

Search for Common Ground West Africa Regional Strategy 2006-2008

Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an international conflict transformation NGO headquartered in Washington, DC and Brussels, Belgium, works in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, among other countries around the world. With a mission to transform the way in which the world deals with conflict, from adversarial solutions to finding cooperative solutions, SFCG's approach in the Mano River Union countries and Côte d'Ivoire (MRU+1) is to employ a regional strategy and a number of multifaceted tools to address four thematic priorities: **Leadership, Exclusion, Communication/Information, and Youth Engagement.**

Regional Overview

While the violence in Liberia and Sierra Leone has ended, and the humanitarian crisis they caused is reduced, escalating conflict in Côte d'Ivoire is creating refugee flows and raising new humanitarian concerns. Even without war, conditions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea are dire, with deepening poverty, endemic corruption and a weak rule of law undermining social, economic and political stability. These four countries are vulnerable to further cycles of violence and suffering by their populations.

With a legacy of bad governance, poorly designed and implemented domestic policies and difficult diplomatic relationships between neighbours, this complex regional conflict requires continued attention and support to its end. The shattered bonds of family and community limit protection of young people from re-recruitment, undermining investments made by the international community in national Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programmes. Driven mainly by economic deprivation, a lack of hope and/or frustration with failed DDR engagement, these 'regional warriors'¹ roam through the region's heavily forested porous borders where reportedly 8,000,000² light weapons are available and little effective border control exists. Their aim is to join together, fight and loot for their livelihoods.

SFCG's West Africa Regional Team manages the regional strategy providing management, technical and strategic support to the four national programmes. Bringing diverse and complementary skills from within the region, team members contribute both to the achievements of national programme to which they are attached and to other programmes in the sub-region. SFCG practices a lessons learned-approach as a way to innovate toward sustainable impact, sharing and adapting good practices and creating linkages across the sub-region.

¹ Defined as young people with no hope and driven by severe economic deprivation to use weapons and war as a livelihood. Youth, Poverty and Blood. The Lethal Legacy of West Africa's Regional Warriors. Human Rights Watch Report. April 2005. <http://hrw.org/reports/2005/westafrica0405/>

² This estimate was presented in a briefing by Rachel Stohl, Senior Analyst, Center for Defense Information before the U.S. Congressional Human Rights Caucus. May 2004 entitled 'Briefing on Small Arms in West Africa'. http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?DocumentID=2225&StartRow=1&ListRows=10&appendURL=&Orderby=D.DateLastUpdated&ProgramID=23&from_page=index.cfm

Since 2004, SFCG has developed and implemented a regional strategy, supported by a consortium of donors, to promote increased regional communication, informed dialogue, and cooperation among diverse groups on issues of common concern. This strategy is operationalised through the four country programmes in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. The strategy maximizes synergies between the programmes' activities and the strengths of the respective staffs; utilizing an integrated approach of media, community outreach, and networking to engage wide and diverse populations in affecting positive social change. As well a number of integrated and joint cross-border activities are undertaken to achieve the goals of the programmes and ultimately contribute to the mission of the organisation.

Regional Strategy

In November 2005 SFCG convened a working session with its strategic and operational partners and staff to update its strategy. While looking at the central issue of means and sources of social change in West Africa, partners and staff identified the priority issues for the region and opportunities for leveraging available resources to address these priorities. Then a discussion explored the role that SFCG should play in the sub-region in fostering and supporting peaceful social change. SFCG also sought feedback from this group on its work in each of the four countries to integrate into its programmatic evaluation and strategic thinking.

SFCG and its partners identified existing regional opportunities that could be leveraged to address these issues. Identified opportunities include:

- Political transitions occurring at different stages,
- Media landscape liberalisation and diversification,
- Increasing awareness of human rights stimulated by UN presence and resources,
- DDRR successes and failures, lessons learned and best practices
- Increasing emergence of women in key leadership positions with prominence of women leaders (especially with Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's election).

African economies are growing on average 7% a year, the highest rate since the 1970's. National incomes are rising, but so is social inequality, fueling political tensions. According to the UN Human Development Index, per capita income is stagnating and life expectancy falling, so the fruits of higher growth are not going to social development.
www.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Africa/4552930.stm

Within the frame of these themes and the organisation's mission, each national programme shapes its own goals, objectives and priorities according to their own context. The November session reaffirmed SFCG's regional approach and the links between the national programmes and the achievement of regional goals. It highlighted possibilities for powerful cross-border and regional types of activities and shared experiences that take a "best practices and lessons learned" approach.

Integrating media and community outreach tools, SFCG expects to achieve the following **outcomes** through the application of its strategy:

- Credible and appropriate information is more generally available around the sub-region, particularly for marginalized populations like refugees, children, women, and youth;
- Youth are constructively engaged in non-violent opportunities and have a growing voice in their communities;
- Women are increasingly acknowledged and included in decision-making processes;
- The general population is more aware of and active in the protection of children's rights; and
- Inter-ethnic tolerance and cooperation has increased, reducing incidences of ethnic violence and discrimination in the sub-region.