
Cotton Tree News (CTN) Strengthening Media in Sierra Leone

Chase the News, Cover the Nation
Sierra Leone 2009



At the Market in Freetown. Photo Jean-Claude Capt.

Cotton Tree News (CTN) is an independent news and information service started in 2007 at Fourah Bay College in partnership with the Mass Communication Department of the University of Sierra Leone. Every day, six hours of CTN programming, most of it live, is broadcast on 18 frequencies over key listening times of the day. Sierra Leoneans hear CTN programs via UN Radio and Radio Mount Aureol on FM, short wave, satellite down-link feeds to ten community radio stations located throughout the country, and the internet (www.cottontreenews.org).

Sierra Leone is at the very bottom of the Human Development Index, ranking 177th out of 177 countries. Sierra Leone experienced a decade of war which destroyed the country's infrastructure and killed, maimed, and displaced hundreds of thousands of its citizens. Most Sierra Leoneans now live in extreme poverty. Radio remains a very powerful medium. Over 80% have radio in their homes and the majority say that radio is their single most important source of information. One out of every two Sierra Leoneans listens to CTN. CTN News is broadcast via short wave in five languages, making CTN the only nation-wide multiple language news service in the country.

Cotton Tree News (CTN) represents a unique approach to media enhancement in a post-conflict environment. It is unique because it is the first time that a global nonprofit partnered with a major university in West Africa to transform a campus radio station into a national training center for media excellence, and in the process successfully addressed a critical information gap in the country. CTN's team of 45 journalists and student volunteers work as apprentices in a state-of-the-art newsroom and studio built by *Fondation Hironnelle* in the Department of Mass Communications at Fourah Bay College. They produce high quality news and features programming as they receive daily mentoring from George Bennett, former head of BBC Africa Service, and work side-by-side with senior journalists brought in for focused training.

The name "Cotton Tree News (CTN)" was chosen because of the enormous cotton tree in the center of Freetown, the capital city, long revered as a place where people come together to discuss issues of importance.

The CTN project was initially supported with grants totalling \$2.5 million by the UK, Ireland, the EU, Switzerland and Luxembourg. After only seven months on air, CTN played a vital role in the 2007 national elections which resulted in the peaceful transition of presidential and parliamentary power to the opposition party, something remarkable in a West African country just emerging from years of conflict. After only one year, CTN made the shortlist for the BBC's "Special Award for Development Media". Support from the European Union, Germany and Ireland has been found for a second phase of operations (2009-2010) to consolidate the gains made so far in strengthening broadcast journalism in Sierra Leone, turn over CTN to an all-Sierra Leonean staff, and develop income-earning services to cover costs. CTN has a budget of US\$ 1.2 million for 2009.