

Search for Common Ground Liberia Strategy 2010 - 2013

Introduction

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is an international non-governmental organization that has been working in Liberia since 1997. The mission of the organization is **to transform the way the world deals with conflict away from adversarial approaches towards collaborative solutions**. SFCG is known locally in Liberia as Talking Drum Studio (TDS).

Despite considerable progress since Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's election as President in 2005, the root causes of conflict and state failure have not been addressed, causing the peace in Liberia to remain fragile and vulnerable to further conflict and instability. As the country makes the transition from humanitarian relief to sustainable development with a focus on renewed governance, tackling the structural conditions that gave rise to the conflict such as centralization of political power, social and political exclusion and unequal distribution of state resources remain a major challenge.

In March 2010, SFCG undertook a participatory process with key partners and beneficiaries in four counties to review and revise its programmatic strategy to address Liberia's fragility. The updated 2010-2013 strategy identifies three programmatic priorities for SFCG:

- National Reconciliation
- Strengthening Social Accountability in Delivering Public Services
- Securing National Assets: Natural Resources and Youth

The 2010-2013 strategy links to the themes outlined in SFCG's West Africa Strategy:

- Leadership;
- Exclusion;
- Youth Engagement and
- Trade and Migration.

Strategy

The strategic review process resulted in a revision of the goal that SFCG has been working towards for the past three years, updating it to reflect advancements in the context as well as the continuing challenges to translate government initiatives into benefits for ordinary people. The new overarching goal is: **An inclusive society where state reform policies translate into meaningful gains for ordinary people**.

Based on SFCG's unique methodology combining outreach and media initiatives, this strategy identifies a range of areas where SFCG's approach will achieve greatest leverage over the next three years. These opportunities are grouped under three programmatic priorities as follows:

1. National Reconciliation

Many of the causes of tensions and conflicts in Liberia are a result of an interlinked set of factors related to poor leadership and governance rooted in old and new divisions within society, which were not resolved through the Peace Accord or related processes. SFCG's analysis recognizes that despite the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) being completed, there is still a national agenda around reconciliation that is important for reforms to take root and be meaningful for the full society.

a) Supporting Transitional Justice and Reconciliation

The TRC, which was the government's mechanism for fostering transitional justice, recently completed its mandate with the submission of its report to the government. SFCG will work with the Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG), an umbrella organization of more than 20 civil society organizations of which SFCG is a founding member, to engage in post-TRC work such as supporting the process of establishing the Independent National Commission on Human Rights as well as monitoring the implementation of the recommendations of the TRC.

Result: Improved relationship between and among different social groups at community and national levels.

b) Decentralization

While the government's reform agenda has addressed policy level change, local inclusion in decision-making and resources allocation has not yet advanced. To date ordinary people have not felt the benefits of promised reform, and mistrust of government outside of the President persists. The current centralization of power perpetuates patronage, engenders mistrust, undermines social cohesion, severs the citizen-state relationship and provides an obstacle to broad-based, transparent and accountable systems of governance. SFCG will work with the Governance, Land and Anti-Corruption Commissions together with Counties and local CSOs to identify where SFCG can best support conflict-sensitive decentralization that involves local people in issues that affect them.

Result: Local communities participate in decision-making that affect their lives.

Cross-Cutting Themes:

Women: The strategy review raised many issues related to women's personal security, sexual-based violence, educational and livelihood opportunities. Throughout its work, SFCG will be gender sensitive and women's interests and voice will be prioritized.

Ethnic/Tribal Divides: SFCG recognizes that the deeply ingrained divides between ethnic and tribal groups underpin many of today's conflicts. SFCG will ensure that it is sensitive to these dimensions of any issues. SFCG will strive to include participation of the various tribal and ethnic groups in its work to ensure that there is open and transparent participation by all affected parties.

c) Promoting Leadership Accountability and Integrity

Good leadership requires accountability and integrity. Leadership at all levels from family to community to institutions is important to 'set the tone', providing examples to be followed and for bringing wisdom in judgments about when, who and how to involve people in decision-making. It is apparent that Liberians now know how to select and elect leaders; however the demand side mechanisms to support leaders' accountability and integrity so that public trust can be developed have not been fully explored. SFCG will identify spaces to promote leadership with integrity and strengthen citizen accountability mechanisms at National and Local Government levels and within CSOs and media organizations.

Result: Improved accountability mechanisms established by CSOs to promote integrity.

d) Resolution of Land Disputes

Liberia is predominantly an agrarian society and access to land is a central issue as it pits ancestral rights against an elite agenda of the plantation and labor economy. Access has been controlled by wealth, power and political connections in a process where illiterate people were disenfranchised by a paper transaction controlled by the urban elites. Many land conflicts have deep roots in ancestral rights related to tribal and ethnic divides. This has been further compounded by the recent conflict with people fleeing their homes only to return to find others living on their property. SFCG will collaborate with the Land Commission, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and civil society organizations to establish early warning mechanisms for disputes heading towards violent conflict. SFCG will also work with CSOs to establish monitoring mechanisms and ways of providing information to the Land

Commission as well as with local communities to develop community based approach to resolving land disputes.

Result: Increased community based approach in the resolution of disputes around land before they erupt into violence.

e) Free and Fair Elections

National and local elections are potential triggers of violence. SFCG will work with the National Election Commission, other CSOs and community radio to ensure high voter registration, active participation of women and youth and credible and trusted information is shared. Further, SFCG will focus on post election work to bring together winners and losers with the community to put together a development agenda that works for everyone thus attempting to close the divides which electioneering in its winner take all approach exacerbates.

Result: Informed citizenry as a result of SFCG's civic and voter education programs

f) Police-Citizen Relations

The police are the first point of contact with the community in responding and addressing incidents of crime and violence, yet citizens have little confidence in their ability to respond. Police reform has occurred, but their capacity to respond to complex post-conflict issues is extremely limited. SFCG will focus on improving the working relationship between the police and communities in the collective response to issues that have the tendency to erupt into violence.

Result: Improved police-civilian relationship in the collective response to crimes and the pursuit of justice.

2. Social Accountability in Public Service Delivery

SFCG's strategy will support the Poverty Reduction Strategy and its targets around health and education. SFCG will promote a shared responsibility and accountability around the delivery of public services beyond specific ministries to include families, individuals, community leaders and CSOs so that all are focused on getting women and children into health clinics and children into school.

a) Strengthening Access to Health Care for Women and Children

Health services for children up to the age of 5 and pregnant women are free. However, numerous barriers prevent women from seeking medical care, including charges for prescriptions, unethical practices by doctors, and transportation costs. SFCG will work with the Ministry of Health, health-focused CSOs, individuals and families to remove the barriers to health services, to increase citizens' and health providers' access to information on the "no fee health policy" and to increase the capacity of communities to demand better health services.

Result: Improved problem solving by health practitioners, policy makers and communities in the provision of health services enabling women to access free health care.

b) Strengthening Access to Education

Although the enrollment of students at all levels of education has increased, many young people still cannot go to school. Consequently, SFCG will explore innovative ways to use new technologies to expand access to educational materials for children who do not have the means for formal education.

Result: Expanded alternative ways to use the media as a source for teaching and learning.

3. Securing Liberia's National Assets: Natural Resources and Youth

a) Youth Livelihoods

High youth unemployment in Liberia is not only a social disaster, but a huge wasted economic asset. Persistent joblessness and the desperation that accompanies it undermine progress, and risk the political and social structures of Liberia and neighboring countries. Yet the innovation and initiative of young people to find livelihoods is remarkable and provides an opportunity to be strengthened. SFCG will continue to explore approaches to support economic opportunities for youth, particularly by continuing to work with emerging organizations like the Bike Riders Association in assisting their growth and transition into the formal economy.

Result: BRA expands into other areas of commercial activity and is involved with other parts of the economy (e.g., diversification into trading commodities and other services)

b) Natural Resource Management

Liberia is a country rich in natural resources; however their exploitation has been problematic and undermined good governance. New reforms that include concession agreements with a percentage for the community, while addressing issues of marginalization, have not yet put into place a mechanism that ensures its application. Supporting efforts to ensure communities are involved in decisions over natural resource extraction and the nature of concessions that are made with international companies together with ensuring transparency in the use of any proceeds from natural resource extraction will be a program priority over the coming three years.

Result: Increased accountable structures established to enable communities to access benefits as stated in concession agreements.

Tools

Consultations with key partners and beneficiaries confirmed the effectiveness of many of the tools used by SFCG. These include:

- **Alliance-building** to encourage conversations that put in place mechanisms for local communities to come together with National and Local Government to find solutions. At the National level, SFCG convenes government agencies together with CSOs, multilateral organizations and donors to develop policies, and discuss and resolve problems. At the County level, SFCG provides technical support to discussions around issues such as the use of Community Development Funds, Natural Resource Management and Land Disputes.
- **Radio programming** to create spaces for freedom of speech and dialogue, opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard, the provision of impartial and credible information, and the modeling of alternative, non-violent attitudes and behaviors;
- **Town Hall Meetings** to bring together members of the community with their elected and public officials
- **Policy dialogues** to raise awareness and improve policy on selected issues.
- **Live theatre** to highlight unacceptable responses to situations and bring about a change in attitudes and new behaviors.
- **Surveys and polling** to introduce new information and to inform strategic communication.

In addition, SFCG is committed to finding innovative and creative ways of addressing issues (e.g., school parliaments, the use of mobile phones for educational purposes, Citizen's Juries/Panels).

SFCG will continue to work in those areas where the tensions and possibility of violence are high. These tend to be in the border regions of Nimba, Ganta, Grand Gedeh and Lofa Counties as well as Bong and Bassa Counties.