

---

**Search for Common Ground  
West Africa Regional Strategy  
2009-2011**

**S**earch for Common Ground (SFCG), an international conflict transformation NGO headquartered in Washington, DC and Brussels, Belgium, works in 18 countries around the world, 9 of which are in African, including the West African countries Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. With a mission to transform the way in which the world deals with conflict, from adversarial approaches to cooperative solutions, the overarching goal of SFCG's West Africa programs is to **contribute to building stability in the region and reducing the potential for violent conflicts.**

Informed by each of the country programmes, SFCG West Africa regional strategy provides a sound framework for growth and development to ensure national programmes are contributing to the success of the region as a whole. It leverages the opportunities and tools that SFCG uses and focuses on thematic priorities that are adjudged to underpin stability and gains in development. These themes are:

1. Youth engagement: - Over the past two decades, youth have been at the core of the West Africa armed conflicts, both as victims and as perpetrators. Although the civil wars are over, lofty expectations due to election promises marked by the absence of economic opportunities create a context in which the potential for violence increases as the availability of resources decreases. At the root of this crisis of youth, is the fact that there are very few employment options available and the end result in extreme cases is a breakdown of the economic, political and social structures of a society which leaves youth marginalized.
2. Leadership –Leadership, which values respect and tolerance and seeks to build processes that use pluralism as a guiding principle of nation building, has the capacity to transform key reform processes from merely technical exercises of reconstruction and infrastructural development to ones that are citizen centred. Strengthening leadership skills to support consensus building around shared values is important to promote pluralism and enhance overall stability.
3. Identity and Social Exclusion - In concrete terms, both the process and the outcomes of democratic reform need to engage a country's citizens. It is the process of participation that builds trust between the elected leaders and the people. Without this interaction, people often feel marginalized and left out of the democratic process and are more likely to revert to violence to feel heard. It is the overall buy-in from the people that leads to sustainable change and lasting peace.

#### **Emerging Framework: Opportunities and Challenges**

With the re emergence of the Mano River Union (MRU) as an active player in the regional body politic and the reorganising of ECOWAS to focus on conflict prevention, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire have regional openings to exploit so that the development gains of each country are mutually beneficially to growth and development for its neighbours.

Within these challenges, there are opportunities which SFCG will leverage with its capabilities and expertise in the region.

Opportunity:	Targeted Change:	Challenge	Outcome:
1. Pluralism and diversification within the media landscape:	Include different voices into the decision-making processes; Increase information to public to enable them to make informed choices	Change must be gradual and accompanied by high degree of professionalism by media so that it gains credibility and supports peace.	Professionalism within the media
2. Political transitions through elections:	Create the platform for individuals to exercise their rights and responsibilities; Create opportunities for consensus around national priorities.	Lack of concensus leads to unmet expectations which in turn leads to voter apathy at local elections. This weakens local democratic institutions charged with driving development	Building consensus around change
3. Post conflict governance reforms:	Create targeted communication strategies around reform processes in post conflict societies to ensure buy in from citizens	Trend is for reform policies not to take into account directly the diverse and heterogeneous needs of youth and women.	Mainstream issues of youth and women in reform processes
4. Increasing demand for accountability	Instilling view that sustainable development is directly linked with internal democratization and the proper management of public funds.	Public will for change is fleeting and can leave civil society undervalued by general public Must work with public to demand changes from government.	Promoting citizens' demand for good governance
5. Diversified civil society	Civil society provides a unique platform that allows alternative voices to be heard and mainstreamed in the way a country is governed.	Building consensus between the public and political will is difficult because outlooks and priorities may differ	Harmonizing public and political will
6. Intra state wars and conflicts are decreasing	Increased interaction among people from different countries through trade and migration creates an opportunity for reducing prejudice, fear and mistrust of the other.	Lack of knowledge among population and customs officials around trade laws, ECOWAS led reduction in tariffs and opening of borders.	Increased Trade, Migration and the Food Crises

### Strategy

The regional context requires a communicative approach that strengthens existing conflict sensitive mechanisms, structures and processes, which are inclusive and people centred. Leveraging the opportunities while mitigating the negative forces, SFCG has identified a unique niche to reach our goal in West Africa of supporting positive social change. This multifaceted approach on the one hand strengthens **drivers of change** and on the other hand generates **dialogue and space to reframe issues**, which ultimately seeks to institutionalise the common ground approach into key processes and structures that underpin stability and peace. SFCG's strategy is to:

- Strengthen the information and communication networks,
- Open more spaces for engagement,
- Build knowledge and applicability of rights and regulatory frameworks so that citizens are informed of rights and responsibilities and means as they move about the sub region.

Institutional frameworks already exist provided by ECOWAS and the MRU, in addition to the daily processes that traders, migrants, and populations living in the border area undertake every day across borders of the region. These can be strengthened at the regional level, while national structures are enhanced in each country.

*Drivers of Change: Information and Communication*

Communication facilitates the development of democratic practices and creates a connection between the governed and the government,

but the communication channel through which reform agendas take place is often both hierarchical and narrow. Strategic communication broadens this channel of representation so that:

- Diverse people and voices on contesting interests are mainstreamed in the national debate.
- Government institutions are opened and a framework formed for national dialogue through which public opinion is formed about key public policies.
- Diversified and minority voices are highlighted creating the opportunity for citizens to gain trust in the institutions that are implementing the reform agenda.
- Collective accountability is built into the system on the part of the citizens, the government and its international partners in the implementation of reform processes.

***Overall the regional strategy consolidates the challenges and successes of each of the country programmes integrating learning and sharing through:***

- Shared systems development,
- Shared resources (i.e. video capability, management team),
- Creative initiatives tested and validated in a number of places,
- A diverse team to conceptualise and share ideas and analysis particularly around sensitive border areas and post conflict challenges,
- Strategic development on common themes – such as youth
- Well-developed strategic relations across the region (i.e. UNHCR and UNICEF),

*Deepening the Analysis: Opening Spaces and Reframing Issues*

SFCG works with civil society organisations nationally and globally on themes that cut across the various countries, creating the space for organizations to analyze and better understand the issues where they work or plan to work. Experience has shown that diversifying and broadening the space for dialogue on key issues leads multi-sector coalitions around identified themes and areas of vested interests which have a higher chance of effecting change than if each organization acts independently.

**Expected Outcomes:** The inter-connection between strategic communications and civil society engagement is manifested through the integration of SFCG's media and community outreach tools. The application of these tools in implementing this strategy will achieve the following outcomes:

- Major reform processes that underpin stability are strengthened through enhanced understanding and informed engagement;
  - The formulation and implementation of major policy reform is informed by conversations reflecting diverse voices, people and interests;
  - Credible and relevant information is more readily available, particularly for marginalized populations like children, women, youth, and special interests groups such as migrants, traders, within the region;
- Excluded social groups such as minorities and youth are constructively engaged in non-violent opportunities and have a growing voice in their communities;
  - Representation of women, youth and other minority groups in the decision-making processes of reform agendas is increased;
  - Expectations for change are managed effectively;
- Citizens' demand for good governance and accountability is increased;
- Inter-ethnic tolerance and cooperation is increased; and
- The ECOWAS integration agenda is strengthened at national and regional level reducing discriminatory practices in the sub-region.