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## Search for Common Ground in Liberia Key Findings from Civil Society Assessment—2007

### *Introduction:*

With financial assistance from the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID), Search for Common Ground (SFCG) commissioned a study of civil society in Liberia in order to assess their institutional capacity and effectiveness. This research is part of a two-year project entitled: *Facilitating Civil Society Dialogue and Development to Foster Accountability and Good Governance in Liberia*. SFCG is an international NGO with programmes in 17 countries with a mission to transform the way the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches towards cooperative solutions. SFCG has been working in Liberia since 1997, operating a multi media production studio (Talking Drum Studio) and a complementary outreach project. SFCG in Liberia is a respected partner of civil society organisations and has nurtured strong relationships in this sector.

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### *Research Scope:*

In Liberia, civil society is a relatively new concept, which emerged at the height of the civil war when state institutions collapsed and the state could no longer meet its responsibilities to its citizens. Since then, civil society has grown and taken on different roles in the management of the Liberian crisis, monitoring the peace process and human rights situation in the country and contributing to the elections of 2005. While the sector is growing, civil society organisations are generally fragile and dependent on foreign money for survival. Groups frequently engage in multiple activities that they do not have the personnel to support. Often, these activities do not fall within their mandate and mission. Furthermore, grants from donors are project driven and do not take into account the organisation's particular strengths or capacity.

In 2007, SFCG commissioned a comprehensive study of civil society in Monrovia and three other counties—Bong, Nimba, and Grand Bassa. The implementation of the study is intended to not only inform SFCG's interventions, but to be used by all organizations and professionals working with civil society organizations in Liberia with the goal of improving future partnerships. The study establishes a knowledge base on Liberian civil society organizations and the current dynamics that are affecting their impact and effectiveness. To encourage ownership and consensus within the Liberian civil society sector, the study was drafted in consultation with these organizations.

*The study has four fundamental objectives:*

- To assess the institutional capacity of a cross-section of civil society organisations, including finance systems and procedures, management structures, work planning, project effectiveness, and other organisational development issues;
- To assess how effective civil society advocacy is in influencing government policies;
- To make recommendations to civil society on how it can be more effective; and
- To use the outcome of the assessment to inform SFCG and donors how to engage and strengthen civil society.

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### *Key Findings:*

- **Staff Retention:** There is a growing gap between the needs and the capacity of the civil society sector, as key actors migrate from civil society jobs into better paying international non-governmental organisation (INGO) and government positions.
- **Leadership:** The skills used by the management of membership organisations and unions are much different from those used by leaders in NGOs focused on advocacy and development. As such, these leaders are not easily interchangeable amongst organisations without training that is not readily available.
- **Networks:** Leaders of civil society organizations recognise the need to build an effective framework to enhance coordination and networking, to be able to inform each other and the rest of civil society, and to disseminate information. However, the formation of networks has been inhibited by a lack of resources, encouraging competition over collaboration. This is particularly true in urban areas.
- **Gender Imbalance:** There are very few women in positions of substantial influence in civil society organisations. Some organisations have women in high profile positions, but very few are integrated fully into the operations of these organisations.
- **Urban/Rural Inequalities:** Organisations outside of Monrovia do not have access to the same resources as organisations in the capital. Smaller, rural organisations need training on organisational development, proposal writing and basic activity skills (agriculture, awareness raising, etc).
- **General Management:** Some organisations have very clear guidelines and separate roles for management and the board of directors or board of advisers. In these cases, the board are elected from the membership. This is particularly true in the unions. However, in the majority of organisations, interested people are selected to be on the board by the organisation's management, often by the Executive Director, with no discussion or process.
- **Financial Management:** Civil society organisations exhibit varied degrees of financial accountability because of a lack of trained accountants in every organisation. Some organisations manage their accounting books quite effectively, while others organisations' financial records are in total disarray.
- **Organisational Capacity:** It was clear that many organisations working on sensitive issues such as gender based violence, peace building and HIV/AIDS did not have enough knowledge of these topics to deliver correct information to their participants. In addition, these organisations did not have the key skills to encourage participation in their activities.
- **Partnerships:** There are few cases of true partnership. Many interviewees said that it was not possible to truly collaborate and that real partnerships are rare. Most so-called partnerships are in fact a relationship between donor and beneficiary. They are also relationships between the contracting

In membership based organisations there is an entirely different management structure than in other civil society organisations, and the power relationship between the management and the membership is quite different to that of NGOs. In these membership organisations the management is responsible downwards to the membership. One important example is the **Motor Bike Riders Union** which has evolved to support the young men who drive motor bike taxis in most of the large towns and cities in Liberia. Many of the 'Bike Riders' had been involved in the war, and the union has emerged out of the post conflict environment in order to provide support services to the young men that are related to their new occupation. For example the organisation is looking for ways to provide parking areas for members to congregate and wait for customers. It has liaised with local police forces to provide training for members on road safety issues. It provides support to members in negotiating with police and the legal system when accidents occur, and also provides financial support to widows and families when there is a death of a member. Most of its members are under 35 years of age. Members pay a joining fee and a monthly stipend which supports the activities of the organisation. This organisation is helping to harness the energy of the youth of the country, one of the country's most valuable resources, and focus that energy on income generating activities which are beneficial to the entire community.

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### *Conclusions and Recommendations:*

- **Transition:** This is a key time for civil society to prepare for its involvement in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process. Civil society has not been involved in some of the recent major policy developments (the Security Policy and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and has been involved in others (Governance policy) but has had no proper forum for accountability and feedback. Civil society participation at a meaningful level is necessary for the development of national ownership, a key element of the PRSP process. In addition, Civil Society Organizations must be systematically included in the process in order to insure its transparency.
- **Leadership:** The leadership of civil society needs to move from the traditional view of leaders coming only from well established (and registered) NGOs run by elites in Monrovia, and look to younger, less established NGOs for possible leadership. Leaders from rural areas, women and minorities should also be considered. A renewal of the leadership in civil society will fill gaps caused by the movement of some leaders to government and the changing nature of the requirements of leadership in civil society.
- **Capacity Building:** Training programs on financial management, advocacy and participatory techniques should be provided in partnership with civil society organisations who may be able to field the exercises. Organisational development training, including information regarding organizational roles and responsibilities should be made available. Capacity building activities should concentrate on organisations that have a mandate from a membership base.
- **Depoliticisation:** In recent elections, many politicians used civil society as a political arena, thereby promoting divisiveness and exclusion. Civil society needs to create a firewall between itself and the political realm. Civil society can unite the nation and support citizens' access to government, government that serves all people not just those of its political party.
- **Marginalisation and Exclusion:** Marginalization of women, youth and some ethnic groups is a reflection of historical narrative in Liberia and was a direct cause of the war. It is of the utmost importance that marginalized groups are afforded the same space in civil society as other citizens. Leaders should be promoted from among these groups. A conscious effort to include all parts of Liberian society will help ensure a vibrant, unified society.

*Exclusion is a conscious decision to keep some groups out of power, out of civil society or out of the governing process. Marginalisation is linked to poverty in many cases. It occurs when those with power, either in government or in civil society, ignore people who lack that status.*

### *Methodology:*

The research methodology was chosen to encourage the participation and ownership by Liberian civil society of the study's recommendations. For instance, the terms of reference for the researcher was developed at the beginning of 2007 in consultation with Liberian civil society organizations; and a draft report was shared with these organizations during validation meetings with their input incorporated into the final report. Interviews served as the principal research tool, with sessions conducted with representatives from 41 different civil society organisations in Monrovia and three counties: Bong, Nimba, and Grand Bassa. Additional interviews with government officials and donors were conducted so as to ascertain the impressions and challenges they experienced in their work with Liberian civil society.

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Source: This document is a summary of "Civil Society in Liberia: Towards a Strategic Framework for Support" A copy of this document can be acquired by contacting Frances Fortune, Africa Director for Search for Common Ground at [ffortune@sfcg.org](mailto:ffortune@sfcg.org)