



## Strengthening police and media relations for the safety of journalists and peaceful, free and fair elections in West Africa

MAY 2018 | A joint initiative by MFWA and IMS in cooperation with ECOWAS





Published in Ghana in 2018

Strengthening police and media relations for the safety of journalists and peaceful, free and fair elections in West Africa.

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Written by Michelle Betz

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**Cover photo:** Policemen screen journalists at the main road leading to the headquarters of the Ghanaian Electoral Commission before being allowed to cover the announcement of the final results of the presidential and parliamentary elections in Accra, Ghana on December 10, 2008.

Photo: Pius Utomi Ekpei /AFP





This publication written by Michelle Betz compiles the experience gained from a regional media and police dialogues initiative implemented by International Media Support and Media Foundation for West Africa in cooperation with ECOWAS. The media-police dialogues were held in connection with elections in Ghana (2016), in Liberia (2017-2018) and in Sierra Leone (2018).

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## Foreword

The relationship between the media and security agencies, including those in the law enforcement and intelligence services, has always been a delicate one. In the West African context, this relationship is often characterized by frequent clashes, arising from a somewhat startling inability of either side to fully appreciate the role of the other in society, particularly in democratic governance.

For decades, each side has viewed the other with suspicion and often-times, as an enemy. The media tend to regard security agencies as over-stating their importance and interest in enforcing public order and protecting national security. Many in the media sector believe that the concern expressed by security agencies over these issues are mere excuses to justify their tendency to violate the rights of citizens and the media, including the right to freedom of expression and media freedom.

The security agencies, on the other hand, largely see media practitioners as reckless and irresponsible, with no regard for the security of the State. Despite widespread instances of corruption, abuse of power and other forms of misconduct in the security sector, security agencies remain impatient with and intolerant of the notion that the media have a duty to hold them accountable.

Matters are not helped when journalists are lax or act unprofessionally in the performance of their functions and get their facts wrong or publish reports which contain inaccuracies. The tendency is for the law enforcement agents to visit such situations with heavy-handedness, sometimes invoking criminal law to punish such journalists to the maximum extent possible and at other times, completely discountenancing the requirements of the rule of law or human rights norms and standards. In many of such cases, security agents have been known to take matters into their own hands either by physically brutalizing the journalists or abusing their powers of arrest and detention to punish journalists who have acted in a manner that does not meet the approval of the security agents.

Ironically, although the security agencies are perhaps the most important factor in ensuring the safety of journalists, including in the context of





elections, in many cases, they remain the greatest threat to that safety. Reports from the monitoring of attacks on the media in the West African region and in individual countries over the last several decades have demonstrated clearly that a significant percentage of recorded attacks on the media and media freedom are perpetrated by members of law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

Violent conflicts have become regular features of national elections in many West African countries, with journalists being deliberately targeted in many cases where contestants in the elections and other actors are displeased by their reporting. In such cases, journalists should ordinarily be able to look towards law enforcement agencies for protection. However, experience has shown that in many cases, law enforcement agents are either complicit in the attacks on journalists or are disposed to turn a blind eye to the violence being unleashed on journalists.

Instituting confidence-building mechanisms and professional journalistic processes to facilitate dialogue between the two groups, engender greater understanding and eliminate distrust and mutual suspicion has become essential in order to promote and create a culture of peaceful elections and democratic processes in the region, where key stakeholders, like the media and security agencies, recognise each other's roles and enable the conditions for the optimal performance of those roles.

This report, *"Strengthening Police and Media Relations for Peaceful, Free and Fair Elections in West Africa"*, makes an invaluable and commendable contribution towards that goal by pulling together experiences and reflections from the region, distilling lessons learnt and best practices in this regard and outlining a framework to inform future initiatives by a variety of stakeholders.

## Edetaen Ojo

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*Chair, Board of Directors of the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)*

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## 1. Introduction

*"Half the job of controlling security is providing reliable information to the community and that means working with the media."*

**Participant at police-media forum in Monrovia, Liberia, February 2018**

The media and security forces are both essential for peacebuilding and ensuring peace and security perhaps even more so during electoral periods and in post-conflict or transitional environments. During electoral periods the public rely on the media for credible, fact-based information about the candidates, the electoral process and security issues. At the same time, political parties and candidates, interest groups, and other key stakeholders such as the electoral commission, election observers, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders also rely on the media for disseminating information on emerging issues, for clarifying issues and for expressing any concerns to the public.

Journalists are, therefore, in the midst of competing interests and information throughout the electioneering period. As a result of these competing interests, particularly among political parties and candidates, journalists are likely to become targets of threats and physical attacks by political activists and thugs simply for doing their work – putting out information about activities of parties and candidates, developments at polling stations and collation centers, and acts by activists that could lead to violence, among others. And it is often in these environments that there are skirmishes or attacks against journalists also at the hands of security forces.

This, coupled with legitimate processes by journalists to obtain and disseminate accurate information to the public may sometimes run counter to or conflict with operations by security agencies leading to challenges between journalists and the security agencies. This sometimes results in relationships marked by misunderstandings and mistrust.

One way to address such issues is to create a space for dialogue. One recommended best practice that emerged from International Media Support's (IMS) activities in the lead up to the October 2007 legislative







elections in the West African country of Togo suggested that simply by providing space for dialogue between media and security officials and other authorities can provide at least a starting point for mutual understanding and better working relations.

That exercise has served as a point of departure for more elaborate recent interventions in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone where it was clear that there was a need for creating space for dialogue with security forces and their personnel, as well as with public officials, to create awareness on the role of media, the importance of their safety and of respecting journalistic work. Likewise, such a space provides an opportunity for journalists to better understand what limitations they face vis-à-vis security forces in transitional environments such as elections or a post-conflict situation.

As such, there needs to be a concerted effort in developing best practices regarding interventions protecting and promoting the role of the media in strengthening democratic structures particularly during electoral periods. For over ten years, IMS and Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) have worked together in a number of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to do precisely this: create preconditions for peaceful and fair electoral processes in West Africa by engaging with and supporting working relations between key stakeholders such as police and military and the media.

The comprehensive concept described in this publication was developed with the overall aim of addressing these issues. As such, the conceptual approach and its various components as described in this publication can serve to provide inspiration and guidance in the form of best practices with a particular focus on promoting a constructive working relationship between the security and media sectors and thereby create an environment conducive for peaceful, free and fair elections in maturing democracies such as those of West Africa.

In a move towards developing best practices, this report intends to review interventions undertaken in three countries, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone and, more generally, describe and analyze the elections support concept that has been developed in close cooperation between IMS and MFWA.





## 2. Conceptual considerations and description of the process

Electoral periods in any country can be contentious, tense and with a higher probability for conflict than other times, particularly in transitional and post-conflict environments. It is in these environments, too, in which journalists and media workers are more prone to be the subjects of aggression, violence and abuses.

Both media and security forces have major roles to play during the electoral process yet their relationship is often complex and, at times, antagonistic. While both seek to contribute to creating preconditions for elections to be peaceful, transparent and successful, there is a need for the two parties to have a clearer understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities.

To address this and create an atmosphere of mutual understanding and dialogue, IMS has supported interventions bringing together media and police in West Africa to ensure collaboration between the two parties during election periods and ensure safety of media workers covering the electoral process.

Over the past two years in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone, IMS and MFWA, together with local partners, implemented several complementary activities in each country that had as their focus dialogue between police and media and enhancing the safety of media workers. The main components were: conflict sensitive election reporting and safety training for journalists; an opportunity for police from different countries to share experiences on media and elections security; and finally, a dialogue forum which brought together senior media editors and managers and senior police officers. These activities together reinforced the common understanding of the importance of journalists being able to access information while doing so responsibly and ethically as well as security forces being able to carry on their mission of maintaining public order while respecting human rights, freedom of expression and the safety of journalists.

Promoting a healthy and respectful working relationship between media and security forces and ensuring the safety of journalists allow for an





environment in which the media are able to provide important information that citizens need during electoral periods and it is the complementarity of the components, different kinds of focused safety training as well as police – media dialogues, that seek to support precisely these objectives.

Journalists must have a clear understanding of the electoral process so that they can inform the citizens responsibly and accurately. The inclusion of one day training on conflict-sensitive election reporting seeks to address this element and, in the case of Ghana, was enhanced by the inclusion of a representative of the electoral commission who could clearly outline the regulations and legislation which the media need to observe also during such sensitive periods. The objective of this was to ensure that journalists had the information necessary to cover the electoral period with veracity.

A second day was devoted to safety training for journalists. This contextualized training was developed so that journalists in the field could improve their risk awareness and have a better understanding of how to stay safe as they cover large gatherings, demonstrations and other elections-related events. Gender aspects of safety were also addressed to ensure that women had specific information that could enhance their safety. While the participants were senior editors and managers, all were asked to share what they had learned with their colleagues who would be covering the elections in the field. The objective here was to ensure that the journalists learned risk awareness techniques they could both use and share with colleagues as well as tips on how to stay safe as they covered the elections.

This two-day workshop was thus able to provide tips and techniques on election reporting and how to stay safe while covering the process. While the journalists were in their second day of the workshop, representatives from the police had an opportunity to gather with their colleagues from across the country and in some cases from across the region. The day was an opportunity to discuss and share election-related security-related issues. In some cases (Liberia and Sierra Leone), colleagues from Ghana and Liberia participated and shared information as to how they had dealt with various security issues related to protecting the role of the media during their respective elections.





The final day brought together the journalists (from the first two days) and the police (from the previous day) so that they could share and exchange experiences. In essence, this day (which in some cases may be more appropriate for two days) was the culmination of the previous three days as it provided an opportunity for all to find and discuss ways of ensuring positive, professional and fruitful working relationships during the electoral period and ultimately, beyond. Modalities and best practices are discussed below.

Finally, to ensure both follow up, sustainability and further solidification of relationships between the two parties, a post-election forum was held that once again brought together the same journalists and police that took part in the dialogue forum. This one day meeting also allowed for joint evaluation of the previous meeting as well as the modalities developed for their working relationship during the elections. After all, elections may be a good reason for starting such a dialogue but it should definitely not end there.

It is important to note, of course, that there are likely to be a variety of challenges that may need to be overcome with each context presenting differently. In Togo, for example, one significant challenge was the fractured media community. There were numerous (at least ten) media unions and associations and relations had been characterized by rivalry and tension; it was rare for these organisations to work together. Ensuring the successful organisation and implementation of a dialogue forum, however, prompted these organisations to work together and put aside their differences.

In Sierra Leone, the dialogue forum was held a mere week prior to the elections. Despite this, due to the buy-in and commitment from the stakeholders involved to ensure peaceful, free and fair elections, the forum was a success.





### 3. Dialogic exchange: media-security forces

*"Balancing legitimate demands for access to public information with the equally legitimate but sometimes conflicting need to maintain law and order in society is a challenge for any democratic society. In general, promoting respect for freedom of expression does not lead to disorder and instability, but creates opportunities for constructive dialogue both between different sections of society and between citizens and public authorities. The right of citizens to receive and impart information and ideas is a fundamental right, and experience has shown that promoting respect for this right strengthens social dialogue and helps consolidate democratic institutions."*<sup>1</sup>

**UNESCO publication "Freedom of Expression and Public Order"**

It was precisely to address these objectives that IMS, MFWA and ECOWAS sought, together with local partners, to bring together police and media workers. The dialogue forums that were held in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone (and much earlier in Togo (2007) and Guinea (2010)) brought together senior media workers (managers and editors) and police officers. These forums were based on the principles of dialogic negotiation providing for an opportunity for dialogue that promotes shared solutions in difficult contexts. The characteristics of dialogic exchange or negotiation, on which the forums were conducted, include the following<sup>2</sup>:

1. Begins with an understanding of the meaning of the conflict and with a clear, working model of how the parties might negotiate those things that are important to them;
2. Focuses on shared and opening questioning of the conflict and of each other's needs;
3. Integrates diverse and oppositional perspectives to achieve win-win solutions;
4. Moves participants beyond polarized arguments and instead promotes the fusion of ideas requiring engagement;

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, (2015), *Freedom of Expression and Public Order*, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Peter M. Kellett, (2007), *Conflict Dialogue: Working with layers of meaning for productive relationships*, University of North Carolina, Greensboro.





5. Develops conflict discourse that explores shared and different meanings and points of possible new meaning helping to achieve a new substance and form of communication between people;
6. By giving participants the space to present the conflict that represents his or her version of the events and encouraging them to question their own and each other's stories of conflict allows them to develop a new story and points to a more collaborative future;
7. Broadens options for pre- and post-conflict management; at the very least the dialogue should bring out possibilities they could not see before due to the conflicted relationship.

In the case of these police-media forums, the objective was to improve what is sometimes a tense relationship between security forces and journalists and to promote freedom of expression and safety of journalists particularly in transitional environments such as elections and post-conflict environments.

It is intended that this report will be able to share lessons and reflections of such interventions to inform future projects as well as the internal policies of security forces, electoral commissions as well as media houses, journalism associations and other stakeholders.





## 4. Ghana (2016)

### Context

Ghana went to the polls on December 7, 2016 to vote in presidential and legislative elections. While the country historically had not experienced election-related violence, there had been heightened tensions. Some months prior to the election, the police administration announced 5,500 electoral flashpoints across the country while assuring the public it was putting in place measures to ensure those flashpoints would not pose any risk going into the elections.<sup>3</sup>

The former executive director of the Media Foundation for West Africa, Prof. Kwame Karikari believed that in every national election there are pockets of violence but that this year the pre-election rhetoric of the leading political parties, especially on radio, gives the impression that all hell will break loose.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, while there was no evidence of planned attacks against journalists by security forces, the police have been accused of press freedom violations in Ghana in recent times. On top of this is dwindling public trust and support for the media and increased partisanship among the media.

These factors together suggested that journalists are likely to be vulnerable should there be election-related violence. Journalists may be targeted by political activists for unprofessional conduct or partisanship. There was also no known specific plan for journalists' safety by the security forces during the elections.

While there were several ongoing elections-related initiatives, there was none that focused on the safety and security of journalists during the elections. IMS and MFWA therefore decided to implement a safety initiative prior to the elections.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://allafrica.com/stories/201610141037.html>

<sup>4</sup> Email correspondence.





## Implementation

The holistic initiative included three components in Ghana: safety training for journalists, conflict-sensitive election reporting, and the police-media dialogue. This report focuses on the latter.

The dialogue between the police and the media provided an opportunity for the two groups to have frank discussions on the challenges the police have with the media and vice versa. The meeting also discussed modalities for police-media co-operation for ensuring the safety of journalists while covering the elections.

The forum was held under the Chatham House Rule, allowing for a very open and frank discussion. All participants seemed to embrace the opportunity to vent frustrations but also to listen to and learn about the concerns of the other side. The police, moreover, provided a detailed briefing on their preparations for election day, which was useful for the media to understand how much effort had been put into ensuring that voting could take place in a peaceful manner. For their part, media representatives were given a chance to explain the importance of their role during elections, not least the need to ask critical questions.

Participants included a Commissioner of the National Media Commission (NMC), President of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA), Chairperson

*Assistant  
Superintendent  
Effia Tenge, Public  
Relations Officer for  
the Accra Regional  
Police Command,  
took part in the  
media and police  
dialogues forum in  
2016 in Accra.  
Photo: MFWA*







of Editors Forum-Ghana, Executive Secretary of the Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association (GIBA), editors and senior journalists from a number of media organisations.

Representing the Ghana Police Service (GPS) were the Director of Operations who also co-ordinates the Elections Task Force; Commander and Deputy Commander of the Counter Terrorism Unit; Commander of the Motor Transport and Traffic Division; Commander of the Formed Unit; Director and Deputy Director of Public Relations all from headquarters of the GPS; as well as Public Relations Officers from the Regional Commands of the GPS.

The facilitator was media consultant and university lecturer, Prof. Kwame Karikari, who is also the former director of MFWA.

There were a number of key points that arose during the discussion. There was agreement, for example, that the respective roles of the media and police are complementary, with media helping society come to consensus (despite opposing views), and police ensuring security for all. However, it was also agreed that there was a clear need for the two sides to improve relations and learn more about the work of each other.

Many of the editors highlighted the need for police to be able to deal with growing pressure on the media and were urged to be transparent and share more information with the media, except when classified. "When you speak directly to the media, they are less likely to spin or twist information," said one participant. Similarly, there were calls for the police to be more proactive in revealing results of investigations which would be in the interest of the media as well as essential for the public and for national security.

The police, however, questioned the "sensationalist tendencies" of the media as well as their penchant for "ridiculing" the police. Similarly, the police are often wrongly perceived to be partisan (i.e. on the side of the president) even though it serves through changing governments. This type of exchange exemplifies the need for increased understanding between the two parties and the modalities and conditions under which each operates.

The issue of taking photos turned out to be a major source of confrontation in many of the districts and there was discussion surrounding best





practices for both parties in how to deal with this. One suggestion was the call to replicate the dialogue forum in various locations thereby ensuring police and media across the country were all on the same page.

Another point that was raised was agreement that the immediate aftermath of the closing of polls is the most critical period in the electoral cycle with social media active and rumours spreading. Police are required to be especially vigilant and present in places where crowds are likely to gather. The media also play an important role at that time.

There was also an interesting discussion on the difference between an electoral offence and a crime thus suggesting more work needs to be done outside of electoral periods to educate journalists, for example, on covering crime and national security. This further suggests a need for additional meetings and workshops in the future to strengthen the police-media relationship in general.

At the end of the meeting, the two sides agreed on a number of practical measures, such as media wearing visible accreditation; the need for clear focal points within the police at all levels; and the need to protect journalists who are attacked at polling stations. These guidelines can found as an annex.

Following the interventions in Ghana, there was no single election-related attack or abuse of a journalist before, during or after the elections.

*IMS together with Media Foundation West Africa organised a media and police dialogue training session in connection with the elections in Ghana in 2016. Photo: MFWA*





## 5. Liberia (2017)

### Context

Prior to the October 2017 elections there were grave concerns by many analysts and political watchers the outcome as it was going to be the first to be solely organized and executed by Liberians since 1985. The success of the elections was a major test case for Liberia's fragile peace, and definitely to show how far of age Liberians had come and their political maturity as a people.

The other challenge with the election was that for the first time, Liberian security forces was to be directly in charge of managing the very demanding security requirements during general presidential elections. The United Nations' security set up in Liberia (UNMIL), which had managed security processes during previous presidential elections, ended its mission in June 2016.

Meanwhile, while the gradual democratization process in Liberia over the years has been associated with general improvement in press freedom conditions in Liberia, there was evidence that during critical national events such as elections, the Liberian police tend to have a bad press freedom record. Apart from consistent attacks on media personnel by security forces and individuals, the media landscape is also characterized by high levels of unprofessionalism, which in turn has eroded public trust and confidence in the media. Thus, attacks on the media are often not condemned by the public who accuse the media of being corrupt and unprofessional.

In Liberia, the gradual democratization process has been associated with general improvement in press freedom. As Liberians readied to go to the polls in 2017, the media had a crucial role to play in ensuring credible, transparent and peaceful elections. Yet, journalists and media workers were likely to be vulnerable to attacks and abuses by police, other security forces and individuals. At the same time, media tend to misunderstand or misinterpret the role and responsibilities of the police.





## Implementation

In addition to a two-day capacity building for journalists on safety during election coverage, the forum in Liberia was similar to that in Ghana but had in addition an informal session that allowed for free and frank discussions among journalists, security personnel and other stakeholders. In addition, members of the Ghana Police Service who took part in the Ghana activity participated in the Liberia forum. This allowed for cross-regional exchange and built an additional layer of knowledge and understanding among participants.

The forum brought together 20 senior journalist/editors and 15 Liberian senior police officers who were part of the elections security and took place over two days. The first day was for police only and was an experience sharing meeting that brought together members of the Ghana Police Service and Liberia Police. The second day saw those participants from day one joined by the media that had been taking part in the safety training.



A man listens to the radio next to two men reading the newspaper in order to find provisional elections results, in Monrovia, Liberia, on October 13, 2017. Photo: Cristina Aldehuela / AFP





Over the course of the first day, issues discussed included how to deal with the media when difficult situations arise; elections security planning for journalists and plans by the Liberia Police to ensure journalists' safety during the elections. Two senior police officers from Ghana, Dr. Benjamin Agordzo, Assistant Commissioner of Police and Inspector Mohammed Bako both of the Ghana Police Service who were part of the leadership of the Election Security Taskforce during Ghana's elections shared their experience with members of the leadership of the Liberian Police who would be responsible for elections security.

ACP Dr. Benjamin Agordzo, Ghana Police Service (GPS) gave a detailed presentation on steps that were put in place to ensure a violent free election in December 2016. He highlighted some of these measures during his presentation in Liberia:

- The police should see the media as partners in security matters adding that the media is a friend; it depends on the manner you handle them;
- The police should have a dedicated media engagement strategy which can lead to greater engagement with the media including use of social media;
- The police should as much as possible be available for all flagship media programmes to respond to and speak to issues of elections security. This will help clear public doubts and misconceptions about the police and its work around the elections;
- The police should consider the establishment of a media engagement centre to coordinate all media engagements for consistency. A social media centre can also be created to track or monitor prominent stories and the tagging of posts by influential individuals

Liberia's Deputy IGP, Col. Abraham K. Kromah, also presented measures put in place by the Liberia National Police to monitor and guard against any security issues that might arise as well as ensure the safety of the media during their coverage of the elections.

The one-day police-media dialogue focused on discussing possible modalities for police-media co-operation and safety of journalists during the coverage of the elections. The police and media had frank discussions to further understand each other's needs, expectations and limitations as well as challenges





they might face with each other as they undertook their duties during the election campaign, polls, possible run-off and post-election.

One month after the second round of elections, a post-election evaluation meeting was held to learn about and document what went well, what could have been done differently and lessons learnt to guide future interventions.

At the post-election forum, the electoral commission noted that they had called on both media and police to be transparent in how they operated and noted with pleasure that the police were more transparent and operated quite differently than during the last elections in 2011. The commission, did however note that at times the media ran counter to some of the professional ethics with radio and social media being particularly partisan. One participant suggested that the Press Union of Liberia should include a section in the code of ethics regarding working with police to promote security.

The electoral commission also noted that they did not see police using excessive force and commended them for that. They had also called for the police to be equitable regarding treatment of political parties and that happened. The commission also noted that in terms of managing limited resources, the police were strategic and made some hard choices regarding deployment of manpower.

The police noted that in compliance with the recommendations made at the pre-election forum, at least 80% of journalists reported themselves to the officer in charge of the district they were covering. In addition, the commissioner's office received tens of calls from journalists identifying areas where there were issues and more police were needed. Police noted how helpful this was. Likewise, journalists noted that prior to the forum if a journalist would ask for police for assistance they often would not respond whereas post-forum there was better response.

Participants also felt that public perception regarding the police has changed for the better. This was in part attributed to the fact that the police would communicate important information to the media early in the day, the public quickly received information. There was at least one case in which a radio station reported something involving the police incorrectly. The police public affairs addressed this quickly initially by calling the station involved to correct the information and then reaching







Supporters for the Coalition for Democratic Change(CDC) party of George Weah listening to radio for the elections results, at the party headquarters in Monrovia, Liberia, 11 October 2017.  
Photo: EPA/Ahmed Jallanzo

out to other radio stations to ensure the incorrect information was not repeated. Of course, each case is different and clearly journalists must verify all information they receive before going to air or print.

There were also several instances discussed of how journalists helped police who were coming under attack and vice versa with the perpetrators of the attacks being supporters of political parties.

There was acknowledgement that both parties need one another, that both need to take ownership and keep communicating with one another and a number of recommendations were made as the two parties discussed about working relationships in the future.





There was consensus, for example, that there is still a need to increase public trust and to ensure mutual accountability going forward. The national media council needs to be more active in holding media to account which will help build trust. Similarly, the police suggested that more investigative reporting is needed as well as increased understanding on coverage of crime.

Both police and media recognized the importance of decentralizing press and public affairs in Liberia's 15 counties and 5 regions. According to one participant: "In rural areas there needs to be an effort to connect police with the people. Every county detachment must have a PR person who can respond to questions not just from the media but perhaps more importantly, those from the community."

There is was also agreement among participants that there is a need for police commanders to receive training about media relations and freedom of expression and this should not be relegated only to public affairs but included in the police academy curriculum so that all entering police will be exposed to such a module.

Members of both the media and police cautioned that many media were becoming partisan and that with radio being the primary source of information there is a need for talk show hosts, for example, to be more neutral. "Our democracy is too fragile for media to be openly taking sides", said one participant, asking "who's watching the watchdog?"

Following the intervention in Liberia, there was no single election-related attack or abuse of a journalist before, during or after the elections.







## 6. Sierra Leone (2018)

### Context

Sierra Leone held general elections to elect a President, Parliamentarians and district representatives on March 7, 2018. The election was the third of such elections since 2002 when the country's prolonged and devastating civil war came to an end. Just as its neighbour, Liberia, which recently had a successful and peaceful elections, democratic stability and peace in post-civil war Sierra Leone remains fragile. Governance institutions remain relatively weak with high levels of public mistrust for state institutions.

Again, as was the case in the recent Liberian elections, the incumbent President of Sierra Leone, Ernest Bai Koroma was not a candidate in the upcoming elections having served the mandatory two 5-year terms. Traditionally, elections in Sierra Leone have often been keenly contested and there were 16 presidential candidates for the March 7 elections.

While the three post-civil war elections passed relatively peacefully, there were incidents of violence in all cases. Apart from the prevailing fragile peace, the stakes in the 2018 elections were further heightened by a number of factors including the fact that it will be the first post-civil war elections that the incumbent president is not a candidate. There were also increased political divisions along ethnic lines.

The elections were therefore seen by many analysts as a major test case for Sierra Leone's fragile peace which, was recently further threatened by the devastating Ebola outbreak followed by a catastrophic mudslide that killed thousands and virtually paralysed the functioning of the state.

While the gradual democratisation process over the years has been associated with general improvement in press freedom conditions in Sierra Leone, during critical national events such as during previous elections and the Ebola outbreak, the police tend to have a bad press freedom record. As is the case in many countries, the police in Sierra Leone have on several occasions arbitrarily arrested, detained and assaulted journalists usually on the orders of political activists.





*Voters and soldiers argue on the military presence at the polling stations in Freetown on March 31, 2018 during the second round of Sierra Leone's presidential election. Photo: Issouf Sanogo / AFP*









Apart from consistent attacks on media personnel and other acts of press freedom violations by security forces and individuals, the media landscape in Sierra Leone, as is the case in nearly all countries in the region, is characterised by high levels of unprofessionalism which in turn has eroded public trust and confidence in the media. Thus, attacks on the media are often not condemned by the public who accuse the media of being corrupt and unprofessional.

The prevailing context for the elections, thus, suggested that while the media would have a crucial role to play in ensuring credible, transparent and peaceful elections, journalists and media workers were likely to be vulnerable to attacks and abuses by the police, other security forces and individuals, particularly in the event of an outbreak of election-related violence.

As in Liberia, while there were several other initiatives aimed at ensuring credible and peaceful elections, none were focused on the safety of journalists during the elections. As a result, IMS and MFWA in cooperation with ECOWAS launched this initiative shortly before the first round of elections was held.

## Implementation

Based on the prevailing context, the joint intervention in Sierra Leone was very similar to those in Ghana and Liberia. The agenda for the police-media dialogue was largely the same as was the facilitator. Participants included senior editors and managers from media houses across the country as well as high-level police officers, including public affairs personnel, from across the country. In addition, representatives from both the Ghanaian and Liberian police forces participated as did a representative of the local partner in Liberia. These three participants were able to reinforce issues being discussed, share their own first-hand experience and provide inspiration for ways forward and best practices for dealing with specific challenges.

The forum sought to provide an opportunity for experience sharing among the Ghana police, Liberian police and the Sierra Leonean police on ways of promoting the safety and security of journalists during electioneering period. In addition, journalists received important information





pertaining to risk assessment and risk management and how to stay safe while covering the election period professionally. The forum created an important space for dialogue and relationship building between Sierra Leone police and the media and ensured that both parties had an increased understanding of the other and how to effectively work with one another during the upcoming election.

The police called for enhanced cooperation with the media and explained that the media were included in their community policing strategy. They also stressed that the police and media are interdependent, and neither can do their jobs without the other and there was a call for mutual understanding despite any differences they have had in the past.

There was substantial discussion about the concern regarding the post-election period when participants were concerned that this would be the most volatile.

Unbeknownst to one another, both the police and the media had already set up situation rooms. The forum provided them an opportunity to explain the mechanics of these operations as well as to exchange contacts and coordinates prior to the elections.

Finally, participants agreed that they all needed to work together for the development of their country and to continue to build and strengthen the initiative of promoting police-media relations during elections in West Africa.

Due to the timing of the post-election forum in Sierra Leone, it was not possible to include the findings and results from that meeting. However, these will be inserted into the electronic version when they become available.





## 7. Post-election forums

A critical element of the dialogic exchange is to ensure follow up and sustainability and to that end, post-election forums were held in both Liberia and Sierra Leone. This allowed the participants to discuss and debrief particularly in light of the agreements they had made in the initial meeting. This allowed for an interactive assessment and evaluation and to identify lessons learned, missed opportunities and additional ways forward.

This should be a concrete discussion (ideally led by the same facilitator) and should focus on lessons learned during the elections as well as ways of operationalizing points agreed on during the previous forum including such issues as for instance:

- Ways of strengthening media-police relations including the possibility of having media focal points within the police service at both national and county levels;
- Possibility of including media relations in the curriculum of police training;
- Ensuring further discussion of some form of more permanent structure or forum for follow-up and continued dialogue (bi annual or annual meetings or other models);
- Modalities for building mutual respect and trust between all stakeholders – media and the police;
- Modalities for ensuring all information trickles down chain of command to police and security on the frontlines at polling stations etc. and who are likely to encounter media workers. For example, in Liberia there are national media focal points at the police, but these are still needed at regional and especially at the county level;
- When journalists are in the field and there are police present, they should introduce themselves to the commander;
- Strengthening skills and capacity of journalists to cover crime and national security as these are specialized fields;
- Strengthening skills and capacity of journalists in investigative journalism.





## 8. Best practices and lessons learned

The descriptions above of the dialogues in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone each highlight various lessons learned and best practices, some unique to the particular context while others can readily be adopted or adapted to other countries in the ECOWAS region.

As mentioned above, dialogic exchange is based on open communication, acknowledgement of conflict areas (real, perceived or potential) and a mutual understanding that the discussion may be difficult and touch on areas of tension. This is all necessary and part of the process allowing participants to move beyond polarization and polarized arguments and work together towards mutually beneficial ends. There is likely (but not always) some tension in the first hours of such a meeting, voices may be raised and accusations thrown about. It is the facilitator's role to ensure there is a respectful environment despite such tensions and should be stated at the outset with reminders during the course of the activity and that diverse perspectives are heard and that will ultimately require engagement.

Ultimately, by giving participants the space to present the conflict that represents his or her version of the events and encouraging them to question their own and each other's stories of conflict allows them to develop a new story and points to a more collaborative future. This discussion thereby also allows for greater options for pre- and post-conflict management; at the very least the dialogue should bring out possibilities they could not see due to the conflicted relationship. In some cases it may be helpful to hold the forums under the Chatham House Rule (or similar agreements) to enable and ensure frank discussions.

It is helpful to include role play activities in the forums as participatory/ active learning is more effective than passive listening to panels or lectures. Such activities could include a mock press conference or an encounter at a polling station or at the headquarters of a political party. In addition, having police and media work together in small groups to solve "problems" and come up with real solutions is another way to engage participants in both the activity and with one another and to ensure challenges and solutions are discussed and debated.







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In addition, keep numbers manageable (no more than 40) and try to have equal numbers of both parties thus avoiding anyone feeling out-numbered. There must be also commitment from all parties to ensure success and that appropriate steps are taken.

Here are some additional best practices:

### **Preparation**

First and foremost, there must be an actual need for such an activity. This sounds obvious but as we saw in the case studies, each country exhibited a need but for different reasons. In addition, it is useful to identify underlying issues which may be creating tension (real or perceived) between actors.

### **Timing**

Pre-electoral periods are a busy time for both media and security forces. As such, it is prudent not to wait until the last minute to implement such activities. Instead, planning should begin several months ahead of the polling day with the dialogue taking place some 8-10 weeks prior to polling day; too far ahead and the activity is likely to not hold the relevance needed to be successful.

### **Local partners**

Identify and partner with local organisations on the ground and have them facilitate, or assist in the facilitation, of activities. This will allow for further cohesion and cooperation among all actors.

### **Identifying participants**

In order for such an activity to have impact and be sustainable there must be a concerted effort to reach those that have the ability to create change. As such, police officers at the highest level including those working in public affairs while on the media side, editors and managers as well as key persons from relevant journalism associations and organisations. Including high level participants will assist buy-in at the highest levels and therefor have a positive impact on the sustainability.

### **Participants from other ECOWAS member states**

Ensure participation from security forces and media sectors from another ECOWAS state that may be able to share valuable best practices, experiences and expertise. In both Liberia and Sierra Leone, Ghana police







came to share their experiences, for example, and in both cases the police found such contributions highly valuable and informative.

### **Gender considerations**

Make a concerted effort to include women from both sectors. In Liberia, for example, only two female journalists participated in the forum. While there are very few senior female journalists in Liberia, concerted efforts need to be made to find ways to include them in the discussion.

### **Identifying facilitator/s**

The facilitator is key to the success (or failure) of this activity. The facilitator must hold a certain weight, be respected by both parties and be able to facilitate the ins and outs of what can be a contentious discussion. Speaking to local and regional partners will help to identify several viable options and then be sure to meet potential candidates to ensure you get the most appropriate person.

### **Role of facilitator**

The facilitator must go beyond the polarizing arguments that can easily hijack the discussion and help to find common ground – without dictating. S/he must ensure that the activity is set up so that participants have clear expectations and know what is expected of them. The facilitator must have a solid understanding of the issues and challenges facing both parties.

### **Agenda**

While the recent police-media dialogue meetings in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone took place over the course of one day, a two-day session would be more ideal particularly where the perceived (or real) tensions are high. It is critical that there be adequate time built in for discussion, questioning, venting and the like. There should also be time for group work so that security and media have an opportunity to work together to come up with concrete ideas or modalities for a stronger working relationship.

If possible, provide an informal opportunity to allow time for participants to mix and mingle with one another without the pressures of work. An evening cocktail, for example, allowed for participants in Sierra Leone to discuss on an informal basis just one week prior to the elections.

An example of a forum agenda can be found as an annex to this report.





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### Setting ground rules

At the outset of the meeting, ground rules must be set to ensure an environment that is conducive to the work at hand. These include:

- Chatham House Rule – This allows for all participants to freely express their thoughts and concerns off the record which is particularly important when members of the press are participants as well.
- Mobile phones off or silent
- Respect for all participants even if views differ.





## 9. Sustainability

While formal dialogic interaction, such as these dialogue forums, may take place over the course of one or two days, the ultimate process is one that should continue long after any formal gatherings and should be sustained. There are after all always new police officers joining the force as well as new journalists joining the profession; they too will need mentoring and guidance on best practices when dealing with one another. But how to ensure this happens?

Part of the closing of the forum should include a viable plan for relevant follow-up actions, including how to disseminate findings and implement decisions; there must be clear ideas as to next steps that can be taken to concretize fruitful and professional working relations between security forces and the media.

While some participants of the various forums suggested that to ensure sustainability an outside donor or partner needs to be involved, there are actually numerous ways in which dialogue can continue without formal interventions and which could be more organic particularly following the dialogues. One of the reasons, after all, of including high level participants is to ensure buy-in and the possibility that change can happen. As such, these same participants simply need to ensure ongoing communication with one another, both individually and on a smaller or even larger group setting. There are numerous ways this can happen.

In Togo, months after the initial dialogue between military and media, the military took it upon themselves and held "open houses" at various bases and invited members of the media. The idea was to build bridges and to show members of the media how the bases operated and how members of the military lived and worked on a daily basis. Media houses can also open their doors to members of security forces as informally as having chats with those in the newsroom or more formally by appearing on a call-in or flagship programme.

Similarly, participants in the Liberia forum suggested that radio stations either include members of security forces in regular programming or even set up a weekly programme that highlights security issues. This could be in





the form of a radio call-in show or even a radio drama. Such programmes would allow media and police to work together, would enhance community policing efforts and would give citizens an opportunity to call in with questions and concerns. Such efforts could then extend to other security apparatus such as presidential guard, immigration etc. who may tend to be more guarded and less proactive vis-à-vis the media

Some issues are best left to the individual sector. For example, decentralization of public affairs with police was clearly noted as necessary in Liberia but this will have to be done in-house. Yet there is also no reason that such processes can't include journalists from the districts and regions in question. This could be in the form of a town hall, for example, where citizens come together and have an opportunity to interact with both police or military and the media that cover their communities.

Similarly, every forum highlighted the need for police and other training academies to include modules on working with the media and freedom of expression. UNESCO has a manual that can be used as a starting point for such efforts.

Likewise, media may want to work with their unions or associations to ensure inclusion of clauses that outline working relations with security forces.

Finally, more research needs to be done to illustrate clear impact of such forums on the relations between security forces and in future it may be useful to undertake a perception study regarding security forces and media both before and after elections. This can not only show impact but also highlight specific areas of concern and additional paths forward.





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## Annexes

### Annex I – Sample Agenda

#### Forum – Experience Sharing between Police on Media and Elections Security

##### **0830 – Arrival**

0900 – Welcome and Introduction  
*Facilitator*

0915 – Brief Remarks & Overview of Project

0925 – Presentation: Preparations of the Police Service so far  
on ensuring peaceful elections  
*Representative from the Police Service*

1000 – Discussions

##### **1030 – Tea break**

1045 – Experience sharing by Senior Police from neighboring country  
*Representative from police service of neighboring country*

1130 – Discussions

1200 – Outlining Modalities for ensuring journalists' safety  
during the elections  
*Facilitator*

##### **1300 – Lunch**

1400 – Discussions

##### **1530 – Wrapping up**





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## **Police-Media Forum on Media and Elections Security**

### **0830 – Arrival / Registration**

0900 – Opening Ceremony  
Welcome & Introduction of Dignitaries  
Brief Remarks & Overview of Project

0930 – Police - media relations: challenges and opportunities for  
collaboration on covering elections  
*Police representative (10 minutes presentation)*  
*Media representative (10 minutes presentation)*

1000 – Discussion

### **1030 – Tea break**

1045 – Police-Media relations for Peaceful Elections  
– Preparations of the Police Service so far

1115 – Election coverage: rights and responsibilities of journalists  
*Rep from Electoral Commission (10 minutes)*  
*Rep from GJA (10 minutes)*

1145 – Discussion

### **1230 – Lunch**

1330 – Access and treatment of national security information

1400 – Discussion

1430 – Legal and institutional framework including for social media

1500 – Discussion and identification of concrete modalities for  
Police-Media collaboration and mechanisms for ensuring  
safety of journalists in the electioneering period. Ideally done  
in groups comprising both police and media

1545 – Presentation of group work

### **1630 – Wrapping up and adoption of resolutions**





## Annex II – Ghana communiqué

### Agreed Modalities for Ensuring Journalists' Safety - Ghana

At the end of the media-police dialogue, both sides agreed to the following modalities for ensuring the safety of journalists during the coverage of the elections:

- The Police will make available to the media at national, regional, divisional and district levels, contact numbers for emergency situations and for timely response to questions and clarifications by the media on emerging issues.
- The police will assist journalists requiring support in the event of emergency or during events that expose the journalists to safety risks.
- The police will update media on any new security arrangements that may have implications for the safety of journalists during the coverage of the elections.
- Journalists should know the nearest police stations within the areas they are deployed for coverage and identify themselves to police or security officials in their areas of coverage.
- The media in the regions should liaise with Public Relations Officers at the regional commands of the GPS for emergency numbers and contacts to designated officers for clarifications on any police-related issues.
- Journalists deployed for elections coverage should have conspicuous identification tags.
- Journalists should familiarise themselves with the socio-cultural and political context of the areas they are deployed for coverage.
- Journalists must adhere to strict professional practices and safety principles in their coverage of the elections.
- Journalists should avoid courting controversy and getting involved in debates among activists thereby drawing unnecessary attention to themselves.
- As much as possible, journalists should work in groups or link up with each other while providing coverage in the same areas.
- Journalists should avoid acts that have the potential to incite violence.
- Journalists should desist from unduly interfering with the work of election officials.
- Media organisations should endeavor to train volunteers they recruit for elections coverage on safety issues.





## Annex III – Liberia communique

### The Police:

- The Police must designate spokespersons to enable the media and the citizens contact them when there are situations;
- The Police must have contingency plans to protect media houses that could be targets of certain negative actions including radio stations whose work are not tolerable;
- The Police should paste the numbers of officers assigned to polling stations to be easily contacted during emergency situations;
- Going forward after the elections, the police should consider including in their training curriculum a session on “building the relationship between the police and the media and the work of the media;

### The Media:

1. The Media covering the elections (polling stations, rallies all election related issues) must be boldly and publicly identified with name tags or as PRESS;
2. The Media should also report any unprofessional conduct of any Police to the police administration;
3. Media organisations should train their journalists on the work of the Police;
4. General issues of mutual respect between all stakeholders – media and the police – respecting and understanding each other's work must be ensured;
5. The media should collaborate with the necessary authorities especially at the end of polls, when the results are announced and after and desist from acts that will incite violence among citizens;
6. The National Media Council and the Liberia Press Union should intervene to bring about some regulation of professional conduct in the media;







## Annex IV – Sierra Leone draft communique

### Preamble

We, the 20 senior journalists and editors across the country and 20 senior police officers from the Sierra Leone Police force, brainstormed security and safety issues as they relate to journalists and the professional and responsible policing of the 2018 multi-tier elections without fear or favor. The rationale was to pitch possible partnership and cooperation between the police and the media, information sharing and general coordination during the 2018 elections.

Participants during the discussions raised several questions and solutions bordering on security and safety issues of journalists and responsible policing of the 2018 elections. These questions and solutions include the following:

- How can the police provide timely information to the media?
- How can the differences between the police and the media be resolved amicably?
- Access of the media to the police sources of information in the districts and the regions?
- How media personnel covering the elections will be easily identified by the public and the police?

In addition, several recommendations were made and were to be adopted at a subsequent meeting between police and media representatives. These recommendations included:

### Police to media and media to police information

- Regular press briefings.
- Activate direct communication at all levels between media and police.
- Police to maintain a media directory of journalists in their vicinity.
- Police to provide a register of media liaison officers in all districts.
- Police to provide emergency contact numbers.

### Safety of journalists

- All media houses must seek accreditation from NEC for their reporters covering the elections.
- Police are to commit to inform all ranks to respect the identity of journalists and protect in the exercise of their duties.
- Media houses must educate their personnel about media laws.



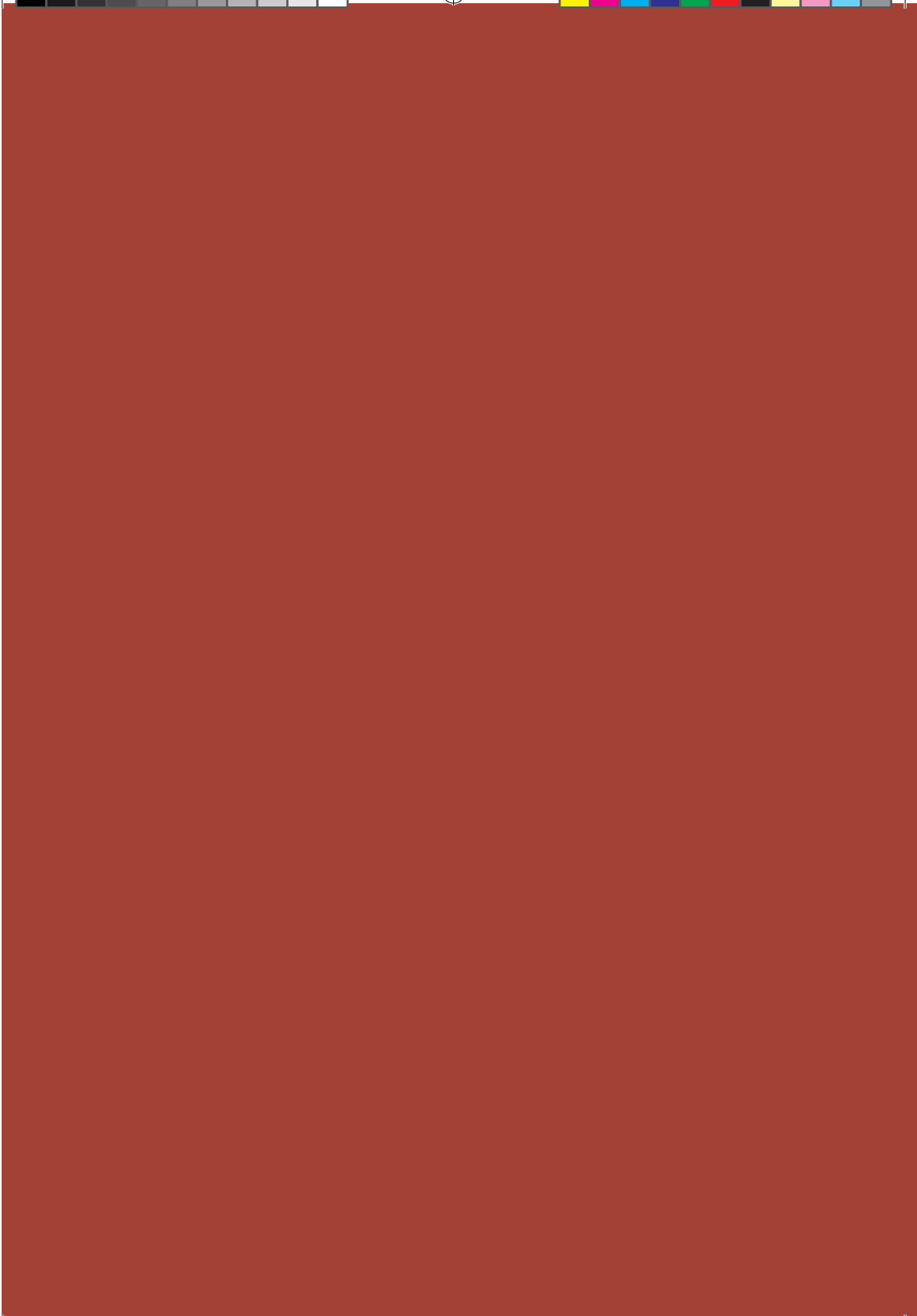


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- Every journalist covering the elections must be accredited by NEC.
  - Journalists covering the elections must not identify with any political party or candidate.

#### **Resolving differences between police and media**

- Aggrieved media or police personnel may report incidents of mal-treatment to their respective situation rooms.
- Joint media/ police platforms to educate the public on election safety.







[mediasupport.org](http://mediasupport.org)  
[mfwa.org](http://mfwa.org)  
[ecowas.int](http://ecowas.int)



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Design and layout: Nanette Vabø  
Published in Ghana, May 2018

ISBN 978-87-92209-92-4

