

Key Findings from Bike Riders in Sierra Leone: A Case Study of the Intervention by Search for Common Ground

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is an international non-governmental organization that works to transform the way the world deals with conflict: away from adversarial approaches, toward cooperative solutions. SFCG in Sierra Leone was established in 2000 and uses a unique two-pronged approach to peace building that couples media work with on the ground peace building activities. SFCG's strategy stimulates grassroots solutions to community problems through the establishment of community radio stations, solidarity events, coalition building, community dialogues, live dramas, and training workshops. In doing so, SFCG engages local and international organizations, as well as the Sierra Leonean government in the process and incorporates outreach into its media programming, bringing community issues into the national media dialogue. The strategy focuses on four priority issues: corruption, quality education, good governance, and those marginalized out of the decision-making process, specifically youth, women and children.

The case study outlines SFCG's intervention in the current, sometimes violent, conflict between bike riders and transport stakeholders.



A BRA meeting in Kailahun

"SFCG-facilitated media programs are important conflict transformation resources that we have been utilizing."

-BRA Executive
(sentiments echoed by the
Traffic Warden supervisor,
Passenger Welfare
Association (PAWA)
members, and other
executives)

RESEARCH SCOPE

Since the end of the war in 2002, many ex-combatants have sustained themselves by transporting people on motorbikes. Riders have since banded together to form the Bike Riders Association (BRA). The organization helps to coordinate the activities of riders and aid them in times of trouble (accidents) and in activities such as weddings, naming ceremonies, and funerals. In 2003, in light of growing problems and increased conflict between (motor) bike riders and other transport stakeholders in different parts of the country, SFCG intervened to improve relations between stakeholders and riders in Bo, Makeni, and Kailahun. Efforts were expanded to Kenema and Kono after violent conflict erupted between riders and other transport stakeholders in 2005. The intervention included organizing training workshops, convening rider/stakeholder dialogues, establishing stakeholder committees and taskforces, and producing radio programs highlighting taskforce messages. In January 2006, SFCG commissioned a case study to assess the results and effectiveness of its intervention with riders and other stakeholders, including members of the drivers' unions, concerned citizens, police/traffic wardens, and other local authorities.

KEY FINDINGS

Bike Riders and Transport Stakeholders: Causes of the Conflict

- *Riders and Police:* The most serious conflicts occur between bike riders and the police. Riders feel targeted as ex-combatants, accusing the police of unwarranted arrests, hasty tickets, and extortion.
- *Riders and SLRTA:* The Sierra Leone Road Transport Authority (SLRTA) issues legal documentation and licenses, which riders often do not possess. Riders blame this lack of proper documentation on high license fees and delays on the part of the SLRTA, adding that they are forced to continue working despite the illegalities because their livelihood depends on it.
- *Riders and Traffic Wardens:* Traffic wardens accuse riders of not obeying road signs, driving dangerously, and violating traffic rules. Riders report that traffic wardens favor well-connected riders in the community and are unnecessarily rough during arrests.
- *Riders and Passengers:* Passengers describe riders as dirty and poorly

“SFCG is a key player and supporter of conflict resolution processes in the township.”

- Chairman of Local Partnership Board, Makeni

Stakeholders participated in the intervention for various reasons, including **SFCG’s credibility** as an organization dedicated to resolving conflict.

Nov 7, 2005: Violent confrontation occurred between Kenema riders and police, triggered by the murder of two bike riders. SFCG organized and facilitated a consultative meeting between authorities and riders, involving the Bo taskforce, to resolve the crisis.

Training workshops were reported as the most significant intervention tool, resulting in decreased accident rates, as well as behavioral changes among riders.

dressed, dangerous and irresponsible. Riders blame their appearances on poverty and road conditions and fault passengers for unfairly assuming that, as ex-combatants, they are killers.

- *Riders and Motor Drivers:* Motor drivers oppose riders’ refusal to join the driver’s union. Riders accuse drivers of being motivated solely by financial gain. In Kono, this conflict has led to drivers beating riders and threatening future beatings if they do not join the union.
- *Riders and Bike Owners:* Typically riders do not own bikes; rather they rent bikes for a fee from bike owners. Conflicts between these groups are mainly related to contractual agreement violations such as unpaid rental fees, owners not providing bikes on agreed days, or owners lending bikes to untrained relatives. Often times, these relatives cause accidents for which riders are then blamed. In many of these cases, the BRA acts as a mediator to ensure that both sides honor the contracts.

Why do stakeholders participate in SFCG’s intervention?

- They value SFCG’s credibility and commitment to resolving conflict.
- The intervention provides an opportunity for better control and regulation of riders, as well as increased revenue for state associations and organizations with close state relationships.
- The taskforces created provide an opportunity for the BRA to pass on grievances to authorities, resulting in more awareness and communication on rider issues.
- Chiefs were the only group not to participate in the intervention. They have typically acted as respected superiors, controlling the land and its resources. However, they have little control over the bike riders and refuse to work with them.

SFCG Intervention: Trainings Increase Professionalism

- *Violence in Kono and Kenema:* In November 2005, when violence broke out between riders and the authorities in Kono and Kenema, SFCG played a key role in mediating the conflict by facilitating meetings between the groups. In Kenema, the SFCG-organized Bo taskforce attended the meeting, resulting in a new stakeholders committee which began radio sensitization programs in order to alleviate tensions.
- *Training in Bo:* Training workshops held in Bo have resulted in certified riders in traffic laws and in insurance and licensing procedures. Certification has provided a sense of professionalism previously not present. Despite being ex-combatants, these youths, men and women alike, are gaining useful career skills, which they reported not receiving from the disarmament process. This sense of professionalism has also led to behavioral change among the riders. It has been noted that in many instances, immediate and sometimes violent action in response to conflict has been replaced by peaceful dialogue.

What interventions worked?

- **Training workshops** were reported by stakeholders as being the most significant interventions, bringing instant and noticeable changes, such as drastic reductions in accident rates and more professional and responsible actions on the part of riders, especially in dealing with accidents.
- **Stakeholder committee meetings** created a forum for honest communication, allowing riders to engage with authorities and other stakeholders and integrate into community processes.
- **Facilitation of radio programs** gave voice to riders and involved the

Riders in Makeni mentioned SFCG as one of the few voices speaking on behalf of the riders. However, despite efforts, there is room to improve as many riders still feel marginalized.

SFCG's credibility and visibility make it well placed both to lead efforts at building capacity for resolving these conflicts and designing interventions to combat them in the future.

larger public in informed discussions about bike riding issues.

- **The Bo taskforce's visit to other regions** not only helped resolve conflicts and create area taskforces, but also helped the Bo taskforce to see themselves as peace ambassadors with conflict resolution skills to share.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain pressure on riders and stakeholders to keep commitments.
- Attention should be expanded to address conflicts within the BRAs.
- The SLRTA, insurance companies, and the BRA should organize trainings and incorporate them into existing procedures like driving tests.
- Taskforce members need to be trained in organizational development and resource mobilization with emphasis on transferring the responsibility for sustaining peace from taskforces to involved public agencies.
- The BRA needs internal democracy, correct financial procedures, leadership training for executive members, and conflict resolution skills, counseling, and peace building sessions for the entire membership.
- Improvement of broadcasted radio programs is needed to increase radio station interest in offering programs as regular features. Additional outreach is needed in order to reach populations with limited access to radios.
- Use riders in election awareness as they can reach areas cars cannot.

CONCLUSION

Commercial Bike Riding and the BRA exemplify an interesting combination of developing self-reintegration tactics and creating emerging livelihood opportunities for youths and ex-combatants, and challenging older associations (drivers' union) and authorities. As uprooted individuals, riders have few established ties with community members and thus find little support and assistance when problems arise. Stereotyped as killers because of their ex-combatant status, many bike riders find themselves marginalized within their communities. Having spent their formative years with fighting factions, many have been deprived of the skills necessary to appreciate civil regulations and engage constructively with authorities. These issues, along with the mobility and visibility that go along with this occupation, tend to exacerbate tensions between riders and other stakeholders.

SFCG's intervention aims to reduce conflict by re-socializing ex-combatants and building their civic and conflict resolution skills and engagement competencies through training and by facilitating regular meetings with stakeholders. SFCG accelerates the bike riders' reintegration into society by engaging them and others in open dialogue and giving them a chance to share community efforts and responsibilities. In Bo and Makeni, SFCG has been proactive in meeting the previously mentioned conflict transformation challenges. In Kenema and Kono, however, the interventions tended to be reactive and lapsed when violence between riders and other stakeholders ceased. Tensions in these two areas are still present, and could flare up into greater violence if more systematic interventions are not designed and implemented. SFCG's credibility and visibility make it well placed both to lead efforts at building capacities for resolving these conflicts and designing interventions to combat them in the future.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Information was gathered in Bo, Kenema, Makeni and Kono. Three streams of information were utilized for the case study: indepth interviews with key transport stakeholders, focus group discussions with members of the BRA, and SFCG's Bike Riders project documents and Transport Stakeholders Committee meeting minutes. These sources were triangulated and verified with each other.

Source: Bike Riders in Sierra Leone: A Case Study of Search for Common Ground's Intervention, February 2006. A copy of this report can be acquired by contacting Frances Fortune at ffortune@sfcg.org.