

2005 UNCHR Sub-Project Assessment

Search for Common Ground in Angola



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1. Background and Program Summary

During 2005, Search for Common Ground Angola (SFCG) continued in its role as an implementing partner of a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sub-project designed *to advance the protection and full reintegration of returning Angolan refugees as an essential component to supporting Angola's peace and reconciliation process*. The overarching objectives of the sub-project were pursued using a variety of strategies and activities including, but not limited to, radio series and spot messages, themed theater performances, conflict management and human rights workshops, community dialogues, public sensitization campaigns, and the employment of Social Promoters to deliver and reinforce messages (e.g. "We are all Angolans") among target populations. All of these different approaches stress problem solving, conflict resolution and the identification of root problems and encourage participants to practically apply these concepts in their everyday lives.

Geographically, SFCG's sub-project programming was strategically designed to reach beneficiaries throughout Angola, roughly along three axes: the North (Zaire, Malange and Uíge Provinces), the South (Huambo Province) and the East (Moxico Province). Within these respective locations, a variety of program activities were offered in larger population centers, yet programming also reached rural and outlying communities, as well. In total, there were over 64,000 beneficiaries of SFCG programs in 2005.

Broadly, target populations were comprised of individuals who recently returned from neighboring countries (returnees) where they had spent varying amounts of time seeking refuge from Angola's 27-year civil war, which ended in 2002. In addition to these individuals, though, communities that had remained in the country are regularly targeted and participate in SFCG programming activities, as friction between these two groups often serves as a formidable impediment to reconciliation. SFCG believes that reintegration and reconciliation are protracted processes – especially considering the nation's violent past - and thus members of both of these communities were targeted for programming throughout the year, extending efforts initiated prior to 2005.

2. Monitoring and Evaluation

2.1 Program Assessment

This report is meant to assess the progress, efficacy and impact of SFCG's various sub-project programming endeavors during 2005. The report is intended to identify the strengths, weaknesses and lessons learned related to the activities associated with the sub-project and reflects SFCG's strong commitment to improving its programming through both self- and external assessments. In turn, this report is meant to be used not only going forward in Angola but may also be accessed by UNHCR offices internationally, and used as a tool to inform programs launched with implementing and/or operational partners elsewhere.

2.2 Assessment Methodology

The methodology adopted to construct this report featured two core components: assessments of regular monitoring reports that were submitted by SFCG staff throughout 2005 and field visits to interview UNHCR and SFCG staff, project participants, partnering local and international NGOs and local and traditional authorities. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and were done individually or in large or smaller groups. Interviewees were routinely asked about the nature of their participation in the sub-project, how it had impacted their lives, how the project could have been implemented better over the past year and what suggestions they might have for the sub-project going forward. Over 35 people were interviewed, representing varying degrees of familiarity and participation with the sub-project. Interviews were conducted in either English or Portuguese, or occasionally in a local indigenous language and then translated into Portuguese through the assistance of an interpreter.

Due to time constraints, only two field visits were made (from 1-4 December to M'Banza Congo and 5-9 to Luena) and thus participants from each of the sites where SFCG is active were not accessed. However, the sites chosen represent areas where SFCG has been most visible and active and thus interviewees' comments broadly reflect the sub-project's Angolan-wide impact. Finally, the oral and written information gathered was organized and analyzed in order to assess the program, including the range of successes and shortcomings, and to determine where improvements can be made in order to maximize the impact of the programming in Angola going forward, as well as in similar programs elsewhere.

3. Summary of Key Findings and Lessons Learned

3.1 Key Findings

- Communities overwhelmingly welcomed this type of programming and consistently participated in numbers much larger than anticipated, while in areas where programming either has or will end recipients were saddened as the need for this type of program is widely seen as necessary if the reintegration and reconciliation processes are to successfully continue.
- Invariably, informants readily identified a number of tangible results that they attributed to the sub-project, reflecting the positive impact that programming has had in communities where it has been offered.
- Awareness of returnees' rights and the laws protecting them was extremely low prior to exposure to SFCG programming, even if these individuals had had some exposure to this type of information while in refugee camps prior to returning to Angola. SFCG was instrumental in raising awareness levels.

- Female participants have taken a very active role in the program and cited a number of improvements in their lives related to the ongoing reintegration process as a direct result of the program.
- SFCG was often perceived as performing tasks and offering services that returnees felt that the government should/could be doing.
- SFCG was widely praised for its willingness to react to needs identified by the communities' themselves, rather than adopting an inflexible or "cookie cutter" approach.

3.2 Lessons Learned

- The lack of adequate transport circumscribed the potential impact of the program by impeding the spread of the program to outlying communities, which often represent ideal target populations.
- Considering the run-up to anticipated elections and the highly-charged political context in which the program is now being implemented, political allegiances, issues and grievances are playing an increasingly prominent role in peoples' daily lives and thus significant consideration must be given to how the program can address and transcend this very real impediment to reconciliation.
- The impact of the program has been tempered in certain situations due to the primacy of participants' more immediate needs revolving around personal and food security, health concerns and the continued lack of revenue-generating opportunities.
- Communication and scheduling problems and/or misunderstandings with local and traditional leaders, and also with partner organizations, has limited the program's effectiveness at times and also hindered the process of raising awareness of the program and its activities so that additional individuals could benefit from it.
- Participants were not content with learning and applying what they've learned in relative isolation but rather want to take a more active role in spreading and delivering the core messages beyond their immediate areas so that they can educate others and in the process learn more themselves by sharing their experiences with others in similar situations.

4. Assessment Findings

Virtually every informant interviewed lauded SFCG's efforts and the sub-project's impact over the past year. This appreciation ranged from the identification of very specific, tangible accomplishments, such as the procurement of ID cards after returnees were initially (illegally) denied them upon arrival, to a more general acknowledgement that dialogue was increasingly being used as a tool to resolve everyday conflicts. While

participants regularly cited specific examples of the program's impact, including the issuance of ID cards, gaining access to arable land and potable water, and reduced violence against returnees, among others, participants also appreciated how the program content had permeated their everyday lives and was easily recognizable in the resolution of even the smallest of disputes, such as children arguing over toys. Collectively, informants expressed that, as a whole, the program has helped to bring about a more honest reconciliation and truer reintegration in their respective areas, phenomena that were not achieved simply by the cessation of the war and the physical return of refugees to Angola.

The fact that the sub-project is a necessary part of the repatriation process is evidenced by the low level of awareness demonstrated by returnees of their legal entitlements and rights. Even those that had been briefed about these prior to returning regularly thanked SFCG not only for its efforts in increasing awareness of their rights but also for fighting to ensure that these were honored upon arrival in Angola. By acting upon issues either brought to its attention or self-identified, SFCG played – and continues to play – a key role in ensuring that recently returned communities and ongoing streams of returnees are receiving their entitlements both upon arrival and in the crucial period of re-establishment and reintegration after receiving their initial arrival packages. In turn, this assistance has engendered feelings of trust and goodwill towards the organization which has helped to remove or minimize potential obstacles to providing the training that has so deeply and effectively permeated many of these communities.

In part, issues surrounding entitlements and rights revolve around returnees' frustrations that the Angolan government is not fulfilling its responsibilities by fully supporting their return and thus SFCG is seen as compensating for governmental shortcomings and inconsistencies. With increased awareness of their rights and entitlements, returnees know what is rightfully theirs and appreciated that SFCG was so actively involved in ensuring that their legal entitlements and rights were honored, although regretted that the organization had to use so much of its time and resources to do so. Many thought that even SFCG's programming was something that the state should be offering considering that the government constantly promotes and reinforces notions of peace and reconciliation.

One regular piece of positive feedback about the sub-project was that SFCG operated a very interactive program in that it consistently incorporated participants' comments, concerns and requests into its workshops and sensitization efforts. As such, participants felt ownership of the program as a result of taking an active role in shaping the course of the discussions. In this way, participants learned core methods and approaches from SFCG and then were able to create their own solutions based on their own real issues that they themselves had brought to the forefront. Thus, SFCG is not seen by participants as imposing its own agenda or delivering only a "pre-packaged" program, without consideration of local concerns or requests.

In particular, women seemed to respond with a great deal of energy to the various forms of programming that SFCG provides. While not always in the majority in the activities

provided, women have eagerly participated and are increasingly taking leadership roles in their communities as a direct result of SFCG's programming and support. This is part of a deliberate effort on SFCG's part to reach out to this segment of the community, because as vulnerable members of these communities women often face a range of issues that their male counterparts do not. As a result, SFCG has strove to empower women in a variety of ways, including the organization and support of women's soccer teams, the provision of professional development for female members of a community center, and through the encouragement of women to act as community leaders in conflict resolution – positions traditionally occupied by men in Angolan society.

Finally, the notion that this is not a finite process was also very prominent in the testimonies of program participants over the past year. While acknowledging that great progress has been made, issues surrounding reintegration continue to obstruct the process of achieving lasting reconciliation and thus participants consistently cited the need for the program to not only continue but to be spread further throughout their respective regions. The fact that the program is ending in M'Banza Congo was deeply distressing to those interviewed as they saw an ongoing need for this type of programming, given that they consider themselves still to be in the middle of a continuing process of reintegration.

5. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

5.1 Lessons Learned

Among the most considerable constraints of the program identified by SFCG staff, partner organizations and even program participants, was the lack of adequate transportation. This limitation meant that outlying communities were often unable to be reached, thereby privileging those that live in or near the various municipalities within SFCG coverage areas. Going forward, it is imperative that these logistical issues are resolved so that they do not continue to impede the program's potential impact.

Another logistical issue that was cited by partner organizations, local leaders and participants revolved around communications and scheduling. This limited the potential impact of the program in a variety of ways, including by failing to alert local leaders or partner organizations when and where events were to occur, by canceling planned activities without notifying others or by showing up at a location to conduct an activity only to find another organization already engaged in an activity at the site.

Another important lesson learned is that the effectiveness of the program can be tempered when people have more immediate food, security and health needs. While these issues are often intertwined with the basic rights and entitlements that SFCG has been keen on fighting for, informants often regretted that their interest in applying the lessons and methods they learned via programming was not a priority until they addressed more pressing situations in their everyday lives.

With the upcoming proposed elections and the politically-charged environment in much of the country - in particular in much of the *planalto* and in Moxico Province, both traditional UNITA support bases - issues, concerns and misunderstandings related to the elections need to be addressed by programming as participants identified these as key to achieving true reconciliation.

Finally, the success of the program and the positive impact it has had among those who have been reached by it has created a desire among individuals and communities to spread the message beyond their immediate areas and to interact and learn from others who are in similar situations. Participants have been so energized by the programming and what they've learned that many are frustrated by the geographical limitations of the program.

5.2. Recommendations

- Although all-terrain vehicles are expensive, smaller motorbikes or even manual bicycles would have expanded the reach of the program and enabled staff to cover more ground within even easily accessible areas. Further, one interviewee suggested that SFCG might have been able to trade the purchase of fuel for the use of a car to alleviate some of these transportation issues.
- Improved communication and scheduling would maximize the impact of the program by raising awareness about events - thereby increasing both attendance and interest among local leaders and potential partner organizations – and minimize potentially embarrassing or damaging situations caused by communication and/or scheduling issues.
- Highly-visible partnerships with development-oriented organizations might provide SFCG with an opportunity to highlight the links between its programming and these respective partners' programs, thereby mutually reinforcing one another's messages and objectives while simultaneously addressing communities' survival *and* reconciliation concerns.
- By more prominently addressing in core programming the very real and immediate political issues that impede true reconciliation, participants' concerns (mostly related to the confusion and return to armed conflict following the country's only other elections in 1992 and the assumption that all returnees are UNITA supporters and thus are discriminated against by the MPLA government) can be addressed, while SFCG can highlight the various ways that democracy can help to achieve a more lasting reconciliation.
- Facilitating the travel of individuals from one area to another to share their experiences with others would enable both groups to learn from one another and, in the process build the capacity to, in turn, act as teachers themselves. This would expand, and add a new dimension to, the local "peace" networks that SFCG has helped to establish.

6. Analysis and Conclusions

By all accounts, SFCG's programming has positively affected everyone that it has reached. Participants unanimously expressed their desire for more training and activities, even when identifying more pressing issues, such as immediate food, health and security concerns. Everyone interviewed could provide both a tangible positive impact that SFCG has made, as well as an affirmation that the program has changed people's mentalities and approaches in dealing with conflicts of all sizes, combining to engender "true reconciliation." As a result, it is imperative that SFCG continue to provide this type of programming as repatriation, although in a reduced fashion, will continue in 2006, while the ongoing reintegration and reconciliation processes is currently in a critical stage in Angola, especially considering the upcoming potentially divisive proposed elections.

Meanwhile, SFCG has already made significant steps in building local capacity both directly and indirectly. Formally, SFCG has trained a number of social promoters who are capable of delivering and spreading core lessons and methods. This effort should continue and be expanded to include more women. Indirectly, many program participants have become willing volunteers wanting to spread the message without working directly for SFCG or having gone through any type of formal "train the trainer" program.

There is still, however, much work to be done in this area. In M'banza Congo, where the program is ending, many participants and staff were pessimistic about the chances that the messages and approaches promoted by SFCG would continue to be spread and applied after the program formally ended. Similarly, although the regularly expressed desire among participants that the programming continue in their respective areas is encouraging, it also suggests that these individuals and communities can not conceive of a program without SFCG's direct involvement. Partnerships with local NGO's, where possible, represent a potential solution to this problem either as a transitional step towards complete community ownership of the messages and approaches expounded by the program or as longer-term arrangements between these NGO's and the communities, with SFCG completely removing itself from the scenario. Increased capacity among local leaders, imploring them to learn and apply the methods and approaches that SFCG promotes, would also benefit returnee communities by minimizing discrimination and promoting equity among communities thereby leading to a more durable and true reconciliation.

Overall, the sub-project was widely hailed by participants, partner organizations and local and traditional leaders alike. Logistical and communication issues will need to be addressed going forward so that the program can reach the maximum number of beneficiaries as economically and as efficiently as possible. And, as the reintegration and reconciliation processes advance in Angola, SFCG will need to maximize local capacity in anticipation of a future cessation of its direct involvement. The experiences of this past year helped to highlight areas in which more work needs to be done, thereby leading to some valuable lessons learned, but overall the program was replete with good practices and served as a valuable and useful tool for thousands of Angolans in both returning and established communities throughout the country working together to keep the peace.