, claimed that over 66,000 combatants had been disarmed under an arrangement in which US\$300 was paid to every former combatant that was disarmed. Curiously though, even by its own account, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) said it had collected and destroyed only 20,000 weapons. At the end of the DDRR programme, UNMIL claimed to have demobilized 103,000 former combatants<sup>2</sup>, almost twice the 53,000 combatants which was projected in February 2004 as the target number to be demobilized throughout the exercise.

These claims have been viewed with suspicion and skepticism as it is difficult to understand the ratio of one weapon to more than three combatants, especially given that at the inception of programme, it had been projected that an average of three weapons would be recovered from each combatant.

With a substantial portion of donor assistance reported to have gone into the DDRR process, there were grumblings about the disappointing returns.

But the local media had no access to the information with which to interrogate this situation. The tendency among many assistance agencies and international organizations is that the media should play a public relations role for them by acknowledging and publicizing the “good work” they are doing. There is therefore a lack of tolerance for inquisitive, probing local journalists and any attempt to question their work provokes anger.

An instance of resentment of any implied criticism of the operations of international agencies is evident in a report by an IRIN correspondent who interviewed Mr. Klein about the corruption in the DDRR in July 2004. IRIN reports that when asked about the issue of anomalies in the DDRR process, “Klein flatly rejected the notion that non-combatants were abusing the DDRR system in order to grab the cash handout. ‘That’s not true, that’s absolutely false!’ *he said angrily*<sup>3</sup>.” (Emphasis supplied).

Transparent systems and processes as well as a regime of access to information are essential for the elimination of corrupt practices in any institution or process. Development organizations and relief agencies much therefore institute effective mechanisms to ensure this while also demonstrating a willingness to subject themselves to scrutiny and to account to the public their serve for their actions, where this is required or necessary.

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<sup>2</sup> Press Briefing by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) January 19, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See “LIBERIA: Where are the weapons? Is disarmament really working?”, IRIN report of July 28, 2004.

## Media Dependency and Conflict of Interests

In an environment of low economic activity in the post-conflict period in Liberia, UN agencies and relief organizations were the main sources of advertising revenue for newspapers and other media organizations. Some of these agencies and organizations have been known to withhold advertising from newspapers which had written offensive articles about them and to blacklist them from their other activities. One example of this is UNMIL which blacklisted the “Vanguard” newspaper and stopped giving it advertising as a result of an article published by the newspaper.

In the fierce competition for the little advertising available to the media in Liberia, many media organizations were very careful not to get into the black books of international organizations which were seen as the main source of advertising revenue for the media.

Besides the issue of advertising revenue, in many cases, poorly resourced journalists and media organizations depend on relief agencies for transportation, accommodation and other logistical assistance, especially when they operate in counties outside the capital city, Monrovia. Many relief agencies have four wheel drive vehicles to navigate difficult terrains to many places outside Monrovia or can afford to hire helicopters for their operations in such places which would reduce a two-day journey to an hour or so. No media organization in Liberia could on its own afford either of these modes of transportation.

In addition, relief agencies end up showing journalists around and pointing out the “real issues” to them. Since the journalists are heavily dependent on aid workers for logistical and other support as well as information sources, they frequently pass on information obtained from relief agencies uncritically.

This practice appears to be quite widespread. According to Mark Turner, who has served as Financial Times correspondent in Nairobi, Kenya, “the aid agencies offer ideas, research and experts on the ground, logistical help and so forth. In return, aid agencies want us to highlight their cause so they get funding<sup>4</sup>.”

Obviously, this relationship undermines independent reporting in many cases with the result that the activities and operations of development organizations and relief agencies are not given the same level of scrutiny which is given to governments or corporations.

Anthony Morland who covered the volcano eruptions in Goma for the AFP, offers additional argument why this is so, observing that “traditionally, aid agencies, especially the UN, are good sources, that is, their information is frequently passed on without checking because if the information proves to be false, the journalist is covered<sup>5</sup>.”

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<sup>4</sup> E-mail interview with Mark Turner on Tuesday, March 19, 2002. (mturner@africaonline.co.ke)

<sup>5</sup> E-mail interview with Anthony Morland of AFP on Monday, March 18, 2002. (anthonymorland@usa.net).

But while this may be so, the media loses its watchdog role if it uncritically accepts whatever information comes from aid agencies because they have a certain profile or image. It also exposes itself to manipulative tendencies.

Turner captured this aptly when he said: “If the UN aid agency is declaring a disaster, it goes out on TV, then radio, and sometimes as a newspaper journalist, you will come under pressure to write it even if you don’t believe it, and take it from me, people make things up and exaggerate numbers all the time. You can even get weird bidding processes with different groups giving ever higher estimates as to numbers of dead etc., all of which make the story more sellable<sup>6</sup>.”

An even more worrisome example of the corrupt manipulation of the media by relief organizations which capitalize on the uncritical coverage of aid agencies by the media, is provided by Dr Paul Moorcraft, a former war correspondent and editor of Defence Review, when he observed that “some aid agencies use that, as in the case with the redemption of slaves in Sudan; a Norwegian aid agency staged a huge set-up. They rounded up some Sudanese children in a field, recruited some Arab looking men to pose as slave traders, documented the whole thing as a slave trade in order to get money for the redemption of these supposed slaves, and half an hour later, those ‘slaves’ were back at work in the fields as free people<sup>7</sup>.”

While it is true that there is frequently a convergence of interests between the media and relief agencies, it is quite obvious that the degree of collaboration which exists between journalists and aid workers would undoubtedly be considered unacceptable if it involved commercial organizations or national governments, rather than relief agencies.

The media must retain a healthy level of skepticism in their relationship with relief agencies for them to be effective in their watchdog role.

### **Corruption in the Media**

The media in Liberia was devastated by years of conflict, which severely incapacitated it in many ways. The conflict weakened the national economy generally, resulting in a very poor market for media products. This coupled with little resources coming from advertising meant that media organizations are hardly able to sustain their operations. The income of journalists and editors, which is somewhere between US\$20 and US\$30 per month, puts them effectively below the poverty line. This is in addition to the fact that many newspapers are not even able to pay these salaries regularly.

Thus, with many journalists working without pay or for very poor pay, there are widespread reports of corruption in the media. Scores of journalists depend on monies they get from various individuals and interests groups to survive. These monies are usually given to them either to

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<sup>6</sup> E-mail interview with Mark Turner on Tuesday, March 19, 2002. (mturner@africaonline.co.ke)

<sup>7</sup> Telephone interview with Dr Paul Moorcraft, former war correspondent, author, former instructor at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst and at the UK Joint Staff College, and editor of Defence Review, on Monday, March 25, 2002. (Telephone: +44 20 7717 1017).

publish flattering stories about their benefactors, which may not reflect the reality, or to suppress negative stories about the giver, including story on corruption.

The result is that even if journalists and media institutions are able to uncover information about corruption, they will frequently suppress such information if induced. There have, in fact, been many reports of cases where media professionals have moved from simply waiting to be induced to actively extorting money from those about whom they have negative reports or information, in exchange for suppressing such information.

According to Professor Lamini Waritay, Special Advisor on Communications to the former Chairman of the NTGL, Mr. Gyude Bryant during the transitional arrangement, “Many Liberians, among those who subscribe to press freedom, have complained about what they call ‘blackmail’ on the part of reporters/editors who would threaten such individuals with bad publicity if they do not meet the financial requests of the journalists. The usual tactic is to have a newspaper carry a little teaser making reference to some wrongdoing involving the intended victim – with an implied warning at the end of the piece to the effect that ‘investigation continues’. The idea is to stampede the victim into rushing to the journalist/newspaper and greasing the palms to avoid ‘further investigation’<sup>8</sup>.”

### **Lack of Capacity for Investigative Reporting**

In Liberia, there is a glaring lack of skilled personnel and adequate resources to carry out investigative reporting, particularly to unearth corruption among both providers of humanitarian assistance as well as government. The media lost its best reporters and most skilled editorial personnel during the conflict in part because of the state of insecurity which led many media practitioners to flee the country, but also because many practitioners realised that their incomes from media work could simply not sustain them and sought more lucrative employment opportunities.

During the period of conflict under the regime of former President Charles Taylor and the most recent transition period in Liberia (between August 2003 and January 2006), when most of the humanitarian assistance was being delivered in the country, there were between 300 and 400 journalists operating in the country. The vast majority of them were poorly trained or not trained at all and lacked the requisite journalistic skills to conduct investigative journalism.

In addition to the lack of skills for investigative journalism, the poorly resourced media organizations were simply unable to invest in investigative stories either about the activities of the transitional government or the humanitarian agencies.

An example of this lack of capacity in the local media that bears mentioning here is a story reported by “The Guardian” of London on the corruption that characterized the activities of humanitarian agencies in the Mano River Union, comprising Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

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<sup>8</sup> Paper delivered at a “Symposium on Developing the Media in Post-Conflict Liberia: Challenges in the Run-up to Elections”, held on March 4 and 5, 2005, and organized by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) in collaboration with the Press Union of Liberia (PUL).

In the story titled “Aid workers in food for child sex scandal” and published on February 27, 2002 in “The Guardian” of London reported that humanitarian workers for more than 40 agencies in the region were involved in extensive sexual exploitation of refugee children, offering food rations and other humanitarian services in return for sexual favours.

The story is based on an internal report detailing testimonies taken from girls under 18 years by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children in refugee camps in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea in which they named more than 40 UN agencies and non-governmental organizations as well as about 70 individuals as using humanitarian aid and services such as shelter, education, medicine and food for sexual exploitation.

If local media organizations in the affected countries had covered the activities of relief organizations and aid agencies more closely and effectively, they could have broken the stories.

### **About the Author**

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