

2 JED – One of the DRC's Most Valuable Assets

Partner Profile

by Kristina Stockwood

Journalist in Danger (Journaliste en Danger, JED) is a leading defender of media freedom in the DRC, and one of the most effective free expression groups in all of Africa. Despite its poor press freedom record of the past few years, the DRC government has been responsive to lobbying generated by JED. Today, the nature of media freedom violations has changed drastically, with few journalists imprisoned for their work.

JED was established in 1998 with a membership of more than 100 journalists from across the country and its membership continues to grow. At the time of JED's founding, media freedom violations were committed almost daily in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with complete impunity.

This small group has had an enormous impact on the media in the DRC. Among other successes, JED alerts have pressured the government to lift bans on radio stations, obtained medical treatment for ailing journalists in prison, and resulted in their release.

In its 2003 annual report, issued to mark International Human Rights Day, JED notes there were 66 attacks against the media this year, but only two journalists were imprisoned for more than two days. In 2002, that figure stood at 16. For the first time since 1997, no journalists remain in prison on December 10th.

Network of volunteers

JED operates a network of volunteer monitors throughout the country who provide information on media violations. When journalists are harassed or jailed, or a news organisation threatened, JED sends an alert out locally and internationally, including through the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX).

JED has been a member of IFEX since 1999, and also belongs to the press freedom network of Reporters Without Borders (RSF), another IFEX member. JED's work is highly regarded by members of the international press freedom movement.

President M'Baya Tshimanga and Secretary General Tshivis Tshivuadi have said that without these alerts, which generate protest letters from international sources, the authorities would carry out even greater violence and they would get away with it.

Several years ago, JED reported that one journalist was freed from prison after a week because local authorities "were troubled by the broadcast of news of his imprisonment over international radio," following alerts disseminated on his case.

Widely used

JED also operates a regional alert network on behalf of the Organisation of Central African Media (OMAC.) In addition, JED information and reports are widely used by alternative and mainstream media around the world for information about the DRC.

Since its creation, JED has managed to keep working under the harshest circumstances, at times fighting against threats to the personal safety of its staff, not to mention working in a country undergoing civil strife, and doing it all with very little funds. Tshimanga and another of JED's courageous leaders were forced into hiding several times from 1999 to 2002, and moved about frequently, not often sleeping in the same place.

Decriminalise press laws

At times there has not been enough money for JED to pay the staff. On occasion, JED's leaders, who receive no salary for their work, have sold personal belongings to keep the organisation going. This may underline an ongoing concern about the group's sustainability – a constant battle for many small NGOs which find it hard to raise core funds for their work, particularly when they are so occupied with their day-to-day challenges.

With some key support from a few donors over the past few years, JED has managed to strengthen its alerts reporting network and Tshimanga has been able to focus more on management and fundraising.

The people running JED believe that promoting free expression is essential to bring about peace and democracy in the DRC. Their work is key to promoting greater adherence to international human rights principles, to which the DRC is a signatory.

To that end, JED has organised a number of workshops and conferences to promote human rights in the country. The group is currently engaged in a campaign to decriminalise press laws in the DRC, which is possible thanks in part to a willingness of the current government to engage in dialogue. Things have improved, and it is a credit to JED that they now number government officials among the participants at their events.

More information: <http://www.jed-congo.org> or <http://www.ifex.org>.

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