

## Chapter 11

# Expanding the Space for Freedom of Expression in Postwar Sierra Leone

Sylvanus Spencer

### **Introduction**

Sierra Leone, a small country on the Upper Guinea Coast, was colonized by the British, who made it a settlement for freed slaves. Hence, the capital came to be known as Freetown. The official language is English, but denizens speak many other ethnic languages; Krio is the lingua franca. At the end of the twentieth century, the country went through a bloody, destructive civil war that puts it in the unenviable group of African states that have been described as ‘dysfunctional’, ‘failed’ or ‘collapsed’ and given rise to much pessimism about the future of the African continent. The gruesome human rights violations that characterized the decade-long civil war became a ‘complex humanitarian emergency’ that captured the attention of the international community in a big way. This put transnational organizations in a comfortable position to meddle in the affairs of Sierra Leone by promoting neoliberal prescriptions for postwar peace building and governance reform. The factors that led to state failure and outbreak of civil war in this country were long in the making and rooted in the history and politics of this postcolonial state. Hence, although the impact of external factors like neocolonialism, Cold War politics and world market forces cannot be discounted, internal factors are crucial variables in explaining the nature of the African states and the predicaments they face (Francis 2006: 51–53).

Most observers attribute the war to a prolonged period of bad governance manifested in, among other things, political patronage, intolerance of opposing views and marginalization of certain groups (Abraham 2000; Ayissi and Robin-Edward 2000). Since neighbouring Liberia shared a similar history of bad governance, it was not surprising that the rebel war that started there in 1989 spilled over into Sierra Leone in 1991, prompting the formation of an alliance of ‘freedom fighters’ from both sides of the border. When the diamond mines of eastern Sierra Leone fell into the hands of the insurgents, they found themselves in a

better position to generate the revenue needed to fund their military venture through illegal mining and sale of 'blood diamonds' to unscrupulous foreign dealers (Hirsh 2001).

Richards (1996, 2005), who was one of the first to study the civil war in Sierra Leone, sees it as a crisis of youth: largely illiterate or poorly educated and unemployed youths facing a declining economy and an exploitative and repressive patrimonial regime had little prospect of a brighter future. Susceptible to extremist views, they were potential material for violent mob action. For Richards, it was youths living in the economically harsh and politically oppressive conditions of a rural context rather than disaffected youths in an urban context (as later put forward by Abdullah and others) that constituted the dynamic force of the rebellion.

In accounting for the formation of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the outbreak of civil war in Sierra Leone, Abdullah (2004) highlights the role of 'lumpen youths' who, in the harsh sociopolitical and economic climate of the 1970s and 1980s, became more and more alienated and found common cause with disgruntled and radical students with whom they fraternized and shared hopes of changing 'de [the] system'. Peters (2010) described the root causes of the conflict in Sierra Leone as a highly explosive combination of neopatrimonial state collapse and the disaffection of marginalized rural youths. Boas (2001) has argued that the wars in Sierra Leone and neighbouring Liberia could fundamentally be attributed to an 'extreme version' of neopatrimonial politics rooted in a shared history of exclusiveness and marginalization that led to the build-up and later violent explosion of deep-seated hatred.

Whereas bad governance, as manifested in political patronage and marginalization, is a common thread running through the above explanations of the civil war in Sierra Leone, Kaplan (1994) claims that the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia were devoid of political motives and driven purely by economic considerations of resource accumulation. This view is also shared by Collier and Hoeffler (2003), who make a distinction between 'greed' and 'grievance' and assert that the real cause of the civil wars in West Africa is not the loud discourse of political grievance but the silent motivation of greed for economic resources.

Hoffman (2007) does not subscribe to such an apolitical view of the civil war in Sierra Leone. He argues that the violence perpetrated in the course of the war was a kind of political speech voiced by people desperate to capture attention and be heard. For Hoffman, RUF rapes, lootings, mutilations and other acts of terror should be looked at as springing only partly from economic motives. This resonates with Richards' point that war may be likened to a violent attempt to enter a conversation from which one feels excluded (Richards 2005: xxiii–xxiv). As an ex-rebel fighter puts it, 'Violence is the only language they [politicians] can understand. The more the violence, the more they are prepared to listen and understand.'<sup>1</sup>

Now that the war is over, frantic efforts are being made to consolidate the nation's hard-won fragile peace with the help of the international community,

which has made good governance a precondition for supplying aid and loans to developing countries (Milliken 2003; Neumayer 2003). Promoting the Western model of the right to freedom of expression is considered an important part of this mainly Western-driven governance reform programme. Freedom of expression may be defined as the liberty to make known one's views, feelings, convictions and so on without violating the rights of others or jeopardizing their security. It is also the right to refrain from expressing one's views as long as this is not due to any harassment or intimidation. It takes different forms like speaking, writing, singing and acting.

This chapter employs theories, travelling models and translation to critically examine efforts by transnational institutions (working in partnership with local actors) to promote the right of freedom of expression in a postwar setting. It seeks to scrutinize some of the strategies that are being utilized and to highlight unintended outcomes and contextual challenges associated with the peculiar realities on the ground.

'Travelling models' refers to certain globally circulating ideas for tackling (among other things) governance-related problems like underdevelopment and civil conflicts. Often prescribed by Western countries and international financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF, these models are often outcomes of peculiar experiences and discourses in the Western world. The freedom of expression model that is promoted as part of Sierra Leone's postwar governance reform programme has deep roots in the political history of the West that can be traced from Greco-Roman times (Berti 1978) to the Humanist tradition of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> However, only after the Second World War were vigorous efforts made to universalize freedom of expression as seen in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948.

Although travelling models like freedom of expression, decentralization and gender mainstreaming have proven very useful in the Western contexts from which they 'travel', they may not have the desired impacts in sociocultural and political contexts where they are newly arrived (Reyna 2007). Travelling ideas, it has been argued, 'travel' across transnational boundaries through a process of translation. Translation implies transformation, not just transfer or movement from one place to another (Rottenburg 2005; see also Rottenburg 2008). In other words, the 'receiving culture' is not just a passive recipient of the travelling idea but is actively involved in assessing, modifying, transforming or appropriating the models in line with local realities.

## **Transnational and Local Actors**

Transnational and local actors work in partnership to promote the freedom of expression model in postwar Sierra Leone. These include transnational govern-

mental agencies like the United States Agency for International Development, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development; United Nations family members like the United Nations Development Plan (UNDP) and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization; and media foundations like the Thompson and Ford Foundations. There are also state agencies and a host of international and local NGOs and civil society groups entangled in a complex transnational web.

Transnational interventions are clearly evident not only at state level but also locally, as many of Africa's civil society groups are not purely local or grass-roots organizations, despite often giving that impression. They are mainly international organizations or branches of them, and even where they spring up locally they tend to be organized, funded and guided by the vision of international bodies. Hence, Ferguson (2006) asserts that the state-versus-civil-society analytic framework that is generally taken for granted in the study of African politics turns out to be flawed when subjected to critical scrutiny. He points out that this analytic framework presents a vertical image or topography of power that is rather simplistic and misleading when viewed against the transnational context within which both the powers at the top (state) and civil society, ideally representing the bottom (local), operate. Englund (2006) makes a similar assertion, maintaining that transnational connections and influences, as manifested in (among other things) funding, formulating and implementing human rights and democratization programmes, appear at both state and civil society levels, and that these crucial complex transnational links have to be factored into understanding the dynamics of the African state.

Transnational interventions in Africa and the Global South are not driven merely by humanitarian considerations. They are also predicated on the West's pursuit of strategic self-interest. Hence, international peace-building operations since the end of the Cold War are firmly anchored in the idea of the liberal peace. Such peace building in 'failed' and collapsed states revolves around a 'security-development' nexus born of the view that these states are a threat to international peace in various ways, including their potential to become a breeding ground for terrorists and other extremists who may strike in the West (Duffield 2001). Other spin-offs of wars in failed states on countries outside the immediate theatres of armed conflicts, include the proliferation of arms, drug trafficking, massive and unexpected displacement of people beyond established borders, the outbreak and spread of diseases, disruption of international trade, environmental degradation and more. Any of these could somehow directly or indirectly impact the stability and prosperity of the West. Underdevelopment due to bad governance and the resultant economic downslide, extreme poverty, corruption and weakened social cohesion are held to be the main precursors of these 'new wars'. It is therefore assumed that development effected by neoliberal prescriptions would diffuse tensions in these areas and provide the stability that is vital to the continued stability

of the West. This brings to mind the Truman Doctrine, which in the interest of the United States and its World War II allies sought to contain the spread of communism by using funds to combat the poverty and underdevelopment that apparently create a seedbed for communist extremism (Urwin 1989).

The strategies that transnational actors employ in partnership with local actors to translate free expression to postwar Sierra Leone include establishment of a supportive legal framework, provision of media support and civic education programmes. However, the realities on the ground pose considerable challenges to the effectiveness of these strategies and militate against full achievement of the desired outcomes. In line with the concept of translation, the targeted culture is not just passively accepting the model wholesale but is involved in modifying and adapting the model to suit existing realities.

Local translators, who generally have more organic and direct contact with the local communities, are key partners in the translation process. As Lewis and Mosse (2006) point out, they often form a crucial link between local communities and transnational actors from other sociocultural backgrounds (Lewis and Mosse 2006). In this scheme of things, they are positioned to package the model by modifying or adapting it to fit local logics and local context while also identifying commonalities (Merry 2006). Although human rights are said to be universal, cultural relativism tends to creep into how they are understood, translated and practised in different sociocultural contexts (An-Na'im and Deng 1990). For instance, in traditional settings local translators of the right to freedom of expression tend to remain silent about the model's potential to undermine and erode long cherished traditions and to bring about unwelcome shifts in power relations between, for instance, youths and elders or women and men. Furthermore, when it comes to the sensitive issue of secret societies serving as a traditional impediment to free expression, it is generally considered prudent to just gloss over that issue or shelve it until some future date.<sup>3</sup>

### **Working for a Supportive Legal Framework**

Working for a supportive legal framework is a major strategy in translating freedom of expression. Those actors who promote this supportive legal framework are guided by the view that freedom of expression is both a political and a legal matter, and that it must be governed and regulated by a conducive legal framework in order to be fully enjoyed and not abused. It is generally assumed that once laws are clearly laid down and penalties for infringement spelled out, people who do not want to be culpable are likely to observe them.<sup>4</sup> Yet a closer look at the realities on the ground shows that this is simply not the case.

Transnational organizations like the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI) are involved in promoting a revisitation of the existing laws

guaranteeing and regulating free expression in Sierra Leone. Their aim in doing so is to determine how supportive of this right these laws are and how far they accord with modern democratic standards and trends. To this end they have supported advocacy movements for the review of such laws and even provided them with technical and financial assistance. It is hoped that the reviews will result in enactment of new laws like the freedom of information law that is being strongly advocated. Some Sierra Leoneans have expressed hope that with transnational support, laws enacted as far back as the colonial period that do not fulfil the requirements of a democratic postcolonial society will be expunged from the law books. Furthermore, legal reforms assisted by transnational bodies are expected to lead to a harmonizing of the contradictions and ambiguities that currently tend to serve as legal cover, allowing violations to take place with impunity.

The most unpopular legal restriction on freedom of expression in Sierra Leone, which has been repeatedly attacked with the help of transnational support, is part 5 of the 1965 Public Order Act, which criminalizes defamatory and seditious libel. The Public Order Act stems from the colonial period, when it was used to silence leaders of the nationalist struggle. In the post-independence period it has been used to gag opposition and critics, serving as a trap that has landed many journalists in jail. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Sierra Leone) – a transnational brainchild set up with transnational funds – states in its report that this law is a relic of the colonial period. The commission considers it outmoded and strongly recommends that it be expunged from the nation's law books (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone 2004: 131–32). But despite many public pronouncements in favour of this measure, there has been considerable reluctance to make it a reality – apparently due to apprehension that decriminalizing libel would give citizens a stronger voice to fearlessly scrutinize politicians and hold them accountable, something long absent in the political culture of Sierra Leone.

Section 32(2) of the Public Order Act states:

Any person who publishes any false statement, rumour or report which is calculated to bring into disrepute any person who holds office under the constitution in the discharge of his duties shall be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding five hundred Leones or to imprisonment not exceeding two years or both.

Section 33 states that a person who, among other things, utters a seditious statement or 'prints, publicizes, sells, offers for sale, distributes or reproduces any seditious publication' shall be guilty of seditious libel and will be imprisoned for up to three years for a first offence and up to seven years in the case of subsequent offences. Subsection 2 makes it a crime to be in possession of a story or article declared to be seditious.

Transnational translators of the free expression model insist that by modern standards, these provisions of the Public Order Act are draconian in that they impose lengthy imprisonment on offenders just for, among other things, expressing their political views. They maintain that statements critical of governments are necessary and vital to keep them in check. Many local civil society groups caught up in the complex web of transnationalism – especially media practitioners and human rights activists – have expressed the opinion that this law is contrary to the spirit of democracy and militates against development and the consolidation of the nation's hard-won peace.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and the 1965 Public Order Act**

With transnational support, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) has been one of the most active agitators for the repeal of the 1965 Public Order Act, which has been called a 'killer bill'. This is understandable because media practitioners, more than any other category of citizen, have fallen victim to this law. It is therefore unsurprising that when the Law Reform Commission was set up (with international but mainly British support) to review the nation's laws, SLAJ was one of the earliest to appeal to it for a review of this law.

When a new government was elected in 2007, hopes ran high that the ill-famed act would at last be nullified because the new president had been an ardent critic of it while in the opposition. In fact, the ruling All Peoples' Congress Party had, in its manifesto for the 2007 elections, pledged to review the Public Order Act and 'improve public trust, confidence and interest through information sharing' by removing 'bottle necks and obstacles that stifle this free flow [of information]' (All Peoples Congress Party 2007).<sup>6</sup> The spirit of optimism for a free press was also felt by the World Association of Newspapers (WAN), which welcomed the president's declared commitment to abrogate the criminal libel law of 1965.<sup>7</sup> Under the previous government, headed by President Tejan Kabbah, WAN – in collaboration with the International Press Institute, another transnational organization – had written an open letter to the then president, fruitlessly calling upon him to repeal the nation's libel law.<sup>8</sup>

When it became clear that the new government (in spite of many public pronouncements and commitments) was dragging its feet over the hoped-for repeal of the law, the SLAJ's Bo Convention (of 2008) resolved to seek legal redress. Thus SLAJ, with support from OSJI, the Society for Democratic Initiatives (Sierra Leone) and the Media Foundation for West Africa, filed a lawsuit on 25 February 2008 challenging the constitutional validity of part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965, which, the plaintiffs claimed, directly contravened the guarantee of freedom of expression enshrined in the third chapter of the 1991 Constitution

of Sierra Leone. This lawsuit has the distinction of being the first direct legal challenge to criminal libel law in the region.<sup>9</sup>

It took the Supreme Court well over six months to issue a ruling on the matter, contrary to the constitutional provision, in Section 120 (16), that it should deliver its decision on matters brought before it not later than three months after the conclusion of the evidence and final arguments. As media practitioners and some members of the public grew impatient with what they considered the judiciary's sluggish response, journalists registered their impatience by imposing a news blackout on the judiciary and later staged a peaceful protest in front of the office of the ombudsman. The situation played into the hands of politicians, who excused themselves from addressing the matter by saying it was already in the hands of the judiciary, whose decision they were not supposed to influence. The long-awaited verdict held that the criminal libel laws contained in the Public Order Act did not contravene the provisions for freedom of expression contained in the 1991 Constitution, because the Constitution also makes provision for the right to be legally restricted, as seen in Section 25 (2).

### **Contextual Challenges**

Promotion of freedom of expression through advocacy for appropriate legal and policy frameworks rests on the assumption that once these laws are in place, stakeholders will have no choice but to abide by them, if they do not wish to be culpable. However, experience has shown that even when these laws are in place, the lack of political will to let them serve their purpose often fosters crafty and ingenious manipulations by state and even nonstate actors. This tends to defeat the purposes of such laws. Writing about Africa's media in this connection, Nyamnjoh (2005) observes:

One of the greatest threats to media freedom in Africa has been the reluctance on the part of government to liberalize press laws. Even where there was such liberalization in principle, governments tended to introduce, by underhand or round about ways, measures and practices that effectively curtail press freedom.

This is often the case when the judiciary, which is supposed to blow the whistle and impose penalties when there is a breach of the law, has compromised its integrity and therefore lost credibility. Hence, in spite of all the clarion calls for repeal of the nation's criminal libel laws, only recently did the Sierra Leone Bar Association produce a statement calling on the government to speedily repeal such laws and enact a freedom of information law. The ongoing judicial reforms, designed to put in place an uncompromised, independent, properly equipped



and adequately staffed judiciary, could be considered a crucial part of the entire postwar democratization process in Sierra Leone. Thinking along similar lines led the commissioners of Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission to observe that 'in a true democracy there is no compromise on the supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law' (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone 2004: 140).

A major weakness of efforts to reform media and free expression laws in this country is that translators have generally not taken into consideration the dual legal system: so far, the focus has been on only the formal legal system. This is not surprising, as the formal system is what the foreign translators of the free expression model most easily relate to. Meanwhile, their local partners are reluctant to vigorously confront certain long-cherished, sensitive traditions lest the effort provoke outright rejection of the model. However, it is vital to factor the traditional legal system into legal reforms that favour freedom of expression if this fundamental human right is to become truly national and universal.

The traditional legal system is rooted in the customs and traditions of ethnic communities in the former Protectorate. The judicial structure of Sierra Leone gives the Native Administration Courts of the traditional legal system jurisdiction over certain matters, beyond which disputes should in principle be sent to the formal courts. The Native Administration Courts dispense justice in line with customary laws that are largely unwritten and thus leave ample room for abuse. Certain restrictions and expectations of this system are not friendly to free expression. For instance, women and youths are deprived of a strong, direct voice in political decisions that affect them. The system also favours a culture of secrecy that denies access to information to nonmembers of the secret societies that preside over the making of certain decisions in some traditional settings.

Thus, despite the dreams and ongoing efforts to harmonize the formal and traditional legal systems in Sierra Leone, the task has proven overwhelming and the dream is far from being realized in the face of enormous social and even political implications.

### **Providing Media Support**

Some transnational organizations, such as the U.S.-based Search for Common Ground and the British Broadcasting Corporation World Service Trust, have pursued a strategy of providing media support as a way of promoting freedom of expression. Interviews with some of these organizations reveal that they are mainly driven by the conviction that an irresponsible and unprofessional media is worse than an autocratic regime because irresponsible media practices tend to help justify the autocratic dislike of free expression. These groups operate under the rationale that proper training leads not just to technical knowhow but also to professionalism, dedication, discipline and responsibility. Therefore, providing

training for media practitioners is an important component of media support. Media training is expected to nurture the media as a powerful instrument of free expression and curb reckless media practices.

Media support also extends to funding media organizations. Some of these have been established by local initiatives but remain very much dependent on transnational support to meet their running costs and fulfil their agendas. Transnational support for media organizations often reflects the conviction that a free media plays an important part in promoting development and democratic good governance. For this to be done meaningfully and responsibly while also overcoming attempts to suppress and manipulate press freedom, so the logic goes, media practitioners need to protect themselves and the integrity of their profession through vibrant organizations. It is hoped that unifying individuals and groups will help promote professionalism, facilitate networking with media organizations within and outside the country (e.g. the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, which works to protect press freedom worldwide) and assist in building a united front with journalists, speaking with one voice in advocacy campaigns and in alerts raised about media violations. This is important because African media tend to be divided along ethnic and partisan lines. Hence, SLAJ has the stated objective ‘To unite the family of journalists to have one voice’.<sup>10</sup>

### **Impact and Contextual Challenges**

Despite huge transnational support for media organizations, the increasing number of training opportunities available and the corresponding increase in the number of people taking advantage of them, the general opinion is that these factors have not had significant impact on the press in terms of the quality of media coverage among other things. The training workshops and seminars are too brief for any effective training to take place. To somehow transcend this limitation, the Canada-based Journalists for Human Rights has a team of resident trainers attached to some media outlets in Sierra Leone, where they work alongside local journalists and hold regular monthly workshops.

Some media practitioners have often complained that the foreign trainers in particular tend to offer them only rudimentary materials that are not new to them, or not relevant to their professional needs. Some are drawn to these training workshops not by the prospect of improving themselves professionally but by financial incentives for attending, which they consider a supplement to their low income.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the president of SLAJ, in presenting his election manifesto (2008), promised to compile a media training blueprint based on the felt needs of the nation’s media, so that ‘whichever international organization wants to organize a training program in the country will have to choose from our felt needs and not their self-imposed courses’.<sup>12</sup>

Media trainers from outside Sierra Leone are usually unfamiliar with some of the peculiar constraints on the press in the country, so the training they offer tends not to reflect the contextual realities (Carothers 1999: 242). For instance, in an effort to show what a badly written story is, a trainer from the United States fished one out of a local newspaper and specifically pointed out that it was one-sided. Then, however, the writer of the story explained that in the absence of a freedom of information act, it was difficult to get other views; he had hoped that publishing a one-sided story ‘may smoke out’ other sides of it.<sup>13</sup> The bottom line is that although training may be guided by very laudable intentions, to be meaningful it has to take into consideration local challenges affecting the media and freedom of expression in general. These include not only the absence of a freedom of information law, which favours rumour-mongering and impedes investigative journalism, but also high levels of illiteracy and poverty and a fragmented, politicized media open to manipulation by unscrupulous politicians.

The focus on training journalists as a way of improving professionalism is based on the assumption that those trained will continue to stay on the job. But indications are that staff retention is poor because low remuneration forces journalists to migrate to better paid jobs. This creates a vicious cycle in which there is always a need for trained journalists who, after training (especially young ones), are likely to move on to greener pastures. In this connection, the head of the Mass Communications Unit at Fourah Bay College (University of Sierra Leone) once lamented the problem of retaining journalists trained in the media profession by his unit, saying that their attraction to better paid jobs had kept them from making a positive impact on the media.<sup>14</sup>

Media support directed at getting the media to develop a corporate identity, pull their resources together and speak with one voice on issues that affect them has not yielded the desired result. This is owed in part to a failure to steer away from ethnic sentiments and political leanings, as the media in Sierra Leone – as in many other African countries – are torn by partisan and tribal strife, and media practitioners, despite much rhetoric, have allowed these narrow and selfish considerations to override professional ethics and national interests. In a speech marking the thirty-eighth anniversary of the founding of SLAJ, the association’s president, referring to undiminished infighting and disunity within the media, lamented that the nation’s media could become the cause of the next civil disturbance in the country if practitioners do not behave responsibly and put national interest above all else.

### **Undertaking Civic Education**

Providing civic education with the aim of transmitting democratic knowledge and values, fostering democratic practices and encouraging civic engagement is another strategy employed in translating freedom of expression. Civic education may be defined as a form of education that, by itself or as part of a broader system

of education, is designed to formally or informally transmit knowledge, skills and values that are associated with responsible citizenship. Its fundamental aim is to equip and motivate citizens to effectively participate in governance and activities that affect the well-being of the public (Finkel 2003: 4–5).

In Sierra Leone, several governmental and nongovernmental agencies, politicians, educational institutions and civil society groups, among others, have engaged in providing some form of civic education for the building of a democratic culture. However, few of these civic education providers focus explicitly on promoting the right to freedom of expression in their programmes. Understandably, the media and some human rights groups devote more attention to promoting the right to freedom of expression.

In translating the model of the right to freedom of expression, civic educators with some training and initiative often seek to draw parallels with aspects of the local way of life that in some ways support the value of free expression. These translators of the model often attempt to make their presentations lively, meaningful and acceptable in local contexts by drawing on local aphorisms, parables, folklore, symbols and the like that in some way portray the value of airing one's views. For example, in teaching the importance of the right to freedom of expression during a civic education outreach programme at Waterloo Village on the outskirts of Freetown, members of the civic group Adventist Youths Organization sought to drive home their message by linking it with popular local sayings such as 'God has given us mouths so that we can speak out our minds' and 'Your grievances are only known when you reveal them'.

In the same vein, 'fambul tok' – a local concept that could be translated as 'frank family discussions' – is used by Fambul Tok International (a 'local' NGO) to convey the importance of candid, open expressions of interests and grievances among community members. The 'fambul tok' concept is based on the notion that in an ideal family, members are at liberty to freely express the depth their minds, knowing full well that the grievances or concerns will be heard regardless of their nature, and that generally all efforts will be made to amicably address these issues with the interest of the family in mind. Like other translators of Western models of conflict management and good governance, Fambul Tok International draws on some locally cherished social values and symbols as a strategy for translating freedom of expression.

The strategy of linking the model with local symbols and drawing on cultural frames of reference in order to induce acceptance is also evident in the media and civic education programmes of the U.S.-based NGO Search for Common Ground, whose mission statement says:

We work with local partners to find culturally appropriate means to strengthen societies' capacity to deal with conflict constructively; to understand the differences and act on the commonalities.<sup>15</sup>

Search for Common Ground engages in (among other things) the training of media practitioners and produces good governance and civic education radio programmes through its Talking Drum Studios. The name ‘Talking Drum’ is a cultural reference point and a cultural link to the notion of free expression. It refers to a common West African musical instrument that is used not only for entertainment purposes but also to summon people to a gathering for discussion or call a meeting to attention.

Meaningful civic education requires more than just acquiring knowledge about freedom of expression and other human rights and being able to discuss the issues surrounding them. Apart from transmitting knowledge (which unfortunately tends to be the emphasis in most cases) there is also a need to get citizens to internalize the civic value of free expression and reflect it in their attitudes and behaviours. This demands systematic, sustained sessions rather than mere sporadic sessions devoted to mainly transmitting knowledge. Whereas knowledge may be acquired in several classroom sessions or community meetings, internalization of values leading to a desired change in attitude and behaviour tends to be much more gradual. This is especially so when certain aspects of the political culture are at variance with the desired civic education goals. Thus effective civic education is not just delivered through lessons taught but also involves a complex web of corporation and reinforcement from interdependent social institutions like the home, social groups and the wider community, which are also engaged in the process of political socialization (Stroupe and Sabato 2004).

### **Impact and Contextual Challenges**

That transmitting civic knowledge alone is not enough to promote freedom of expression is evident from the fact that even some highly educated citizens are at times hesitant to freely exercise their rights. This is very much so when it comes to exercising the right to free expression by speaking a contrary view or taking the opposite side on certain issues. This tendency could be partly attributed to the prevalence of a patronage system in which people at times seek to elicit a patron’s protection and support by turning a blind eye and keeping quiet about certain issues bordering on that patron’s integrity. Apart from this political hypocrisy, there are also times when even highly educated people have been socially conditioned by a general culture of silence and what Ibelema (2008) calls ‘civic cynicism’, that is, the pessimistic conviction that the situation is so bad it cannot be remedied, no matter how much one speaks out against it.

The high level of intolerance of opposing views manifested by students, especially in student union elections at tertiary institutions, also underscores the observation that acquisition of knowledge alone does not guarantee that citizens will claim and freely exercise their right to free expression (or other rights). Freedom of expression involves more than making one’s own views known – rec-

ognition of the other sides' right to make their views known in matters both political and nonpolitical. With regards to expressing political views, high levels of intolerance have been manifest at educational institutions where, for instance, students from rival student union political camps have violently persecuted their colleagues for holding different views. This occurred during the 2008 student union elections at the Freetown Teachers College when one camp of students presented its election manifesto and then violently prevented members of the other camp from presenting theirs. In recent times the university campuses of Fourah Bay College (FBC) and Njala University have witnessed violent confrontations between student political camps that resulted in temporary bans of student union bodies. In fact, just under two years after the ban was lifted on student union politics at FBC, electoral violence erupted again between the 'Black Camp' and the 'White Camp', which are said to be receiving support from the two leading political parties in the country.

As the fever of the 2010 FBC student union election ran high, the Peace Society, Students for Democracy, and the Media and Public Relations Department of the Sierra Leone Police, among others, took pre-emptive measures to forestall violence. Yet in spite of intervention by campus- and noncampus-based human rights and peace organizations preaching the values of free expression and political tolerance, violent outbursts resulted in wounding with intent and destruction of property. This ugly development at FBC was worrisome to most observers not only because the students, as future leaders, are expected to set an example of tolerating divergent political views, but also because student politics at FBC in the 1980s somehow became a seedbed that sprouted the revolutionary fervour that culminated in the decade-long civil war (Abdullah 2004: Chaps. 2 and 3).

In assessing the use of civic education to promote freedom of expression and other rights, one has to examine whether the knowledge, skills and values transmitted have brought about the intended attitudinal and behavioural change manifested in a political orientation towards good citizenship and meaningful participation in governance.

Compared with what obtained in the prewar period, many more citizens across the country do have some knowledge about the right to freedom of expression and know they are entitled to enjoy it. However, a large percentage of the population of Sierra Leone have not demonstrated that they know how to exercise this right within the confines of the law. Apparently they have not fully realized and appreciated that there are very good reasons to do so. This should not be attributed only to failure to strike a balance between 'rights' and 'responsibilities' or, in some cases, to initiate and sustain well-thought-out civic education programmes. It is also due to the fact that bringing about attitudinal and behavioural change is a gradual process – especially in postwar settings like Sierra Leone, where the political culture has long been marked by exclusiveness

and intolerance that can be traced far back to the early years of the post-independence period.

The high level of illiteracy and lack of formal education do not help the situation. As the UNDP points out in its *Practical Guidance Note* on civic education, 'literacy levels are fundamental in civic education programming and can be a significant barrier if not addressed appropriately' (United Nations Development Plan 2004: 27). Illiteracy means that the educational information transmitted cannot be reinforced by the printed word; nor can the learning experience be sustained and exchanged by that means. Furthermore, the lack of formal education may affect citizens' capacity to appreciate abstract concepts and fully analyse and evaluate what is being conveyed. This is why the Sierra Leone Adult Education Association, in addition to its commitment to promote peace building and human rights among adults, is also engaged in supporting programmes to reduce the high rate of illiteracy among them.

A major weakness in translating freedom of expression through civic education is the apparent over-emphasis on political and civil rights (i.e. the category of rights to which freedom of expression belongs) at the expense of economic, social and cultural rights. Englund (2006) describes how both political elites and civil society groups tend to fall short in this respect in their promotion of human rights in Malawi. While not subscribing to the view that there is a hierarchy of rights, Englund asserts that political rights tend to be very abstract to the ordinary man, and that dwelling simply on them diverts attention from real bread-and-butter issues like health, employment and education, which are enshrined in economic, social and cultural rights and tend to have more immediate relevance to the needs and conditions of the masses. Englund maintains that this imbalance, evidenced by both political elites and civil society with support from transnational bodies, deprives the citizenry of the substantive meaning of democracy. Still, this need not be the case if human rights are presented as indivisible or mutually supportive.

Although freedom of expression belongs to the category of civil and political rights and may be regarded as a primary right, it is more meaningfully promoted by positioning it alongside economic, social and cultural rights rather than solely with other civil and political rights. The right to freedom of expression is related to economic, social and cultural rights and can in many ways contribute to real socioeconomic and cultural gains. For instance, deprived communities have to be able to freely and openly voice their felt needs to engage the attention of government and attract an appropriate response. Also, for the development process to be meaningful to citizens, and for them to have a vested interest in the process, they are expected to participate in various ways, including by expressing their views on development policies and programmes. The vertical and horizontal flow of information may provide feedback helpful in managing conflict and building

the peaceful environment that is often conducive to economic development and social well-being.

## Conclusion

Despite many challenges, transnational interventions in translating the model of freedom of expression in postwar Sierra Leone have contributed to a gradual expansion of political space for increased participation in governance (although in some cases this participation is manipulated, as when people are, contrary to their political convictions, financially seduced into putting up a show of support by masquerading in political party colours). The expanding space for free expression and participation in governance is evident in a growing media pluralism and the mushrooming of civil society groups (some of which have questionable credentials, however). Also increasing is the use of pop music, especially by young people, to express political views critical of their governments. Through the disparaging lyrics of pop songs like 'Mr Government' and 'Positive Change', Sierra Leonean youth have become very vocal about issues like mismanagement, corruption and tribalism. This unprecedented development is a far cry from what obtained in the past, when singing of such songs was enough to land one behind bars and discussing such issues was an offence known as 'careless talk'.

Although the freedom of expression model has the potential to fulfil the desired outcomes of managing conflicts and encouraging participation in governance, at times it inadvertently generates new conflicts associated with what some politicians view as irresponsible exercise of this freedom. Some concerned citizens have also bemoaned what they perceive as unhealthy rivalry among highly politicized media groups as a new source of conflict. Elderly citizens in particular have lamented the use of what they consider to be vulgar and inciting lyrics by allegedly contracted musicians. For instance, two of the songs of Sierra Leonean musician Innocent – 'Bailiff' and 'Ejectment [Eviction] Notice' – convey the idea of forceful removal of the ruling government. In the latter song, which mentions unpopular politicians who insist on perpetuating their hold on power at all costs, he sings of stabbing them in the stomach. Similarly, the musician Emerson Bockarie, in his popular 'Borboh Belleh' (Boy with Bloated Stomach) maintains that it is right to beat up a thief (which in this context refers to a corrupt politician) until he loses a tooth. This use of violent lyrics cannot be ascribed solely to the horrifying violence experienced during the country's recent civil war. Also pertinent is that most of these artists are inspired by American hip-hop musicians who, in exercising their right to free expression as provided for in the First Amendment of the American Constitution, have become notorious for their use of vulgar lyrics and glorification of violence.



The translation approach offers a realistic expectation that the free expression model will not be wholly passively accepted by the culture into which it is being translated. It implies sensitivity to cultural and contextual differences, which may be taken on board in the process of translation. Translators should not be surprised or discouraged by unintended outcomes or achievements that only marginally reflect what obtains back home in the West.

**Sylvanus Spencer** is a senior lecturer and the head of the Department of History and African Studies at Fourah Bay College, Freetown, University of Sierra Leone. His recent publications include 'Singing for Change: Music as a Means of Political Expression for Young People in Sierra Leone and Liberia' in *Traveling Models in African Conflict Management: Translating Technologies of Social Ordering* (Brill, 2014) and 'The Use of Pop Songs by Sierra Leonean Youths in Enjoying the Space Created for Freedom of Expression after the Civil War', *Africa Today* 59(1) (2012).

## Notes

1. Interview: Henry Lebbie, ex-combatant of the RUF (Revolutionary United Front), 19 February 1997.
2. The Renaissance and Enlightenment were intellectual movements in Europe that stressed, among other things, the need for free expression and tolerance.
3. Interview: A.G. Sesay, Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, 17 August 2010.
4. Interviews: James Wolo, Head of Media Monitoring and Development (United Nations Mission in Liberia), 19 March 2008; J.C. Humper, Chairman Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone, 28 May 2007.
5. Interview: Ronald Gidwani, President of Human Rights Clinic, Fourah Bay College, 7 May 2007.
6. All Peoples Congress Party Manifesto for the 2007 Elections, retrieved 19 October 2015 from <http://www.sierraherald.com/apc-manifesto.htm>.
7. See Newsletter of the World Association of Newspapers, no. 38, April 2008.
8. 'Sierra Leone: Open Letter to President on Libel Laws'. Retrieved 9 November 2009 from <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/media/28778>.
9. 'Lawsuit Seeks Greater Freedom of Expression in Sierra Leone'. Retrieved 20 March 2008 from [http://www.justiveinitiative.org/db/resource2?res\\_id=104048](http://www.justiveinitiative.org/db/resource2?res_id=104048).
10. See the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists website: <http://slajsl.com/> (retrieved 22 November 2008).
11. Interview: Mathew Qwerty, journalist, Radio Democracy, 7 May 2006.
12. Manifesto of Umaru Fofanah for the 2008 SLAJ presidential election. Retrieved from SLAJ Head Office, Campbell Street, Freetown.
13. Interview: Alpha Rashid Jalloh, media practitioner, *Independent Newspaper*, 11 May 2008.
14. Statement of Isaac Massaquoi, head of the Mass Communications Unit, Fourah Bay College Faculty of Arts Board Meeting, 13 May 2009.
15. See the Search for Common Ground website: [http://www.sfcg.org/sfcg/sfcg\\_home.html](http://www.sfcg.org/sfcg/sfcg_home.html) (retrieved 5 April 2008).

## References

- Abdullah, I. 2004. 'Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the RUF/SL', in I. Abdullah (ed.), *Between Democracy and Terror: The Sierra Leone Civil War*. Dakar: CODESRIA, pp. 41–65.
- Abraham, A. 2000. 'Liberia and Sierra Leone: History of Misery and Misery of History', *International Journal of Sierra Leone Studies and Reviews* 1(1): 5–32.
- An-Na'im, A.A., and F.M. Deng (eds). 1990. *Human Rights in Africa: Cross Cultural Perspectives*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Ayissi, A., and P. Robin-Edward (eds). 2000. *Bound to Cooperate: Conflict, Peace and People in Sierra Leone*. Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research.
- Berti, E. 1978. 'Ancient Greek Dialectic as Freedom of Thought and Speech', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39(3): 349–75.
- Boas, M. 2001. 'Liberia and Sierra Leone – Dead Ringers? The Logic of Neo-patrimonial Rule', *Third World Quarterly* 22(5): 697–723.
- Carothers, T. 1999. *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment.
- Collier, P., and A. Hoeffler. 2003. 'Greed and Grievances in Civil Wars', *Oxford Economic Papers* 56(4): 536–95.
- Duffield, M. 2001. *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. London: Zed Books.
- Englund, H. 2006. *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor*. London: University of California Press.
- Ferguson, J. 2006. 'Transnational Topographies of Power: Beyond "the State" and "Civil Society" in the Study of African Politics', in B. Maurer and G. Schwab (eds), *Accelerating Possession: Global Futures of Property and Personhood*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 76–98.
- Finkel, S.E. 2003. *Can Democracy Be Taught? Civil Society and the Development of a Democratic Political Culture*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- Francis, D.J. 2006. *Uniting Africa: Building Regional Peace and Security Systems*. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Hirsh, J.L. 2001. *Sierra Leone Diamonds and the Struggle for Democracy*. London: Lynne Rienner.
- Hoffman, D. 2007. 'Disagreement, Dissent Politics and the War in Sierra Leone', *Africa Today*. Retrieved 6 July 2007 from Project Muse <http://muse.jhu.edu>.
- Ibelema, M. 2008. *The African Press, Civic Cynicism and Democracy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kaplan, R. 1994. 'The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation and Disease are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of our Planet', *The Atlantic Monthly* 273(2): 44–76.
- Lewis, D., and D. Mosse (eds). 2006. *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Merry, S.E. 2006. 'Transnational Human Rights and Local Activism: Mapping the Middle', *American Anthropologist* 108(1): 38–51.
- Milliken, J. (ed.). 2003. *State Failure, Collapse and Reconstruction*. Oxford: John Wiley and Sons.
- Neumayer, E. 2003. *Pattern of Aid Giving: The Impact of Good Governance on Development Assistance*. London: Routledge.
- Nyamnjoh, F.B. 2005. *Africa's Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*. New York: Zed Books.

- Peters, K. 2010. 'Generating Rebels and Soldiers: On the Socio-economic Crisis of Rural Youth in Sierra Leone Before the War', in J. Knörr and W. Trajano Filho (eds), *The Powerful Presence of the Past: Integration and Conflict along the Upper Guinea Coast*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 323–55.
- Reyna, S.P. 2007. 'The Traveling Model That Would Not Travel: Oil, Empire and Patrimonialism in Contemporary Chad', *Social Analysis* 51(3): 78–102.
- Richards, P. 1996. *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- . 2005. 'To Fight or to Farm? Agrarian Dimensions of the Mano River Conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone)', *African Affairs* 104(417): 571–90.
- Rottenburg, R. 2005. 'Code Switching or Why a Metacode Is Good to Have', in B. Carniawska and G. Sevón (eds), *Global Ideas: How Ideas, Objects and Practices Travel in the Global Economy*. Malmö: Författarna och Liber AB, pp. 259–74.
- . 2008. 'From Transfer to Translation'. Keynote lecture delivered at the Summer School on Cultural Translation held at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany, 13 July.
- Stroupe K.S., and L.J. Sabato. 2004. 'Politics: The Missing Link of Responsible Civic Education', CIRCLE Working Paper no. 18. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Centre for Politics. <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP18Stroupe.pdf>.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone. 2004. *Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone*, vol. 4. Accra: Graphic Packaging Ltd.
- United Nations Development Plan. 2004. *Practical Guidance Note on Civic Education*. New York: UNDP.
- Urwin, D.W. 1989. *Western Europe Since 1945: A Political History*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. London: Longman.