

INDEPENDENT RADIO NETWORK

A Report to the Canadian Embassy Fund

For the project entitled:

“WOMEN, MEDIA AND LOCAL ELECTIONS: AN INITIATIVE TO BUILD MEDIA CAPACITY AND PROVIDE OBJECTIVE AND DIVERSE REPORTING FOR THE 2008 LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS.”

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Executive Summary

In May 2008, the Canadian International Development Agency, through the Embassy of Canada in Abidjan gave the Independent Radio Network a 9 month grant of \$CAN 43,411 to assist the organization in ensuring that IRN and its membership actively and constructively engaged in credible electoral reporting during the 2008 Local Council elections.

Accusations of manipulations by the ruling party with most of their candidates unopposed, allegations of electoral fraud and incidents of violence were highlighted during the elections process. But as a whole, international observers as well as local monitoring missions declared the 2008 Local Council elections to be 'free, fair and credible', with the resulting victory for the ruling party winning more seats than the opposition parties.

Much of the success of these elections was due to the effective role of civil society and the independent media. With funding from the Canadian Embassy Fund, IRN was able to plan and implement a long-term strategy for the elections including training member station reporters on techniques for reporting on elections and producing new programmes specifically for the elections period.

The emphasis on increasing women's participation in the local council elections was also successfully addressed, with post elections surveys showing that women candidates were well represented on the radio and well accepted by the listening audience. IRN's collaboration with women's civil society organizations was able to provide women's candidates with a space to be heard on the airwaves and a platform to call for respect for the aspirations of women's candidates.

Introduction

The Independent Radio Network (IRN) was formed in 2002 to report on the national election held in May of that year. Strongly supported by Search for Common Ground (SFCG), and hosted by the Media Foundation for Peace and Development (MPFD), IRN was a key element in SFCG's strategy to use the media to support a peaceful electoral process.

With technical support from MPFD and institutional support from SFCG, IRN has built a reputation of covering elections in an accurate and objective manner. Building on the strength of its 21 partner stations, IRN has been engaged in extensive voter education campaign, this led IRN in collaboration with its strategic partners to look into some of the other issues around violence, women's participation and ways it could improve its engagement. Through its monthly national general meetings held on a rotational basis, IRN developed a strategy to engage in the electoral process, which involved



forging a partnership with the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and National Elections Watch (NEW), identifying key issues for IRN joint programming and developing the capacity of member stations. These meetings also provided protection for network members as the civil space had become highly politicized. With the 21 IRN member stations, excellent broadcast coverage is provided which can be recognized as equal or surpassing that of the state radio network.

In the words of the country's National Electoral Commission chair, the 2007 election was a "make or break" moment for Sierra Leone's post-war democracy. For a number of reasons it represented an opportunity to demonstrate the country's break from the past. It was the first election since United Nations peacekeepers had withdrawn; it was the first election run by Sierra Leoneans themselves; it was the first election with an open seat for president; and it was the first election where an opposition party had a competitive chance to win, setting the stage for a potential change of government.

The election was also a key moment in the maturation of IRN and a strong test of its operational structure. It was the first nationwide event since the 21-station consortium had formalized its cooperative programming structure, and an event that would require continuous rolling coverage from all corners of the country. It was the first live-to-air broadcast from IRN's new production center in Freetown and furthermore, it was the first test of an initiative that trained journalists at IRN stations to report election news to the nation.

Both Sierra Leone and IRN rose to the challenge. International observers declared the election 'free, fair, transparent, credible and peaceful, while IRN's coverage was praised for its accuracy and responsibility. It was an exemplary effort that demonstrated how cooperative radio programming can keep the public informed and can help keep the peace.

With the proven capacity of IRN to maintain an accurate information flow across the nation, the challenge is to expand the scope and coverage of issues.

Project Goals and Objectives

The project, entitled Women, Media and Local Council Elections: An initiative to build media capacity and provide objective and diverse reporting for the 2008 Local Council Elections, was designed to ensure that IRN and its membership were actively and constructively engaged in credible electoral reporting, as well as empowering women to increase their participation in the process.

The immediate and expected results of the project were:

- Mobilized female Producers and Presenters linked with women’s solidarity movements.
- Increased air time available for clarification and examination of candidates (especially female candidates) manifestos to the audience of the member radio stations.
- Increased electoral reporting skills from the staff of the member radio stations.
- Accreditation of 250 radio producers/staff to observe and report on the electoral process.
- Election Day reporting over a 3 day period nationwide for 18 hours per day on 21 stations.
- A code of conduct agreed upon and signed by all members of the IRN network for electoral reporting contributing to peace building.

IRN network membership

Radio Station	Location
2. Radio Bintumani	Freetown
3. Radio Bontico	Kabala
4. Choice FM	Bonthe
5. Radio Democracy	Lungi
6. Eastern Radio	Freetown
7. Radio Gbafth	Kenema
8. Radio Kalleone	Mile 91
9. Kiss FM	Freetown
10. Kolenten	Bo
11. Mankneh	Kambia
12. Radio Maria	Makeni
13. Radio Moa	Makeni
14. Modcar	Kailahun
15. Mt. Aureol	Moyama
16. New Song	Freetown
17. Radio Kunike	Bo
18. Skyy	Makali
19. Radio Tombo	Freetown
20. Voice of Women	Tombo
21. Radio Wanjei	Matru-Jong

Activities

A. IRN Elections Radio Programmes

IRN members held a first planning and strategy workshop in Freetown and a second one in Makeni to discuss lessons learnt from the past elections and develop a strategic plan for the coverage of the entire local council elections process.

At the meetings the IRN partners agreed that there would be three types of broadcasts on elections information by IRN namely IRN Weekly elections talk programmes, a regional thematic election programme, and twice daily national broadcasts through the membership station later in the election process.

IRN Elections Talk

The “IRN Elections talk” was to commence prior to the registration process for the elections. This radio programme was designed to fill the information gap on critical issues related to the elections and also to address the need for women’s participation. The radio programme was designed to give clarity to every stage of the electoral process in order to avoid ambiguity and enhance credibility.

The one hour weekly radio programme produced by IRN focused on civic and voter education and was nationally broadcast. The one hour weekly programme was broadcasted simultaneously on all the member stations with diverse angle to address the prevailing issues in different regions. Panelist included civil society actors, NEC, Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), NEW members, political party representatives, youth and women coalitions. The public was accorded the opportunity to phone in with questions and seek clarity. These programmes supported the NEC and other stakeholders whose goals coincided with those of IRN. Common issues discussed by all the regions included, dates and rules during campaigning period, the candidate’s nomination process, tolerance and non-violence. The programmes also brought political party representatives together to discuss issues around violence and intimidation. This then set the tone of programming during campaigning period. Candidates were asked to come to the forum prepared to communicate their manifestoes to the voters, and in the question and answer sessions, the voters were encouraged to ask questions of the candidates in a coordinated way. All the political parties were given an equal opportunity to interact with voters without bias.

The interaction was also realized in the public debates held for aspirants. Ten forums were held, 6 for mayoral candidates in Freetown, Western Rural, Bo, Kenema, Makeni, Kono and 4 for chairpersons in Bonthe, Pujehun, Koinadugu and Kailahun that are districts far away from the nation’s capital and share borders with Liberia and Guinea. Each debate lasts for four hours, and each candidate was allowed at least 20 minutes to talk to the voters while the remainder of the time was used for questions and answers. The process was linked live on the IRN network of radio stations thus had national broadcast. People were able to listen and be part of the debate from their remote locations thanks to the reach of IRN. A civil society actor moderated the debate.

To generate public interest and enthusiasm, prior to the debates, jingles and spot messages were done and public notices sent out to IRN radio stations to inform the public about the event. In addition letters of invitation/notification were sent out to candidates upon release of the lists of nominated candidates from the political parties, informing them about their participation in the debates. Letters were also sent to chiefdom authorities to notify them about the event and request permission to use a local facility for the debate.

These strategies proved successful as huge numbers turned out for each debate. Most people when asked explained that they attended the sessions because they had never before witnessed such events in the political history of Sierra Leone. The majority of the audiences were made up of youths, women and elderly who seized the opportunity to interact with their potential representatives. This way whomever emerged victorious from the election could be held accountable for any promises made.

In almost all the constituencies, the candidate's manifestoes addressed similar issues including security, the education of young girls, road construction, food security and inflation. The audience asked each candidate how they would raise the funds for their proposed projects and how far the communities would be involved in the design and implementation of those projects.

Public cooperation was very good in all the districts with attendance increasing each day. For those who could not make it to the venue, they had the opportunity to listen to it live on the radio.

Regional Elections Radio Programmes

The members developed weekly radio programmes of 30 minutes each that were broadcast by the membership in the regions they were produced in. The different regional stations decided on the themes and pursued them together. This also helped to inform the central IRN hub of the current issues in each of the regions. In total 40 programmes were produced, 10 per region for a period of 10 weeks.

IRN National Daily Broadcast

IRN developed a daily news update prior to the elections with simultaneous broadcast on all 21 independent and community radio stations. It is a 1 hour magazine program made up of news gathered by member radio stations and then packaged by the core production team at the IRN hub in Freetown. Each episode consists of three principle parts:

- Segment One: Broadcast news reports contributed by IRN stations throughout Sierra Leone with IRN's national staff helping each station repackage these stories and nationalize their perspective.
- Segment Two: In-depth interviews with IRN station news editors, who summarize what has been happening in their communities.
- Segment Three: Mobilization of women to fully participate in the election process.



IRN production facilities

Each edition of the daily news programme addresses the prevailing issues of the day but ensuring that the core principles are achieved. The news contribution from members served as a unifying element across the network. The solidarity was strengthened and each station and region identified with the programme because matters concerning their respective regions were addressed.

Intimidation toward women candidates, violence against women candidates, and the need to support women candidates all formed parts of the theme the daily update addressed. 80% of the presenters for the daily news update on radio were females from the constituent member stations. IRN provided training for these presenters and they also benefited from on the job training and mentoring. This also enforced the message of women's participation that we advocate and stimulated women to participate in the elections process.

Problems of violence and political intimidation that occurred in different parts of the country were adequately covered and reported by IRN. The network is represented in every district of the country so that reporters are there to file in first hand information as it occurs. The editorial team ensures that all sides to a story are covered. The latter always gives IRN the cutting edge for its stories are accurate and balanced. This has built up the confidence of the public and more people want to listen to IRN because according to them IRN “does not lie”. On the other hand candidates and political parties engaged in subtle intimidations became more cautious as IRN would disclose the issue to the public eye.

Thanks to the extensive coverage provided by IRN during the daily simulcast update, people are able partake via mobile phones from some of the most remote parts of the country. This was unique because as the text messages were read, these people made their views known. It can be seen as IRN giving voice the voiceless.

Other programmes

Several IRN stations conducted “know the candidates” programmes. Some of these were multi-candidate debates. Others were interview programmes featuring one candidate at a time.

IRN was unable to get all local council contestants given their number but endeavoured to cover a cross section of the contestants making sure women were voiced. IRN edited the recorded debates into a “virtual” debate.

B. Electoral Reporting

i. IRN Code of Conduct

The standard code of conduct for the electoral reporting was reviewed by IRN and shared with members in the monthly general meeting. Copies of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) media code were also distributed to members. It was read out, explained and discussed. All the network members agreed to comply with.

During one of the monthly general meeting in Makeni, members of the ethics committee identified a breach of the code of ethics by a staff of a member station. Investigations and reprimand was recommended which took effect. This isolated case and action sent a warning to all member stations.

The most important way to improve the quality of IRN reporters was to work at the station level to strengthen the quality of stories sent by local reporters. This required a sustained effort. The BBC World Service Trust focused on this aspect and BBC trainers spent a month at a number of IRN stations working on a sustained training programme for elections reporting.

Additionally, IRN stations sent their news editors or a senior news representative for a two-day training workshop. Overall, the goals were to build a sense of teamwork and shared purpose among the station news departments, and to get stations thinking about how news in their communities might be of interest to the nation as a whole. The training focused on what stations need to do for their new IRN news program to succeed. This involved exercises in “nationalizing” local stories, and exercises in “talking the news” effectively while being interviewed.

ii. Preparations for elections day reporting

In a one-day workshop for IRN station Managers and Producers, members agreed on several principles for their election coverage, which included accurate and balanced reporting, providing listeners with an account of trends in the entire country, providing the public with timely access to information, acting as a watchdog on the election process and decreasing the potential for false rumours and violence to spread.

Achieving these goals was the primary focus of most of the meetings held before elections day, guiding the IRN team in several areas.

- Establishing a broadcast schedule for special election programs.
- Creating an editorial work plan for receiving news from field reporters.
- Organizing the central news hub to efficiently handle vote results, news events stories, and election analysis interviews.
- Reconfiguring the IRN production facility into a live-on-air radio studio.

iii. Election day

Broadcast Schedule

On elections day, IRN mounted an eighteen-hour extensive coverage of the elections. Twelve of those hours were dedicated to national programming and another six hours to local programming. During the six hours of local programming, IRN broadcast news bulletins at the top of each hour. Stations were free to break away for the remainder of the hour and during this period cover local issues in their surrounding. On the day after the elections, IRN provided a two-hour national program in the morning and evening. For the remainder of the day, IRN broadcast news bulletins each hour again allowing stations to break away for the remainder of the hour.

Editorial Process

Election coverage consists of three major components: results, events, and analysis. The IRN team crafted an editorial process to create an efficient division of labour, and a manageable system to receive information from the field and package it for use on air.

Field Reports:

It was decided that IRN station-based journalists would report news to their own stations. IRN central information hub then contacted key presenters at each station, who provided on-air roundups of election events in their districts. Using the pyramid approach IRN strategically placed about fifty roving election reporters into areas with high tension between rival parties, areas difficult to access, or places with no broadcast coverage. The reporters, who came from IRN stations and SFCG staff, were mandated to report to their own stations and live to national audiences through IRN on the conditions they found, and to monitor and investigate allegations of electoral fraud.

Throughout election day, the information coming in gave producers a clear view of how the elections were progressing nationally and feeding into a live rolling news service from early morning until mid afternoon, which continued again in the evening as results were trickling in.

Vote Results:

As a standard adopted since the 2002 elections, IRN conducted its own quick-count parallel vote tabulation. This would be a safeguard against election fraud, and helped to ease tension by filling an anticipated information vacuum before the National Electoral Commission (NEC) began to progressively release official results itself.

There were significant challenges but this time progress was made based on improving the lessons learnt from 2002 and 2007 elections. NEC published results at the individual polling centre level with no other disclosure before national vote tabulation began. This meant that IRN reporters had to visit various polling stations to get the displayed results. With a team of database entry personnel backed by a group of volunteers manning phones at the Freetown hub, the 250 election reporters stationed across the country called in the unofficial voting results as they were announced and posted at each poll centre. Working at a slow pace, the result tallies were gathered and broadcast to listeners around the nation. As the counting process progressed and NEC began issuing consolidated results, IRN focused on managing expectations around the developing numbers.

C. Mobilize Women Producers and Presenters linked with women’s solidarity movements

Working with SFCG, IRN organized trainings for 40 young female presenters and producers from all 20 IRN partner stations, to strengthen their communication and production skills. The trainees were then used to mobilize female participation in their various regions. During the elections of 2007 and 2008, Local Council Elections were crucial to the work of the Independent Radio Network, in particular in the effort to support women candidates. These elections provided an opportunity for women and young people to participate in the political process, and it served as an entry point for their inclusion in the country’s decision-making. Therefore, women and youth voices on issues of concern needed to be captured and allowed to flow through debates and forums on radio.



Female IRN members examining the list of female candidates

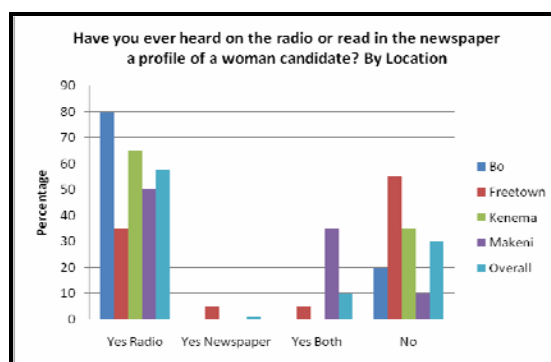
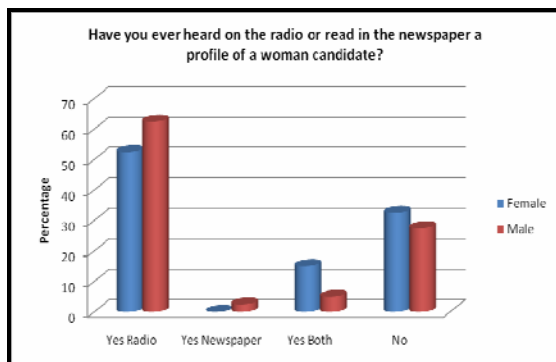
The producers made a commitment to provide airtime for nominated and independent female candidates after campaigning was declared open. The producers and presenters from the radio stations sent to the IRN office individual schedules for the programmes for monitoring and those copies are now being collected for archiving. Based upon these reports, the radio stations dedicated a total of 78 hours to female candidates.

Radio Station	Location	Allocated airtime
Radio Bintumani	Kabala	2 hrs
Radio Moa	Kailahun	3 ½ hrs
KISS FM Radio Bo	Bo	3 hrs
Eastern Radio	Kenema	6 hrs

Radio Bontico	Bonthe	4 hrs
Radio Kolenten	Kambia	6 hrs
Radio Mankneh	Makeni	4 hrs
Radio Maria	Makeni	2 hrs
Radio Gbafth	Mile 91	6 hrs
Radio New Song	Bo	4 hrs
Radio Wanjei	Pujehun	2 hrs
Voice of Women	Mattru Jong	5 hrs
Radio MODCAR	Moyamba	3 hrs
Voice of the Peninsula	Tombo	3 hrs
SHYY Radio	Freetown	7 hrs
Radio Democracy	Freetown	1 ½ hrs
Believers Broadcasting Network	Freetown	2 hrs
Kalleone Radio	Freetown	8 hrs
Radio Mount Aureol	Freetown	2 hrs
Choice FM	Lungi	4 hrs

A pre-election survey was conducted by IRN and SFCG in order to assess the immediate impact of the project on voter's access to credible election information through the radio, particularly related to women candidates, as well as their awareness of the women candidates running in the election. 80 people participated in the survey, 20 in each of four locations: Freetown, Bo, Makeni, and Kenema.

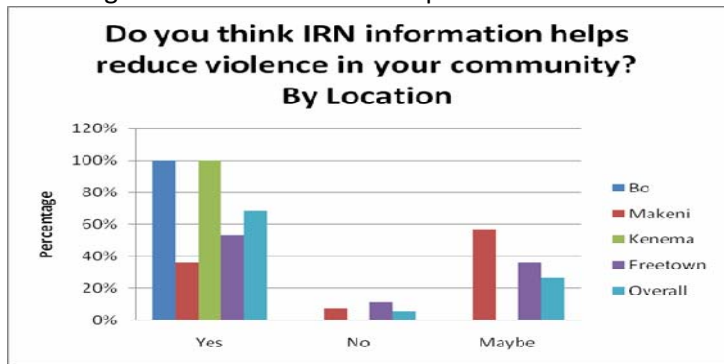
With regards to female candidates, 76% of respondents were able to name a female candidate in their area. There was relatively little difference in this trend based upon gender or location. When asked if they had heard on IRN a profile of a woman candidate, 57% heard one on the radio. For the breakdown by gender and location, please refer to the graphs below.



D. OUTCOMES

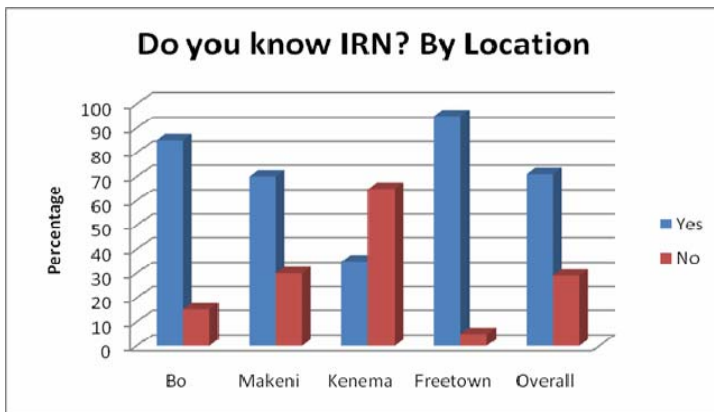
In the pre-survey conducted by IRN and SFCG, the results of the questionnaire display that 71.25% of respondents are familiar with IRN. Freetown had the most people who were familiar with IRN, while

Kenema had the least (see graph). There was no significant difference in responses from men and women. Of the people who answered yes to knowing IRN, approximately 70% gave IRN a “5” and 16% gave IRN a “4” when asked if they trusted in the information on IRN; with 1 = not at all, and 5 = very much. This trend did not vary greatly between genders. However it did vary slightly by location. The least number of people who trusted IRN were in Freetown, whereas the most amounts of people who greatly trusted IRN live in Makeni.



When asked if they believe that IRN has reduced violence in their community, approximately 68% said yes and 26% said maybe. Once again, there was no considerable difference in the responses given by

men and women, but there was a difference based on location. Both Bo and Kenema had 100% of respondents say that they believe IRN helped reduce violence. In Freetown and Makeni, on the other hand, 53% and 36%, of respondents, respectively, believed IRN helped reduce violence. Please see graph.

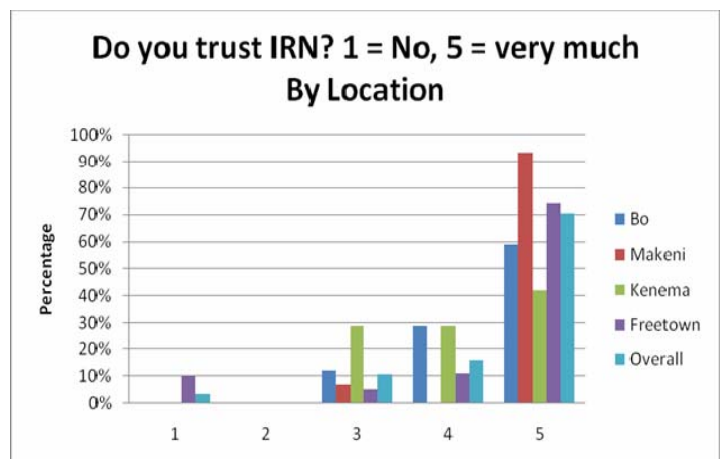


One example given by a respondent in Bo about how IRN has helped reduced violence was with regards to the “clock tower issue.”

In Bo Town, whose constituents are largely in support of the opposition party - the Sierra Leone People’s Party - there were many problems around the central clock tower. The current government tried to paint it red and white (its party colours) and a portrait of President Ernest Bai Koroma was hung from the tower. However, at various points, the clock tower was “anonymously” re-painted and the picture was damaged. The respondent said that because of the accurate and credible IRN reporting on this issue, violence has been avoided as people have the proper information.

In Bo Town, whose constituents are largely

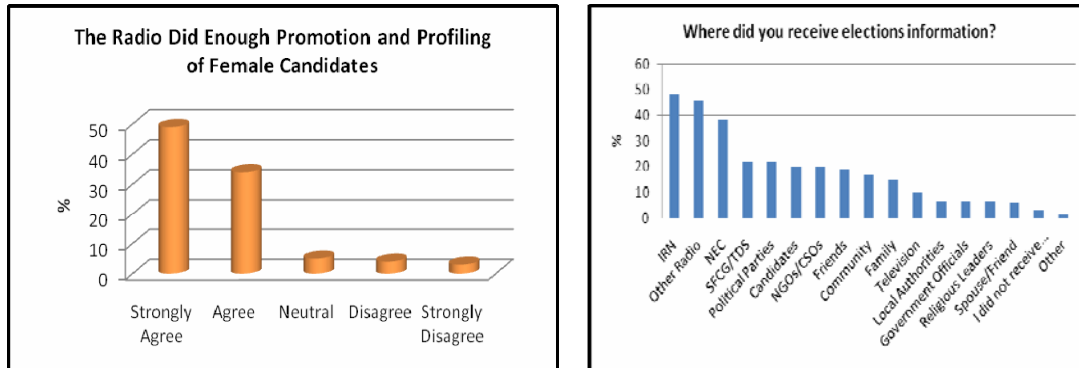
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From these findings, it is justifiable to conclude that IRN is both listened to and deemed credible. Furthermore, the initiatives of this project in promoting female candidates have been relatively successful as the majority of people are able to name a female candidate

and have heard at least one female candidate's profile as a result of this project. It was also found that programming for disabled candidates faced challenges and would need to be revised in the future to create a more effective impact.

In another post elections survey conducted by SFCG and National Elections Watch (NEW), in which 790 people were surveyed from each district in Sierra Leone, results show that the radio was adequate in providing information about female candidates and that the radio was the number one source for people to get elections information, as shown in the following graphs:



From these results, it can be concluded that this project's campaign to disseminate election-related information through the radio, and to profile women through the radio, was effective.

E. NEXT STEPS

As a result of the desired impact achieved on raising awareness on women's participation in the elections process, a follow up action is envisaged by IRN. Activities of women candidates can be followed up and profiled in order to motivate them to do more.

- ☐ The existing "Parliament Bol At" programme will be reviewed to cover more accountability issues among parliamentarians and councillors.
- IRN will develop a national strategy to ensure that it serves as a national information network to uphold democratic principles.
- After the daily news update ended it became clear that there was a news vacuum. As a result, IRN intends to start a one hour twice weekly live update covering news and emerging issues across the country.
- Empower more women radio broadcasters to provide continuous support to women solidarity groups, Female Members of Parliament and Female Councillors.