

Freedom of Information in Action:

Advancing Freedom of Information in Seven Liberian Counties



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*“...access to information is indispensable to genuine democracy and good governance and...
no limitation shall be placed on the public right to be informed about the government and its functionaries.”*

Preamble, 2010 Liberian Freedom of Information Act



Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Grand Gedeh County: Poor Communities Benefit from County Development Funds	7
River Gee County: Freedom of Information Provides Avenues for Understanding	8
Bong County: FOI Compels Provision of Information on Development Projects	9
Meet George Toddy	10
New Bridges for the Community	11
Lofa County: Freedom of Information Enables Meaningful Participation and Action	13
Grand Bassa: Demand Leads to Automatic Publication of County Expenditures	14
Rural Montserrado County: FOI Request Accelerates Hospital Construction	15
Nimba County: FOI Request Exposes Illegal School Fee Collection	16



Introduction

Liberia's Freedom of Information Act, signed into law on September 16, 2010, provides all persons the right of access to public information. The right of access to information is a fundamental human right guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, as well as the Constitution of Liberia. While Freedom of Information laws or regulations have been passed in over 90 countries around the world, Liberia is the first country in West Africa to establish a comprehensive right to information law.

Advancing the right of access to information is a joint responsibility between the government and its citizens. While the government must assure full and effective implementation and enforcement of the Freedom of Information legislation, it is up to the citizens to monitor government efforts and to use the law. Ultimately the value of the Liberia Freedom of Information Act rests in its use, as it is only by seeking and making requests for information that the benefits of access to information can be fully enjoyed. In advancement of freedom of information in Liberia at the local level, the Carter Center has supported seven county freedom of information networks in Grand Gedeh, Grand Bassa, Bong, Lofa, River Gee, Rural Montserrado, and Nimba Counties.

Led by passionate and driven coordinators that are well respected and active within their communities, these seven networks have become true champions for freedom of information. In collaboration with other local civil society and community based organizations, media networks, students, government representatives, and individuals, these networks have worked hard to raise awareness of the value of freedom of information and encourage use of the 2010 Liberian Freedom of Information Act. Contained within this publication are examples of these efforts, various requests for information that have been made, and some of the impacts that freedom of information has had in changing the lives of Liberians residing and working within these seven counties.



Grand Gedeh County

Poor Communities Benefit from County Development Funds

The impact of Liberia's civil war is not only seen through burnt buildings and run-down streets in the capitol city of Monrovia. The chaos left communities shattered at the very grassroots level. Since the firing ceased and two democratic elections held, the new leadership of Liberia is providing ways to decentralize funding to rebuild everything. One key community funding mechanism is through the state budgeted County and Social Development Funds—a community share of taxes paid from concessionaires. Allocations of these funds have attracted much controversy as communities demand their fair share. In Zwedru, Grand Gedeh, it took a request for information under Liberia's 2010 Freedom of Information (FOI) Act to ensure that three poor communities were included in the allocation of funds. The Gender Peace Network, a community based organization working with local leaders and the Grand Gedeh FOI Network, requested a copy of the Special County Development Resolution containing all development projects and budgetary allocations for the fiscal year, as well as the County Development Agenda. When authorities provided the documents, Gender Peace observed that Blue Camp, Camp Tuma, and the Crab Hole Community of Kudah Bye Pass, all in the provincial capital of Zwedru, had been left out in previous allocations. During the County sitting in August 2013, Gender Peace used this information to convince decision makers to include fund allocations for these three communities. Blue Camp's main road will be repaired; Crab Hole will get a much needed elementary school; and Camp Tuma will receive safe drinking water. These projects total US\$66,000. Perhaps more importantly, the Grand Gedeh communities now see FOI as a key tool for promoting peace and development.



About the FOI Network

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Reflection:

“In order to promote and maintain peace in communities, basic social services need to be provided to ease the difficulties that accompany rebuilding.”

River Gee County

Freedom of Information Provides Avenues for Understanding

River Gee is Liberia's newest of the fifteen counties. As it mobilizes to start fresh construction of its fast growing capital, Fish Town, there is a rush for land space for building homes and commercial structures. No doubt, there are cases of land grabbing and conflicts. River Gee adds to the growing national menu of land disputes. The River Gee County FOI network filed a request to the office of the County Land Commissioner asking for information on the procedures and policies for land purchase in the county and what is being done to resolve any local land disputes. According to the network, as the desire to build grows, so does the enthusiasm to know about such development, and thus, FOI offers the best vehicle through which one can obtain such information. Examples of recent FOI requests include one to the Internal Affairs Ministry for a list of River Gee County assets purchased from the County Development Funds; another to the Ministry of Youth and Sports for information on the delay of construction on a mini sports stadium in the county; and a request to the Ministry of Commerce for the guidelines that govern price control in the county. Two residents of Fish Town made a FOI request for the list of essential drugs supplied to the Fish Town government hospital. Several other requests were filed by local community citizens, including one by a local high school FOI club for the Ministry of Education policy relating to teachers who impregnate female students following a controversy in the County. The suspected teachers did not wait for the County Education officer to respond, but rather fled the county.



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“FOI has pushed community advocacy
one giant step forward”

Bong County

FOI Compels Provision of Information on Development Projects

Following repeated requests for information by civil society groups, Bong County authorities put in place measures to hold an open, monthly meeting to provide information on development projects within the County. According to the Bong County Freedom of Information Network (BFIN), the initial meeting marked the first time that stakeholders gathered to obtain information regarding disbursement of the County and Social development funds since they began. Assisted by BFIN, local people and civil society groups had been asking to know the breakdown of expenditures and social



development funds for the county, as well as information pertaining to various approved projects in the County. At the first meeting, the County Superintendent and the Project Management Committee provided documents containing the list of projects, locations, contractor names, and budget breakdowns in order to inform individuals and empower them to track development progress on their own.



About the FOI Network

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"FOI is changing the face of public administration"

Meet George Toddy

When Liberian high school student George Toddy failed the math and science sections of his college entrance exam, he was disappointed but not surprised; his region had a very high failure rate compared to other parts of the country. After attending an awareness raising activity held by the local county FOI network, he began to wonder why students in the southwest do so much worse on the exam than those elsewhere, and why the low scores were always in the math and science sections.

With his new awareness of the FOI law, he made a request for information to his school and the local department of education for a copy of the math and science curriculum. He then compared the national curriculum to the classes he received and found that his teachers skipped a number of the required classes. That was why he and many of his friends were not able to pass the national exams. Toddy contacted his school and the district education office to let them know of the issue.

Since then, new procedures have been put in place to ensure the classes taught meet the national curriculum. George also helped launch a FOI club at his school so more students could learn about and use this great resource. Because of George and his freedom of information request, future students in the southwest region now have a greater chance to pass college entrance exams and enter university the same as anyone else in Liberia.



New Bridges for the Community

Before the war in the 1980s, Kudah Road had three major bridges that provided access to more than 10,000 inhabitants. Even though the bridges were poorly constructed, they enabled the community members to get to work, school, market, and other locations. It was not possible to get to the rest of Zwedru without crossing these bridges. But, by 2008, all three bridges had finally collapsed, and people were forced to use their heads to transport heavy loads, while parents carried their kids on their backs across the water to school. A single plank was used as a makeshift bridge, but people were forced to wait as only one person could cross at a time. The other option—going through the water—was very difficult during the rainy season.

The community made many appeals to the government, organizations, and other partners for the rehabilitation of the bridges. After one boy fell into the water on his way home from school and was not rescued until much later, the local administration and many civil society organizations became increasingly concerned and engaged, but the bridges had yet to be rebuilt. In 2012, the local county FOI network made a request for information about the status of the bridge construction to the Liberia Agency for Community Empowerment (LACE) and discussed the issue on a series of radio programs on two community radio stations. Soon after, LACE resumed work on the two bridges. Today, one of the new Kudah Bye Pass bridges has been rebuilt and now transports hundreds of residents each day, and reconstruction of another bridge is near completion.





Lofa County

Freedom of Information Enables Meaningful Participation and Action

Concerns and requests for information on what is happening with the County Development and Social Funds has recently flooded Lofa County. Internet penetration is severely low in the interior of Liberia and many people prefer listening to radio than finding the time to sit down and read. Therefore, local authorities are making regular radio appearances to provide updates on the implementation of development projects in the County. Lofa County Freedom of Information Network Coordinator Beatrice Kamara notes that regular consultation with the County authorities and representatives from the line Ministries is making an impact on the way authorities relate to the people of Lofa County. The Network attends and raises awareness about the value of freedom of information at the County Development Steering Committee meetings. “That the County Superintendent can feel accountable and oblige himself to explain how the people’s money is being spent is impactful,” said Kamara, also a leading women rights advocate in Lofa. More FOI requests are being made, including the one filed by Lofa County Community College students for details pertaining to 50 scholarships awarded to Lofa students under the County Development Funds. The Network has made a request to the office of the Superintendent for information on the proposed road rehabilitation in Voinjama, Lofa’s provincial capital. And, youths in the county have written the County Engineer to request information on the road rehabilitation plan.



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Reflection:

“The use of the FOI law will bring more benefits to the people of Liberia”

Grand Bassa County

Demand Leads to Automatic Publication of County Expenditures

Demands for information regarding the usage of the Grand Bassa County and Social Development Funds are as old as the payment of the funds themselves, according to County authorities in Buchanan, the country's second port city. Grand Bassa receives income from the world's largest steel company, Mittal, for the use of its port for ore shipments. But back when the government disbursed the first penny from the County Development Funds after it came to power in 2006, there was no specific law to compel disclosure. It was not until nearly five years later in 2010, when Liberia passed West Africa's first comprehensive Freedom of Information (FOI) law, that disclosure was mandated. Since the law came into effect, requests for information on how the county leadership is using the money has increased. Several citizens and civil society groups, including the Association of Evangelicals of Liberia and the Institute for Democracy, Governance, and Development have made FOI requests. Additional requests have been filed, seeking a breakdown of the County Development Fund allocations per projects. The pressure from FOI requests and several awareness raising meetings hosted by the Grand Bassa FOI Coordinating Group for key authorities has finally paid off. Local authorities have begun publishing the project costs, contracts, photos, and updates on the bulletin board of the Administrative Building in Buchanan. Members of the public visit the Administrative building daily to read updated information posted on the board. According to the Grand Bassa FOI network, before the proactive publications, the County Information Officer or Development Superintendent only briefly discussed projects on the local community radio station. Now, disclosure is becoming the norm.



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Reflection:

"FOI is a major tool that enhances accountability and transparency; FOI exposes corruption."

Rural Montserrado County

FOI Request Accelerates Hospital Construction

In May 2011, a local firm, Concern for Human Development, was contracted by the Ministry of Health to renovate the Bensonville Hospital and construct an annex. But, the renovation and construction stopped. People became concerned because the hospital is the only referrer medical facility in the District. The Rural Montserrado County FOI network wrote a letter to the hospital Administration requesting information about the contract and why the construction was delayed. Following this request for information, the network and community members met with the hospital Administrator who provided a copy of the agreement with the contractor. As a result of the meeting, the administrator followed up with the contractor to relay the community's concerns. Today, the annex is nearly complete. Hospital authorities also have provided information on the cost for the construction of the annex.



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Reflection:

“With freedom of information, communities can change their own situation by simply asking to know.”

Nimba County

FOI Request Exposes Illegal School Fee Collection



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Reflection:

“FOI provides the best platform to help ordinary people expose corruption and advance community interest”



Education can be an expensive endeavor for families, and sometimes prevents children from being able to attend. Concerned with the growing costs of school, parents and students in Nimba County filed a request with the County Education Officer for a copy of the Ministry of Education policy requiring District Education Officers (DEO) to request specific fees to be paid directly to them. The request was prompted by allegations of illegal collection of fees for 3 years by a local officer. Upon learning that no such policy exists, the DEO was exposed and the collection of illegal fees was stopped.

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The Carter Center is currently working in Liberia to support government and civil society efforts to establish greater transparency and improve peoples rights through freedom of information

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