

## Search for Common Ground in West Africa – Regional Youth Strategy

West Africa is currently grappling with a crisis among its youth, brought on by years of war, unemployment and marginalisation. Over the past two decades, youth have been at the core of armed conflicts in Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone, both as victims and as perpetrators. In each instance, national conflicts took on regional components, with combatants from neighbouring countries being recruited across porous borders to fight alongside indigenous fighters. Commanders and warlords recruited these combatants both domestically and regionally, attracting them with assurances of payment and the chance to loot with abandon. Following the wars, they returned to their homes, where poor socio-economic conditions led to feelings of hopelessness. Unable to support themselves, let alone their families, these *regional warriors*<sup>1</sup> were re-recruited into neighbouring conflicts, continuing the vicious cycle.

Ex-combatants are just one group of youth in West Africa particularly affected by the current crisis. Though their experience may be different, the socio-economic reality of these *regional warriors* "is tragically mirrored by millions of others in West Africa... (including the victims they left behind), who, as aptly noted in the report of Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission 'languish in a twilight zone of unemployment and despair.'"<sup>1</sup> The continued difficulties in Cote d'Ivoire and questions of Guinea's future post-Conte, coupled with development indices in these four countries stagnating at some of the lowest levels in the world, make the environment in the sub-region ripe for youth manipulation and marginalisation, including recruitment into armed combat. In order to consolidate peace in the sub-region, the youth in West Africa, both victims and perpetrators, must fully be included in their countries' decision-making processes, as well as empowered to engage in the sub-region's combined development.

Building and expanding on four years of experience encouraging and facilitating just such inclusion in Sierra Leone, Search for Common Ground in West Africa's youth strategy seeks to identify opportunities where youth can have a positive influence on political and social events as they unfold within the sub-region. With offices in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the seat of its operational base, SFCG targets three main groups<sup>2</sup>: young people who are out of school and seeking livelihoods; youth leaders who are already part of organised efforts to address issues affecting young people; and elders and decision makers who have a big influence on young people, including district council members, educators and paramount chiefs. The overall goal of SFCG's youth strategy is **to facilitate the inclusion and participation of young women and men in consolidating the peace and developing the sub-region**. In support of this goal, SFCG's activities are aimed toward three main objectives:

- 1) *Depolarise the interactions and debate among young people;*
- 2) *Foster inter-generational dialogue; and*
- 3) *Empower youth to engage in good decision-making.*

### *Depolarise the interactions and debate among young people*

Beyond radio, SFCG will work with youth to help them identify common interests and strategies on how they can best work together. Drawing on its experiences in Sierra Leone, SFCG will create platforms for youth groups to dialogue with one another on issues that affect them. SFCG will form coalitions and networks, bringing together youth groups with different political affiliations and creating access points for those organisations that are marginalized. These activities will have the following results:

- Relationships will be formed between those groups that are linked into the power structures and those that are currently left out;
- Youth groups will increasingly work together and gain independence from the political parties so that they can all advance their own agendas;

The relationship between SFCG and youth groups has led to meaningful projects that give a sense of identity and recognition, and a voice that contributes to decision making in communities, while reducing the chance youths will be lured into violence or crime.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch article: *Youth, Poverty and Blood: The Lethal Legacy of West Africa's Regional Warriors*. March 2005, Vol. 17, No. 5 (A), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> In West Africa, the term 'youth' is defined not only by age, but also by life stage and an individual's relationship to his/her work. Once gainfully employed, young people are no longer considered youth.

- Youth groups will see how political manipulation has evolved in the post-conflict environment and will have the ability and perspective to avoid it.

#### *Foster intergenerational dialogue*

SFCG will bring together youth leaders and elder decision makers to focus on key issues both on the radio and in community activities. SFCG will pair local youth groups with community-level councils and community-based organisations in forums and dialogues aimed at encouraging youth groups to get more active within the communities. These activities will achieve several results:

- Youth will have an increased sense of inclusion;
- Elders, who often speak about including youth, will have a platform to do so, involving youth in non-political ways;
- Youth and elders will understand each other's perspectives;
- Channels of communication will be opened or expanded between youth and elders within the communities; and
- Youth will be able to manage their expectations more effectively, understanding the benefits that they are entitled to, as well as the limitations of the local decision-makers.

*Atunda Ayenda*, SFCG's popular radio soap opera reaching 90% of survey respondents, focuses on youth issues and the reintegration of ex-combatants. It is making a significant contribution to the improved relationship between youth and community leaders.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Media work*

In support of Objectives 1 and 2, SFCG will work through its media arm, Talking Drum Studio<sup>3</sup>, to create a platform for young peoples' voices on the radio. TDS will expand its existing news and soap opera programmes and dedicate even more airtime to addressing youth issues. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, SFCG/TDS will include a youth version of its popular *Golden Kids News* and encourage community radios to do more youth programming. Building on proven impact in Sierra Leone (see text box<sup>4</sup>) and Liberia, SFCG will develop similar youth programming in Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea. In order to foster dialogue and promote inclusion, SFCG will present case studies of successful instances of conflict resolution both among youth and between youth and decision-makers on the radio.

#### *Empower youth to engage in good decision-making*

SFCG will work with young entrepreneurs, 'innovators', who have succeeded in creating small businesses, focusing on their successes as models and linking them with other youth as mentors. SFCG will work to strengthen existing youth groups through organizational development, promoting good leadership and management, systems, and consensus building. SFCG will select the target groups based on their ability to address the major issues facing youth within their communities and to reach across political lines. As a result,

- Young people will develop soft skills that will help them find employment and make active, independent decisions that help them to avoid being manipulated by their elders;
- Key youth groups will become more successful in developing and implementing activities and managing their resources;
- Other youth groups will learn about what it takes to be successful; and
- Youth groups will gain the skills and relationships to address key issues that are affecting them and their communities.

In Sierra Leone, the upcoming elections in 2007 provide a clear opportunity for youth to participate in the political process, serving as an entry-point for their inclusion in the country's decision-making. In Liberia, the new government and its promises to work towards sustainable peace will offer youth citizens a real opportunity to engage in their country's development. The liberalisation of the airwaves in Guinea provides SFCG/TDS with the opportunity to strengthen its media work in the country, while recent youth uprisings in Cote d'Ivoire serve as grave reminders of the continuing manipulation of youth in violent conflict situations in the sub-region. As it has done since 1997, SFCG/TDS' radio programming will continue to provide a platform for young people's voices, while its outreach work will continue to engage youth and youth groups, further promoting their inclusion in the consolidation of peace and development within the sub-region.

<sup>3</sup> SFCG in West Africa currently produces radio programming in eight Talking Drum Studios: Cote d'Ivoire – Abidjan and Daloa; Guinea – Conakry; Liberia – Monrovia and Gbarnga; and Sierra Leone – Freetown, Bo and Makeni.

<sup>4</sup> Everett, P., Williams, T. and Myers, M. *Evaluation of Search for Common Ground Activities in Sierra Leone*. August 2004. <http://www.sfcg.org/sfcg/evaluations/sierra2.html>