

SEARCH FOR
COMMON GROUND
IN SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone Update



Local chief contributes to forum with district councillors and community leaders

The President, Ernest Bai Koroma and his All People's Congress Party (APC), elected on a reform platform in 2007, are facing increasing political pressures as a result of the economic slow-down in Sierra Leone. Election pledges to tackle corruption, create jobs and increase the standard of living will be even more difficult to realise if the current economic situation persists. The IMF continues to assist the government in the formulation of new economic policy priorities to address failed policies under the previous administration. International donors also remain committed to assisting with the reconstruction process in Sierra Leone; however, the global recession may result in substantial cuts in aid budgets

Sierra Leone has made some recent strides in holding those responsible for the conflict accountable. On February 25, Sierra Leone's UN-backed Special Court found three of the senior commanders of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the use of child soldiers. Of note, the RUF commanders were the first in the world to be convicted for attacking peacekeepers and forcibly marrying off individuals.

However, recent events underline Sierra Leone's continuing fragility. Tensions between supporters of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the APC continue to flare into localised violence as reported after a by-election for a district council seat in Pujehun district on March 14. At least 17 people were hurt in two days of clashes between supporters of rival political parties armed with rocks and machetes. Since the elections in 2008, civil society groups have become increasingly alarmed by incidences of political violence, including attacks on the offices of the SLPP and reports of journalists being assaulted, most notably the alleged brutal gang rape of opposition SLPP supporters on March 16, 2009. In many cases of political violence the police have been accused of not being proactive and in some instances of aiding and abetting human rights violations. These incidents of violence raise concerns about Sierra Leone's continuing fragility and lack of political tolerance.

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Support to Democratic Systems in Sierra Leone

With support from the Canadian Government's Global Peace and Security Fund, SFCG has been encouraging citizen engagement in decision-making processes to improve service delivery in four districts, namely Kailahun, Koinadugu, Bombali, and Kenema. The project applies a number of SFCG's common ground tools including radio programming, town hall meetings, trainings, and exchange visits. Activities target a range of stake-holders at the district level, namely the newly elected Local Councils, civil society organisations, and community radio stations as well as the local residents.

Programme interventions resulted in following achievements:



Local participant speaks at a town hall meeting held in Kabala

- Information fostering participation, transparency, and accountability is more available at the local level:

As a result of trainings focused on transparency and accountability, civil society participants reported a better understanding of how to access information from their Councils as well as radio stations, and also how to share information with their membership.

- Community radio stations have increased capacity to produce programming addressing governance and service delivery at the community and district level:

Community radio journalists equally reported in post-workshop questionnaires that they had gained knowledge and skills to improve their efforts producing programming on governance and accountability in their communities. Radio stations developed creative programming including roundtable discussions, call-in programmes, local language programming and interviews with community stake-holders to enable the general public to hold their councillors financially accountable.

- Constructive forums are made available for discussion around local decision-making and priority setting:

Town hall meetings provided a constructive forum for discussion among Councillors, civil society members, and community residents around financial accountability. 16 meetings were held around the four districts, in many cases providing the first instance of citizens directly engaging their leadership. Councillors and citizen speakers at every forum expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to engage directly in this type of forum, and encouraged the organisation of follow-up meetings.

- Local councils have increased understanding of their roles and strategies on how to effectively fulfil their obligations:

The council exchange visits enabled Councillors to strategise with their peers about the opportunities and challenges that they face in their governing responsibilities. Prior to the project's implementation, the Councillors generally considered civil society representatives to be "witch hunters"—just seeking to highlight failings of the Councillors and publicise their flaws. Through the discussions, and SWOT analyses undertaken, the Councils were made aware of their roles and responsibilities to their constituents, and the tools available to them to realise these roles.

In one example, the Mayor of Kenema Town reported that his office was approached by representatives of an international NGO, who informed him that they were impressed by his presentation and were ready to fund some development projects in his area of operation. SFCG will follow-up on the realisation of this promise and the accountability of the Kenema Town Council in the implementation of these projects.

In the second example, a councillor from Ward 41 (Tongo Field in Kenema District) was approached by an international NGO who declared that they were ready to help dig eight hand pump wells in his ward based on what they heard in the town hall meeting where he shared his development priorities. The areas were identified together with him and the Ward Committee members.

- Leaders are better able to engage with the constituents in their areas:

Over the course of the project, Councillors and other local government representatives became more comfortable interacting with the local radio station, civil society, and the general population. This increased confidence between the officials and the radio station staff is a critical step in ensuring improved availability of information from the councils to their constituents as radio is the primary source of information for Sierra Leonean citizens. Councils are also seeing some concrete results for their involvement in the project. In two specific cases, the presentations made by the Local Councils resulted in outside funding for their development plans.

The Chair of the UN Peace Building Commission Visits Sierra Leone

SFCG was pleased to host a visit from the new Chair of the UN Peacebuilding Commission, a post that was assumed by Canada on February 25th, building on its active commitment to the region since 2002. SFCG is currently implementing a project supported by Canada's Department for Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and was consulted along with national-level officials and other civil society representatives concerning the status of rehabilitation and reconstruction in Sierra Leone. The Peace Building Commission has been working since June 2006 to support Sierra Leone in its efforts to consolidate peace in a post-conflict environment.

Independent Radio Network Condemns Attacks on Member Stations

SFCG has played an instrumental role in establishing the Independent Radio Network (IRN), which now functions as a legally registered body of 21 independent stations in rural and urban communities operating throughout Sierra Leone. During a general meeting held in mid-January, IRN representatives condemned a recent spate of violence directed against their member stations in Tombo, Pujehun and Kambia. Reporters from all three areas have been subjected to threats, harassment, and beatings. In Pujehun, stalwarts from the APC party attacked Radio Wanjei during the parliamentary by-elections, shutting it down for two weeks and damaging its technical facilities. At this time, supporters of the SLPP also assaulted one of the station's reporters. In Tombo, disgruntled community members forced the radio station Voice of Peninsular Mountains to cease its operations for two weeks in the face of repeated violent attacks. More recently, a reporter from Radio Kolenten in Kambia was verbally harassed and received a series of menacing phone calls. The youth leader in Kambia even wrote a letter to the Chairman of the radio station's Board threatening to beat the journalist if he appeared on the station again. The IRN is also concerned about their Freetown members, many of whom have likewise been assailed or intimidated in recent months.

SFCG remains actively engaged with IRN's member stations, providing financial support and partnering with the constituent stations on an individual basis to develop new programmes, as well as supporting the organisational development of the institution as a whole.

Consequently, IRN utilised its general meeting held in Pujehun to publicly reaffirm the members' commitment to democracy, rule of law and freedom of expression. IRN representatives also reminded their member stations to adhere to the codes of conduct that each station adopted in order to guide their journalists and reporters in the responsible exercise of their duties. Finally, IRN called upon the Office of National Security and the local police in Kambia and Pujehun to investigate these attacks in a timely manner and prosecute those found responsible.

SFCG Facilitates Dialogue to Address Needs of Marginalised Youth

In March, SFCG collaborated with the Conflict Security and Development Group based at King's College in London and the Centre for the Coordination of Youth Activities on the validation of the Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion Project. The project, designed to generate discussion around how government, international aid agencies and youth groups can reach out to vulnerable and excluded youth, produced a study on marginalised youth in Sierra Leone funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

SFCG's role centred on facilitating the validation of the report, sharing the findings from two regional sessions and one national workshop, and gathering feedback to incorporate into the final report.

Thirty-five individuals participated in each of the regional sessions, held in Bo and Makeni respectively, including representatives from the Mayor's Office; the Ministry of Youth Education and Sport; regional and town councils; youth groups and civil society organisations. Discussions illustrated that youth issues elicit a great deal of interest and concern in Sierra Leone. Many of the sessions rapidly became heated, with representatives from the government and youth groups engaging in mutual recriminations. Government officials blamed youth for failing to constitute themselves as a unified group to present their grievances. Youth, in turn, placed the blame squarely on the government for failing to recognise their needs. All three sessions consequently provided an opportunity to engage in dialogue around these polemical issues.



Participants meet in Makeni to discuss report on vulnerable youth

Overall, participants agreed on the following recommendations:

- The government should increase the budget of the Ministry of Youth; create a national youth commission; review the National Youth Policy; and popularise the 'strategic action plan for a youth document', which is the official government blue print for solving the youth crisis;
- Political parties should bolster government efforts to address youth marginalisation by increasing communication and collaboration;
- International aid agencies can complement efforts made by the government and youth groups to improve their situation within Sierra Leone by funding programmes geared towards increasing youth participation in the community and supporting their entrepreneurial endeavours;
- As the main stake-holder, youth groups should take steps to engage political leaders so as to increase their involvement in the political process. Other steps include, partaking in skill training and educational opportunities when these are made available and attempting to revitalise youth as a unified force for the development and rehabilitation of the nation.

This initiative complemented similar efforts by SFCG's programme in Liberia to validate the research report in the Liberian context. More information is provided in SFCG's Liberia Update, available at www.sfcg.org.

Staff Spotlight: SFCG Sierra Leone Country Director Assists Community Radio Stations in Ethiopia

SFCG Sierra Leone's Country Director, Ambrose James, and partner Andrew Kromah, the Executive Director of the Media Foundation for Peace and Development, travelled to Ethiopia in April to conduct an assessment to inform community radio development in the country. Community radio is still a relatively new phenomenon in Ethiopia as compared to Sierra Leone, which has a fairly well developed community radio network with approximately 30 stations broadcasting throughout the country. Ambrose and Andrew brought their experience to bear on the newly liberalising media environment in Ethiopia, sharing experiences with communities and producing a report that provides recommendations on how to develop community radio stations that will be sustainable and serve the communities' needs as an information and dialogue platform.



Ambrose James interviews head of the Information Bureau in Jimma

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