
SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND IN SIERRA LEONE PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

The Forest Region of the Mano River Union (MRU) where Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire converge is strategically important to achieving greater stability and security in the wider sub-region. Various ethnic groups in the region played a significant role in the regional conflicts. The border areas suffer from an absence of the rule of law, serve as havens for criminal activities, and harbour the continuing threat of renewed political conflict. This undermines the re-establishment of livelihoods and the ability of communities to live in peace, and constitutes a persistent destabilising influence in the region.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has been working in Sierra Leone since 2000 to strengthen the capacity of communities to participate in building a tolerant, inclusive society for sustainable peace. The ten-year war claimed 50,000 lives, left thousands mutilated, displaced over a million people, and turned more than 7,000 children into child soldiers. Since the end of the war in 2002 the country has struggled to rebuild and to heal.

With new efforts at peace and social reintegration underway in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire, shattered communities must find effective ways to reintegrate refugees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and former combatants, reconcile the internal divisions caused by the conflicts, and respond to threats to their safety and security constructively. The MRU border communities can play a singular role in monitoring and reducing threats to regional security while addressing their own local security needs.

Sierra Leone, ranked at the bottom of the UN Human Development Index, is currently in a transition period from recovery into long-term development. This transition period will see the complete withdrawal of UNAMSIL and the handover of responsibility for security to the Sierra Leone Government. Still, the widespread poverty and dismal social conditions across the country have the ability to undermine the hard-won gains that have been made.

SFCG'S APPROACH IN SIERRA LEONE

SFCG in Sierra Leone, like the Liberia programme, operates two projects that complement, integrate, and multiply the efforts of the other: Talking Drum Studio (TDS) and the Community Peace-building Unit. SFCG has identified four priorities around which to design its activities: corruption; quality education; governance; and those marginalized out of the decision-making process, specifically youth, women and children. As recommended by the June 2004 external evaluation SFCG is concentrating its efforts on supporting the policy of decentralisation.

Decentralisation

SFCG aims to build the legitimacy of government -including local- in the hearts and minds of the people, generating trust and confidence in the institutions. SFCG supports decentralisation by maximising the strong links already forged between community voices and national policy platforms to manage expectations of the population. Not only does decentralisation bring governance closer to the population, it also places the development agenda firmly at the district level. As the policy is only beginning to be implemented, it provides new entry points, strategic linkages and new opportunities for SFCG.

SFCG is chair for the National Elections Watch (NEW), a coalition of civil society groups and non-governmental organizations, which monitored the last local council elections. Currently, NEW is working to improve transparency and accountability by holding briefings, discussions, and forging a partnership with the decentralisation secretariat.

TALKING DRUMS STUDIO (TDS) & INDEPENDENT RADIO NETWORK (IRN)

Talking Drum Studio (TDS) is a multi-media studio producing seven national and eight district-level radio programmes for distribution to 18 local and international radio stations across Sierra Leone. A recent listener survey indicates that 89% of people listen regularly and that the issues of corruption; HIV/AIDS; elections; poverty; children; reintegration of ex-combatants; and education are trusted by over 65% to be dealt with effectively on the radio. Local community stations significantly increase access to information and stimulate dialogue. As such they assist in increasing government transparency and accountability and improving education.

TDS produces radio programs with the Independent Radio Network (IRN). Through their collaborative efforts, they increase civic participation, particularly of marginalised groups. In addition, SFCG supports the two main national platforms developed to increase access to information on the political reform process: *Parliament Bol Hat* and *Wi Yone Salone*. SFCG also airs its own widely popular radio programs, including:

- *Atunda Ayenda* ('Lost and Found'), a radio drama series (soap opera) which addresses a range of social issues of particular concern to youth; including corruption, HIV/AIDS, their role in decision making, livelihoods etc.;
- *Golden Kids News* is a radio programme that engages networks of children of mixed backgrounds from around the country to serve as producers, reporters, and actors; they identify issues for broadcast that affect children across the country and advocate on their behalf; and
- *Unity Boat*, a local language drama series, now airing in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia, promotes themes of reconciliation, non-violence, and conflict resolution to the forest region peoples.

COMMUNITY PEACEBUILDING UNIT (CPU)

The CPU uses a wide range of methods to do its work, including supporting the establishment of community radio stations, organising solidarity events, building local and national coalitions, facilitating community dialogue, performing live drama performances, and training. The CPU stimulates grassroots searches for solutions to community problems and, in so doing, engages other organisations and the Sierra Leonean government in the process. This work feeds back into the media programming and brings community problems to the forefront of national media discussion. Examples of CPU activities follow:

Community Radio Outreach

At the request of communities SFCG has supported local groups that wanted to start community radio stations. To date five such stations have opened successfully in Tombo, Mile 91, Makeni, Kabala, and Kailahun. Once the stations are operational, they are each locally owned and managed by a board of directors elected by a coalition of community groups. SFCG animates a process to ensure participation of a broad section of people in these communities through establishment of a board, supporting training of a station manager and training residents in journalism.

Solidarity Events

The large public events have a variety of forms and functions. Peace Festivals (which entail entertainment, cultural expression, and dialogue) are a capacity development success story. The first peace festival was held in 2001. Since then, peace festivals have multiplied in frequency and location. Originally organised by SFCG, the peace festivals have now transitioned into local initiatives with community groups taking the lead in planning and implementation.

SFCG in Sierra Leone is a program of Search for Common Ground, an international NGO in the field of conflict transformation. For additional information, visit our website, <http://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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