

Media and Peacebuilding in Sierra Leone

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by [Mary Magellan](#)

Coated in red dust, we traipsed across the scorching hot sand dunes, quickly making our way towards the barely clothed, emaciated men who were sieving through endless piles of sand. The agitated workers shouted incomprehensible phrases to us, but the one that I clearly understood was, “You here to buy diamonds!”

I was frightened, and for the first time after a week of being in Sierra Leone I sensed the hostility and aggression that only eight years ago fueled a horrific civil war. I had already lost hope that we would be able to conduct an interview with the workers. The men were aggravated by our presence; surely it would be futile and dangerous to converse with them. Suddenly, a local radio journalist spoke into a cell phone and announced that we were on the air. As soon as he said this, there was a quick hush amongst the workers and the atmosphere changed from one of complete chaos to a situation where communication was possible. Giving these workers, who are ignored by society, the opportunity to talk about their circumstances was more powerful than I could have imagined. In less than a few minutes, an angry, irate and hostile environment subsided, and our different languages, cultures and backgrounds met to create a successful and respectful dialogue.

Media has become a strong tool for peacebuilding in Sierra Leone, largely as a result of the 11-year civil war. At one of our interviews, Ramatu, the Chairwoman of Women’s Action for Dignity (WAD), said, “Thank God for the war, it allowed us to say ‘yes’.... After [the war] we were empowered.” Ramatu implied that women gained increased power as a result of the devastating war, and one way that they did this was through the use of media. “Media is our focus,” says Ramatu, “we had one hour per week of free radio airing to speak on issues regarding women and children.”

According to James Ambrose of Search for Common Ground (SFCG), between 80-90% of Sierra Leoneans own a radio. Those who did not have a radio during the war quickly acquired one in order to know where the rebels were moving. During the war, media played an integral role in reaching out to otherwise unreachable groups. Civilians and NGOs began to use radio and

music to create open dialogue between political enemies and put an end to violence by communicating with combatants in the bush.



• *In the Search for Common Ground office in Freetown watching a radio broadcast being made.*

Photograph by Mary Magellan. •

Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an organization that uses radio to create national and community discourse, successfully crossed the frontlines of the rebel armies and engaged in direct communication with the combatants. SFCG convinced rebel commanders to disarm and release child soldiers. Reporters went into the bush, talked with commanders, established credibility and then gradually took truckloads of children back into civilian life. Additionally, SFCG strategically used music, an ingrained aspect of Sierra Leonean culture, as a common connector to rebuild relationships between fighting forces and in broken communities. SFCG organized Peace Festivals in which musicians crossed the fighting lines to play concerts for the rebels and local villages. “We used music to cross borders,” said James Ambrose, the director of SFCG. All of the festivals were broadcast live throughout the country and featured discussions with local representatives on issues of reintegration, gender and empowerment.

We asked SFCG, “What do you believe the causes of the civil war to be?” Director James Ambrose responded, “alienating the youth from making decisions and participating in politics, and [not] giving them opportunities to work.” SFCG has addressed these root causes by using media to reintegrate and empower youth. They established Talking Drums Studios, a multi-media production studio, to create radio and audio programs that encourage the youth to take an active role in building peace and transforming conflict. Adolescents write and sing songs, recite poems, and tell stories about the challenges they face in the aftermath of the war. Talking Drums promotes the progression of sustainable peace by encouraging citizens to apologize, forgive and heal in a safe space.

As our course title suggests, there are many challenges to peacebuilding and media is no exception. The government is trying to take over many radio stations, reduce political criticism, promote pro-government public relations broadcasting, and according to Ambrose, “manipulate populations through music.” SFCG has been resisting the government by financially supporting independent stations and encouraging the development of issue-based programming. In addition, western rap music, which was highly criticized as a cause of the civil war, remains a negative influence on youth because it spreads messages of gaining power through violence and forming gangs to resolve conflicts.

Like many tools for building sustainable peace in conflict-ridden societies, media can bring about gradual change. Radio has created a necessary space for victims and perpetrators of the war to grieve and heal; one that is not readily accessible or accepted in Sierra Leonean society. Radio programs give many people, particularly women, children and the illiterate, a voice that they never had. Radio discussions may not immediately remove the underlying causes of conflict that still remain in Sierra Leone, but slowly, over generations, it can change the nature of discourse and stimulate an open society.

Mary Magellan was in Sierra Leone for a two-week course led by Dr. Pushpa Iyer of the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Mary's blog is part of a [series of reflections](#) by Dr. Iyer and her students on the challenges to building peace in this war-ravaged country. -Ed.

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