

## Motorcycle Taxis Task Force Project

### Overview

As Sierra Leone transitions from years of war to peace and stability, its youth population is also adjusting from military to civilian life. One major aspect of this task is finding the means to earn a livelihood that does not involve violence. While displaced and living in Guinea as refugees, many young people witnessed the use of motorcycle taxis. After returning to Sierra Leone after the war, some of these young people are trying to adopt this mode of employment. Motorcycle taxis have thus emerged in the provincial towns of Bo, Kenema, Makeni, Kabala and Kailahun.

Tensions have been building around this arrangement, however, and are driven from a number of sources. Parties involved in the situation include the youth, the police, the Sierra Leone Road Transport Authority (SLRTA), the Customs and Excise Office, and the taxi passengers. SFCG-SL is piloting a project in Bo that aims to reduce the conflict between the various parties regarding the motorcycle taxis, and, based on its experience there, will expand this effort to Kenema, Makeni, and other towns.



*Who needs a ride? Motorcycle taxis wait outside a market in Sierra Leone.*

### Problem Background

As Sierra Leone emerges from war, people are searching for creative ways to earn a living. Livelihood issues are of paramount concern for youth, most of who struggle to maintain a subsistence-based existence. In the larger border towns—Bo, Kenema, Makeni, and Kailahun—motorcycle taxis have emerged as an affordable and convenient mode of transport, particularly as roads are in bad condition and motorcycles are considerably cheaper than cars. This development has translated into a potential livelihood for many young men and their families.

While some of the motorcycles are legitimately purchased either in Sierra Leone or imported from Guinea, others are smuggled across the border from Guinea. Young people generally cannot afford to purchase motorcycles, and for those that can, the bureaucracy of licensing, taxation, duty and insurance requires connections and financial resources that are not at their disposal. Presently, this issue is part of the social discourse

at every community level, yet no constructive measure had been adopted to solve the problem. Disenfranchisement of youth was a major factor in Sierra Leone's war and this issue remains unresolved. Consequently, many young people feel harassed and exploited in a continuation of the status quo -- with elite members of society and the government (and its officials) appearing to working collusion to prevent them from succeeding.

The taxi drivers have organized themselves into a nationwide association called the Bike Riders Association (BRA) to help address this issue. With a horizontal leadership structure, they have agreed on a course of action to protect the members from what they perceive as predatory system. Many of the members are poorly educated or illiterate: obeying the laws and regulations regarding driving a motorcycle is not a high priority, and they often are unlicensed and unaware of the rules of the road. The Sierra Leone police (SLP), aware of these shortcomings, have established roadblocks for spot-checking the motorcycle taxis, and often extort money, thereby exacerbating tension between the youth and the police. BRA has strategic locations in certain towns, which enables the organization to respond quickly as a group to harassment or other difficulties with the authorities. This mutually adversarial approach does not teach the taxi operators the need to obey laws and regulations; rather, it reminds them of their subordinate status in society.

Drastically exacerbating this situation is the manipulative patron-client relationship. Most young men cannot afford their own motorcycles and rent on a weekly basis them from wealthier townspeople, often policemen or members of the Town Council. By renting from these powerful people, certain youth obtain immunity from the SLP. For independent operators, however, this protection is not available and they are subjected to the heaviest fines and penalties. For example, word will spread about plans for an inspection, but it will only pass among the patrons, excluding independent youth.

Tensions have been building around this arrangement and a number of violent incidences have erupted between the BRA and the SLP, including damage to a police vehicle, a demonstration and injuries to pedestrians and passengers. Conflict has also emerged between passengers and taxi drivers, resulting in police and mob action. Although the police have thus far contained the violence, the underlying issues have not been resolved.

Further compounding the problem is the poor relationship that exists between the various stakeholders in the transportation sector. The SLRTA has problems with the police concerning their delinquent reporting of accidents<sup>1</sup> and raids; the Customs and Excise Office and the Police have issues over smuggling; and the Income Tax Office is concerned about tax evasion on the purchase of the motorcycles and the annually assessed property tax<sup>2</sup>. Sierra Leone's roads are poorly marked, and the taxis take advantage of this, for which people blame the Sierra Leone Roads Authority (SLRA). The Passenger Welfare Association (PAWA) has also gotten involved as the motorcycle taxis have frequent accidents. More often than not, the taxi drivers ride away from the scene, leaving the hurt passenger unattended. All of these various stakeholders work in

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<sup>1</sup> It is legal procedure that SLRTA files a report for every occurring accident with SLP, which decides whether or not to make an arrest.

<sup>2</sup> While the bike owner is responsible for the income and property taxes, the bike rider is often the one confronted with the problem by the authorities.

isolation with poor communication between them, which has exacerbated the problem and led to the undermining of the transportation network.

### **SFCG-SL Response**

SFCG-SL has been active in the youth community in Bo for several years, and has developed a youth network engaging ten youth groups in the area. The youth in the network have expressed their concerns about the problems related to motorcycle taxis. The network has discussed the issue at its regular meetings, and a number of other people have also complained directly to SFCG-SL. As an initial response, SFCG-SL addressed the topic in several of its radio programs, but then decided to launch a more concerted effort to resolve the escalating conflict.

After having executed a thorough analysis of the problem, SFCG-SL's Community Peace Building Unit began piloting a project in Bo District to try to reduce the tensions among the youth, police, SLRTA, SLRA, Customs and Excise Office, Income Tax Office and PAWA in July 2003.

As a first step, all parties to the conflict were invited to attend a meeting to discuss the problem and whether a collaborative approach was necessary. The group's response was an overwhelming "Yes", and the meeting concluded with a call for a larger group of representatives to work on the problem. Five delegates from each of the stakeholders, plus two representatives from the area radio stations—KISS 104 and SLBS Bo—attended a full day meeting that allowed each to voice their views on the issue. Activities during the day included the creation of a conflict map diagramming all of the issues, focus groups on particular issues, and the development of an action plan, with assignment of responsibility for specific points to the various groups. Through the course of the discussions, two prominent themes emerged: 1) that poor communication had led to a breakdown in relationships between the various parties, and 2) the need for education about transportation regulations, import duties, and other legal issues involved in operating motorcycle taxis. To implement the action plan and deal with any future problems, the meeting participants agreed that a taskforce be established.



*Discussing a fair solution to motorbike taxis.*

SFCG-SL facilitated the formation of a nine-man taskforce consisting of one representative from each of the parties, with SLRTA elected as the chair. Meeting biweekly, the group's discussions so far have centered on formulating a work plan and setting targets and priorities. They have also decided that a multi-prong approach should be adopted, combining media and outreach. The media will be used for discussion programs and airing community comments on the situation and developing improvements. Another component would involve workshops on specific topics, like annual property taxes and the rules of the road. The project also intends to convene sensitization meetings in the parking lots where the motorcycle taxis congregate, reaching out to the drivers as they work. SFCG-SL is facilitating this process by providing space at the office for the workshops and regular meetings, donating supplies for the taskforce, and keeping the project on track. KISS 104 and SLBS FM Bo are providing airtime at a minimal cost for the discussion programs, and the other parties will share their expertise in workshops, discussions and meetings.

## **Results**

After these taskforce discussions, which allowed for the involved parties to understand the competing points of view, the conflict subsided significantly. Work remains, however, to ensure that the broader issues—including the paternal relationship between youth and adult entrepreneurs—are resolved. Media advocacy featuring roundtable discussions between the various primary parties began clarifying those deeper more systemic issues. The workshops and meetings create a platform where social relationships can be built between major parties influencing a decrease in conflict and the forging of relationships, which can change positively affect attitudes and norms.

As the project develops in Bo, the BRA from the district went on to meet their colleagues in Makeni and Kenema who face similar situations. They shared their experience of dialogue and consultation, as well as the strategy that they implemented. SFCG-SL is now facilitating the development of taskforces in these two towns to reduce the violence between the youth and the SLP and to contribute to reconciliation.