

## Search for Common Ground - Liberia

### Key Findings from 2006 External Evaluation

Founded in 1982, SFCG is an international non-governmental organisation dedicated to transforming how the world deals with conflict. SFCG supports programmes that aim to resolve conflict, build consensus, solve problems collaboratively, and promote reconciliation. SFCG programmes create and implement innovative models for the successful management and transformation of conflict, moving away from adversarial approaches toward cooperative solutions.

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 is to employ a regional strategy and a number of multifaceted tools to address four thematic priorities: **Leadership, Exclusion, Communication/ Information, and Youth Engagement.**

Guided by its West Africa regional strategy, SFCG's interventions in Liberia seek to address regional conflict themes in concert with national programmes in Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

To support the transition process that recently concluded with the inauguration of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, SFCG targeted violence-prone urban centres, working on a range of issues including disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR); roles and responsibilities in the transitional government, timber concession review, corruption, elections, reconciliation, and HIV/AIDS. SFCG used a variety of tools—including diverse dialogue platforms such as round tables, town hall meetings, consultative processes, as well as polling techniques—to engage the population in the transition and electoral processes that concluded that period.

#### PROGRAMME BACKGROUND

Founded in 1997, SFCG's Talking Drum Studio (TDS), a multi-media project with studios in Monrovia and Gbarnga, has built a national audience with its regular weekly programmes that address governance, reconciliation, and conflict issues. Since September 2004, with funding from USAID under the Next Steps in Peace Project, SFCG has focused on border counties critical to national security. In Nimba, Bong and Grand Gedeh Counties, SFCG partnered with three local organisations—Development Education Network-Liberia (DEN-L), Center for Justice and Peace Studies (CJPS), and the Southeastern Women's Development Association (SEWODA)—using a peacebuilding framework of problem-solving to help quell ethnic rivalries and conflicts.

Over the course of the 27-month project, TDS worked with the three local NGOs to provide peace-building and conflict resolution training in eight locales to a cross sections of stakeholders, establishing "Peace Committees" whose task was to identify and attempt to resolve local conflict. Designed to complement SFCG's already successful media activities, the community outreach included support for community radio stations, drama groups, and sponsorship of events such as community fora and Peace Festivals.

The strategy of partnering while facilitating collaborations with local communities by working with organisations known and trusted by residents aimed to build the capacity of those partners while implementing the project.

The project was designed to meet two objectives determined by USAID: 1) Strengthen and expand constituencies for peace; and 2) Address causes and consequences of conflict. Given the broad nature of these objectives, SFCG determined three sub-objectives to help target its work: to (1) increase local capacity for early identification of conflict and resolution of that conflict; (2) increase participation of all social groups (women, youth, various ethnic and religious minorities, ex-combatants, etc.) in local decision-making and governance; and (3) increase the flow of information about issues critical to Liberia's transition, such as elections, DDDR, and returnee issues.

### EVALUATION SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

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The purpose of this independent ex-post evaluation was to assess SFCG's overall program in Liberia covering the period of September 2003 – July 2006. The evaluation had two main objectives:

- 1) To assess the extent to which SFCG's program in Liberia strengthened local capacities for peace in the eight communities targeted by the Next Steps in Peace program
- 2) To critically examine SFCG's understanding and approach to partnership as it affects its abilities to engage and the effectiveness of its engagement.

The evaluation findings provide field-wide learning to both the *Next Steps in Peace Project* funder and SFCG. Evaluation results also contribute to SFCG Liberia's efforts for improved quality of programming. Additionally, the lessons learned inform programming of similar activities across several regions where SFCG works.

### EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

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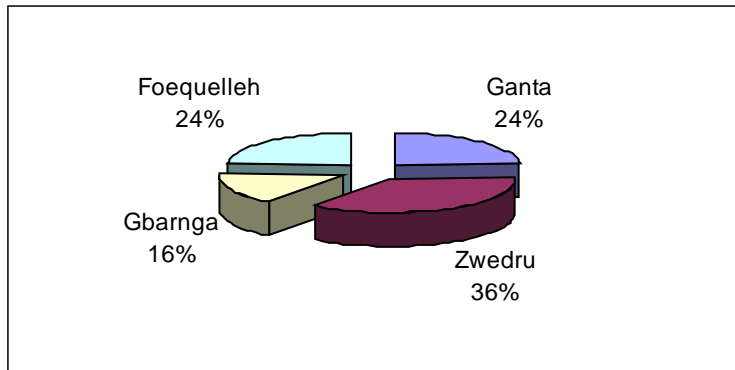
The fieldwork component of the evaluation was carried out by a three-person team between 31 July and 12 August 2006. The team evaluated four different elements of SFCG's program in Liberia, namely:

- Media program
- Outreach program
- NGO partnership strategy
- Synergy between the Media and Outreach activities.

The evaluation research methodology and tools were qualitative in nature; they included a **document review** (including listenership surveys and baseline studies), **Key informant interviews** (with leadership of civil society and government agencies, radio station partners, *Next Steps in Peace* operational partners, and Monrovia-based civil society organizations) and **Focus group discussions** in four Monrovia communities with fifteen radio listeners each (age and gender specific).

Finally four **case studies** were conducted in targeted communities chosen to represent all three counties and all three local NGO partners. For each case study interviews were conducted with the local NGO partner field staff, the members of the peace committee (individually and as a group), community outreach activity participants, town or village authorities, representatives of various social groupings (women, Muslims, elders, youths, ex-combatants, etc.), representatives of community radio stations (if any), parties to conflicts resolved by the peace committees, and other randomly selected

community members. Following the requirements of the SFCG evaluation manual<sup>1</sup> at least 25% of respondents were identified by the evaluators and not by TDS staff or NGO partner staff.



**Distribution of Evaluation Participants per Target Community**

### **KEY FINDINGS**

SFCG has close to ten years of community experience and established relationships to support peace and reconciliation in Liberia. Having worked with various local, national, and international partners in national and community-based projects, SFCG has earned a reputation for mainstreaming the voices of ordinary Liberians and their concerns, especially for disenfranchised and marginalized populations. Specifically,

#### **1. TDS Media program**

**“The media program is very well known and well respected in Liberia. People at all levels of society know the work of TDS. Election education has been especially important.”**

TDS’s work in Liberia was held in high regard. Every informant interviewed thought that SFCG’s work was significant, useful and meeting the needs of the local community through use of media, drama and trainings. Most of the interviewees thought it was useful and appropriate (use of Liberian English and other local languages). Interviewees also mentioned the important role TDS played in increasing election education, calling it exceptional and directly contributing voters’ level of education to TDS’ work. TDS’ training for journalists was also cited as having made an important contribution, with trained reporters being fair and balanced in their elections reporting. The majority of interviewees believe that TDS is making an important contribution to the post-war society.

Focus group discussions were informative in many ways; they highlighted gender preferences for radio programs (e.g. *One Step Beyond* appeals to men more than women while *Today is Not Tomorrow* (radio drama) appeals across the gender divide), and appreciation among listeners for the peacebuilding and reconciliation emphasis, the wide geographical coverage and the professionalism of the presenters. There was also some evidence of behavioural change as a result of the programmes: all groups reported using lessons learned to resolve conflicts in their lives and think the programs are relevant because they treat everyday issues.

<sup>1</sup> Church, C. and M. M. Rogers (2006). Designing for Results: Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation in Conflict Transformation Programs. Washington DC, Search for Common Ground. See Chapter Eleven, “Ethics in Evaluation”

## 2. Outreach program

The evaluation found that the results of the outreach program were mixed. In some communities, perhaps due to the intractability of conflict, the Peace Committee failed to take root; in others it was successful and in others, the Peace Committee changed direction to meet the needs of the community. Each of the committees had some successes in addressing local conflicts, including the symbolic achievement of reopening of the mosque in Ganta, the lifting of land use restrictions on land leases between ethnic groups in Zwedru, the reopening of Toes Towns' intra-county market, and supporting the peaceful reintegration of excombatants in Forquelleh.

*I work together with the Peace Committee. If someone takes a case to them, and they resolve it, I accept the decision. They take longer to resolve conflicts than I do and they look for the root causes. As a result, their solutions are more long-lasting.*

Forquelleh Town Mayor

The evaluation team identified a number of variables for assessing "local capacity for peace". Meaningful variables include:

- **Intractability of the local conflict**

The Ganta land dispute turned out to be too difficult for the local Peace Committee to resolve given its national scope.

- **Size of the community**

Foequelleh, the smallest of the communities surveyed, had the most effective Peace Committee. In larger towns, there were perhaps too many conflicting sources of authority and possible

dispute resolution for a great impact. Indeed, many respondents attributed the failure of the Gbarnga Peace Committee directly to the size of the town.

- **Strength of the NGO partners**

The strongest of the local NGO partners had the best understanding of the goals of the project and was therefore most able to bring it to fruition. The two other NGOs ended up serving more as intermediaries between the community and SFCG in asking for more development aid.

*"They [TDS] have experience in producing good programs and have listener recognition."*

Chief of Radio  
Executive Producer,  
UNMIL radio

- **Strength of local leadership**

In communities with a strong central authority (and who had clearly taken sides in local conflict), what the Peace Committee could accomplish was limited. In a smaller community with a relative vacuum of leadership, the Peace Committee was able to step up and fill a needed role.

- **Number of NGOs active in a community**

In the larger towns, there was a great demand by NGOs for community participation in their programs. This led to the creation of "sitting fees"<sup>2</sup>. This was a real hindrance to the establishment of Peace Committees in larger towns where participants expected to be paid rather than seeing their participation as civic duty. This points to the problem of developing authentic Civil Society in the context of an excess of NGOs.

Interestingly, the evaluators report that the *breadth of representation* on the Peace Committee and the *existence of a radio tie-in* were less important variables in their success. Most important seemed to be a core group of dedicated and trusted individuals rather than the diversity of the committee. In addition, the existence of a radio station in the community or the coverage of Peace Committee

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<sup>2</sup> NGO payment to community members who participated in their programs.

activities on the radio seemed to have no effect on the capacity of the Peace Committees to affect their communities.

### **3. Partnership strategy**

Data on partnership strategy was collected both through cases studies and interviews from key informants. Findings on the program's partnership strategy were mixed; they are divided into the three categories below.

#### **Partnerships with Radio Stations**

TDS' work with community radio stations is a very successful alliance, but seems to be unbalanced (or "top-down") and therefore not actually considered a partnership. The manager of Radio UNMIL<sup>3</sup> was very impressed with the quality of TDS programming that they suggested TDS take over the ownership of their transmitter after UNMIL leaves Liberia.

#### **Partnerships with NGOs**

TDS is well recognized by its NGO partners mostly due to its strong local dimension, but also its non-bureaucratic or hierarchical nature. Key informants reported that although there are many benefits to the fact the SFCG is an international NGO, one of the main challenges it faces is to rapidly respond to local events. With regards to SFCG's relationship with smaller, local NGOs; partners report that the working relationships have been cordial and an open forum has been created for discussion of any issues that arise. Strategic planning throughout the process for the project has included all partners equally. All three partners (DEN-L, CJPS and SEWODA) report that their capacity has been strengthened at both individual and institutional level.

#### **Partnership with Government Ministries**

The evaluators reported that not enough data was collected on this issue to come to any reliable conclusions about TDS' partnerships with government ministries. That said, interviews with key informants hinted to the fact that Government ministries see TDS as independent and therefore not necessarily useful to them as a "mouthpiece."

### **4. Synergy between the Media and Outreach activities.**

The Next Steps in Peace program is built on the idea that media and outreach activities would work in concert and would reinforce each other. Data seems to suggest to the evaluators that synergy between media and outreach works best when the outreach activities grow out of media activities. Interviews with TDS staff reinforce the impression that not enough effort was made on the part of TDS Media program to achieve synergy.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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Based on the above key findings, the evaluation team outlined five recommendations to strengthen SFCG's Liberia program with regards to media, outreach and partnership building.

1. TDS should look for activities that *make use of the credibility* gained through the media program. The synergy between media and outreach works best when the outreach activities grow out of media activities.

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<sup>3</sup> UN Peacekeeping Mission to Liberia

2. ***The Media Program needs to move closer to the Outreach Program.*** Perhaps more effort needs to be made within the organization to merge the two and explain the underlying strategy of synergy between outreach and media, and to clarify the mission of TDS as a peacebuilding media outlet. The solution lies in ***getting the members of the media program to see themselves as more than simple journalists, and rather as peace-builders.*** Of course, part of what is needed to build a peaceful society is free access to information, and good journalism is a part of that. But what should set TDS apart from other media organs in the nation is a commitment to techniques of conflict resolution.
3. Everyone likes the radio dramas, but it is unclear how to measure the impact on peacebuilding. ***TDS should include more measurement and evaluation in their ongoing work.*** In addition to helping find a future direction for the organization, it will help clarify the project for the partner NGOs. ***Evaluation of peacebuilding needs to be seen as an always shifting project. There should be space for collaborative qualitative evaluation of programming.***
4. In post-war Liberia, the focus of programming has naturally shifted from conflict-resolution to governance issues. ***TDS needs to continuously assess how to continue the mandate of focusing on peacebuilding and on conflict resolution themes and stories.***
5. Regarding an ***exit strategy for SFCG***, the organization should consider (1) a ***training program for media practitioners in the Common Ground method*** sponsored by SFCG and (2) a ***local media organization***, perhaps even keeping the name Talking Drum Studio (perhaps with its own transmitter). The two organizations could fruitfully partner.

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Source: This document is a summary of the 2006 Evaluation of the Search for Common Ground Programming in Liberia. The full evaluation is available upon request- please contact [rtcherif@sfcg.org](mailto:rtcherif@sfcg.org) for a copy.