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SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

COUNTRY CONTEXT

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is heading into the last phase of a transition to democracy, after 10 years of war and 30 months of a transitional power-sharing government. If the tight elections calendar is implemented as planned, a new government should be elected by 30 June 2006. After the success of the constitutional referendum held in December 2005, there is strong international pressure on the Independent Electoral Commission to maintain the momentum. At the same time, the toll of death and displacement has been on the rise in recent months. Dissident battalions and brigades in northern Katanga, North and South Kivu and Ituri have been engaged in deadly combat with the Congolese Defence Force (FARDC), supported logistically by MONUC, the UN peacekeeping mission. MONUC has also supported the FARDC to track down Rwandan and Ugandan armed groups, whose hard-line leaders are refusing to leave the DRC despite national and international ultimatums. The facilitated return of approximately 150,000 Congolese refugees from the Tanzanian refugee camps to South Kivu, launched in September 2005, continues with a rhythm of 1,000 returnees each week. While the homecoming is overall positive, land and property conflicts risk escalating into violence if there is not sufficient support and assistance to this process.

The fragile transition process is at a critical juncture. If it fails, the potential for regional conflict to re-ignite seems high. If it succeeds, it could help resolve some of the deep-rooted mistrust and tension among groups and communities throughout the country and contribute to regional stability.

SFCG APPROACH IN DRC

Search for Common Ground in the DRC (SFCG), known locally as Centre Lokole (a Lokole is a Congolese wooden drum played to gather people), was established in 2001 to support the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. SFCG has since expanded its operations in the DRC to enhance the prospects for a more inclusive and viable transition process and to contribute to the development of sustainable peace. SFCG uses a wide range of peacebuilding tools, including common-ground media production and training, while maintaining flexibility to enable quick response to emerging challenges. SFCG has found that the media – radio in particular – is a key tool of awareness raising and communication between groups in such a vast country lacking basic infrastructure. SFCG aims to improve the population's knowledge of the transition, as well as to encourage informed participation in local, regional and national decision-making that affects the future of the country. SFCG also seeks to reduce violent conflict in the East by enabling communities divided because of the war to re-establish trust and healthy relationships. With offices in Kinshasa and Bukavu, SFCG works closely with local partners as well as international organisations throughout the country to implement its programmes.

PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

Enhancing informative and participative communication around the transition process. SFCG produces radio programmes as well as other media (such as comic books) to inform Congolese about the key elements of the ongoing transition, particularly those subject to manipulation, divisionism or conflict. Our radio programmes are produced in various Congolese national languages, as well as French, and broadcast on SFCG's 80 partner radio stations in all provinces around the country. Three radio programmes, using diverse formats, are produced out of our Kinshasa office each week. *Arbre à Palabre* ("Dialogue Tree") is a 30-minute French-language magazine programme. *Mopila*, an educational soap opera, is produced in the four national Congolese languagues: Kiswahili, Tshiluba, Lingala and Kikongo. Finally, *Boyoka pe biso* ("Listen to us as well") is a *vox pop* programme produced in Lingala presenting pre-recorded interviews from Congolese around the country through a network of 20 correspondents. To support the electoral process, SFCG produced 15,000 copies of a comic book, featuring the popular Mopila character, which were distributed around the country. A new radio drama in two languages focusing on the social reintegration of ex-combattants was launched in 2006, in partnership with the National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration.

Contributing to the reduction of tensions and the development of sustainable peace in Eastern Congo. From its office in Bukavu, SFCG helps consolidate peace in the East through radio programming, cross-border dialogues, awareness-raising campaigns, and mediation between communities divided because of the war. These initiatives aim to enable the population to transform conflict without resorting to violence, by clarifying issues and modelling positive examples of peacebuilding. *Jirani Ni Ndugu* ('My Neighbour, My Brother'), a popular weekly soap opera broadcast in Swahili, shows conflict in people's daily lives as well as ways to resolve it peacefully. SFCG's programme entitled '*Peacebuilders*' highlights extraordinary contributions to peace made by organisations, groups, and individuals. Controversy, rumours, and tensions are discussed and debated in the magazine programme *En Parler, C'est Agir*; ('To Talk about it is to Act'). And SFCG's team of young journalists produces a weekly programme, *Sisi Watoto* ('We Are the Children') stressing the impact of war on Congo's children, as well as the demobilisation and reintegration of former child soldiers. The new programme *Tukutane Tena* ('Let's All Meet again) focuses on the critical repatriation process, highlighting ways in which conflicts can be resolved without violence.

Gloire, a *Sisi Watoto* cub reporter at work

INNOVATIVE TOOLS AND PARTNERSHIPS

SFCG uses innovative, culturally appropriate tools, such as music and theatre, to reach out to the largest number of people. This includes on-the-ground participatory theatre for conflict transformation, which adapts renowned participatory techniques to base the scenarios on real conflicts and incorporate the audience's suggestions for their peaceful transformation. Training of journalists in common-ground journalism, both news and programmatic formats, contributes to a more responsible media context with journalists aware of how to contribute to conflict transformation rather than exacerbating violent conflict. Radio drama remains a critical vehicle for transmitting information and raising important questions through a format that is attractive and accessible.

In 2006, SFCG is undertaking strategic collaborations with the Independent Electoral Commission, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and Conader, the governmental National Commission for the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of ex-combatants. By communicating thematically relevant conflict-transformation information with these partners, SFCG's tools are reaching key target groups at risk of violent conflict.

GREAT LAKES POLICY FORUM (GLPF)

In addition to the ongoing projects in DRC, SFCG, with assistance from partner organisations, organises the Great Lakes Policy Forum in Washington, DC. This forum provides an opportunity for representatives of government and non-governmental agencies, the diplomatic corps, and international organisations to focus on current issues pertaining to the Great Lakes region. SFCG thus actively supports the Congolese transition by keeping the Great Lakes region on the agenda of policy makers and the international NGO community

Search for Common Ground in DRC is a programme of Search for Common Ground, an international NGO working in the field of conflict transformation. For additional information, see the Centre Lokole website, www.centrelokole.org, or the SFCG website, www.sfcg.org, or contact the Sub-Saharan Africa Programme, 1601 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20009, USA; phone (+1)(202) 265-4300; fax (+1)(202) 232-6718; e-mail search@sfcg.org.

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