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Search for Common Ground

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# SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND in LIBERIA
## Strategy 2008-2010

## I. INTRODUCTION

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is an international non-governmental organisation that has been working in Liberia since 1997. The mission of the organisation is to transform the way the world deals with conflict: from adversarial approach to collaborative solutions: supporting a vision of recognising differences and acting on commonalities. SFCG is locally known in Liberia as Talking Drum Studio (TDS)

In 2006, following the inauguration of the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf-led government that brought an end to Liberia's transition process, SFCG revised the program's goal to be *strengthening participation and inclusion to consolidate peace in Liberia*. In pursuit of this goal, four thematic issues were identified as priorities for intervention: •Youth Engagement •Identity and Ethnicity •Leadership and •Transparency and Accountability.

> SFCG's programme in Liberia fits within the West Africa regional strategy, which provides an umbrella framework of common priority themes, namely:
> - Leadership;
> - Exclusion;
> - Youth Engagement; and
> - Use of Information/Communication

Since the last strategic meeting, dramatic changes within the socio-political context of the country have necessitated a re-examination of SFCG's priority areas. This document outlines the new strategic plan for SFCG in Liberia, drawn together after a series of meetings in early 2008 with SFCG staff, local partners and target communities in Monrovia, Buchanan, Gbarnga, Zorzor and Ganta. The findings from these communities were processed, analysed and outcomes taken back to the communities for validation, creating SFCG's new framework for intervention in the country for the next three years.

## II. CONTEXT AND OPPORTUNITIES

Since the formation of the new government, the security situation has improved considerably yet the peace remains fragile. Reconciliation processes are moving forward through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well as community-level initiatives, and the government has introduced a number of reforms to try to address the root causes of the country's 15–year conflict.

As with all post-war countries, consolidating the peace is critical for sustaining the governance and development process. By the same token, consolidating the peace will require change at the institutional, community and individual levels. Based on an analysis of political parties, government, media, civil society, and international partners, SFCG has identified the following opportunities for change that can be leveraged for programme development:

- The government's creation of an anti-corruption unit to tackle impunity around corruption.
- The establishment of the Governance Commission and the Land Reform Commission to support the decentralisation of power and authority and increase local ownership of development at the county level.

- Restructuring of the army and police in anticipation of the departure of United Nations peacekeeping forces.
- Greater press freedoms supporting a flourishing media sector with 12 independent newspapers, eight private radio stations, more than 30 community radio stations, and three private television stations in the country.
- On-going consultations on the poverty reduction strategy with opportunities to work with the government and its partners to develop a comprehensive communication strategy to avoid the failings experienced in Sierra Leone with their PRS.

## III. Strategic and Priority Areas

The interactive and collaborative review process with SFCG staff and target communities led to the identification of a new overarching goal: *expanding inclusion to consolidate peace in Liberia.* Within this the following priority areas have been chosen:

- Corruption
- Access to resources and decision making processes
- Land reform
- Security-civilian relationships

### *Thematic Issue 1: Corruption*

Corruption and the impunity that goes with it is a product of poor leadership and bad governance. Corruption can no longer be seen as a cause and effect phenomenon but rather as a system that is structural in nature and interlocked between values, attitudes and behaviours. Therefore tackling corruption will require a thorough analysis of the system before producing an approach that deals with corruption holistically and not in a piecemeal fashion. Such an approach will require working in concerted efforts with different actors who bring different expertise and experience, including the Governance Commission, media, key government agencies, international agencies and other anti-corruption civil society organisations. Civil society including the media is the main driver of change in the fight against corruption. SFCG role will be to serve as a convener for civil society to develop a national strategy as well as provide training and support to the media in investigating, reporting accurately on corruption issues and following them up. SFCG will also use its communication skills and tools in developing anti-corruption messages that will support the work of other partners.

### *Thematic Issue 2: Access to resources and decision-making*

Rural communities are pushing to have access to resources and participation in decision making processes. In the broad sense of the word, this is a call for decentralisation. The government has also pledged it commitment to promote decentralisation of resources by providing development funds directly to the counties. While the intention is good, the system and processes for the management of resources have not charged so giving money to counties without an alteration in the faulty system for its proper utilisation does not lead to good results.

Decentralisation will require a re-orientation of people's perception of governance, power and authority. Communities will also need to be prepared for their participation in this process in terms of their roles and responsibilities. SFCG will work closely with the Governance Commission, other relevant government agencies, the media and pro-democracy civil society organisations to engage communities through outreach activities and mass sensitisation campaign.

### *Thematic Issue 3: Land Reform*

Access to and utilisation of land especially in the rural counties has been marked by wealth, power and political connections. Part of the government's reform agenda is the setting up of a Land Commission to facilitate the re-distribution of land in the rural counties and give more local ownership of land. The re-distribution of land is not only a complex issue but a source of conflict. Mass community sensitisation will be required to educate communities on the policy and prepare them for their participation. Working with local traditional structures and other stakeholders in putting into place conflict prevention mechanisms around land disputes will be important when the re-distribution starts. SFCG will play a key role in these two areas in collaboration with the Land Commission, Governance Commission, Ministries of Agriculture and Internal Affairs and civil society organisations.

### *Thematic Issue 4: Security civilian relations:*

Under the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) the international community have invested a lot of resources into training the new security forces. The police have been deployed in most of the counties though in small numbers with inadequate logistics. The training of the Army continues and with time they will be deployed in different parts of the country. The police and New Army have been properly uniformed and their salaries increased. This does not, however, guarantee that their relationship with the civilian populace will be improved as people still hold negative views and perception of the security apparatus especially the police as the New Army is yet to begin interacting with civilians. SFCG will work closely with the Ministry of Defense and the National Police through its Outreach Department in creating a platform where civilians and the security apparatus will explore ways of breaking down negative stereotypes and prejudice and forging cooperative working relationships.

## IV. Methodology and Tools

SFCG aims to bridge the gap between the government and civil society through intensive outreach and media work. Both elements will be informed by two key studies recently undertaken by SFCG to map out civil society and the media sector. Outreach activities will serve as connecting point between policy makers and their constituents and will build on work already done over the past three years in Bong, Nimba and Grand Gedeh Counties as well as starting to work in Lofa. These outreach activities will inform the contents of the media products, which are broadcast over 31 community radio stations across the country. On the media side, SFCG will continue to work with Monrovia based radio stations but will invest its time and resources into strengthening the new Independent Rural Radio Network, which links together community radio stations. SFCG's Gbarnga Studio will serve as a facility to conduct technical and management trainings to improve the quality and effectiveness of the network, which will serve as a platform for linking development and governance information.

SFCG will continue to use the following range of tools: Radio programming; Town hall meetings; Focus group discussions to inform the design of media products and the agenda of the town hall meetings; Policy dialogues between communities, policy makers and civil society; Surveys and polling: Live theatre; and Listening dialogues where a leader is invited to listen to the concerns of the people and gives response at the end.