

## A path to peace: Indigenous conflict transformation and peacebuilding in southern Sierra Leone

**Mariamama Conteh, April 2004**

The civil war that ravaged Sierra Leone between 1991 and 2001 left the country and its communities struggling to stand, let alone take steps forward.

The work supported by the international conflict resolution NGO, Conciliation Resources (CR) there since the mid-nineties illustrates that solutions however can be found at the local level. They may need a little support, but in the long run, the path to peace lies within communities themselves.

Two innovative organisations, Bo Peace Reconciliation Movement (BPRM) and the Sulima Fishing Community Development Project (SFCDP) in southern Sierra Leone are proof local people can craft solutions to their own problems.

Both have developed successful systems of 'peace monitors', where elected community members work together to create cohesion by intervening in conflicts, arbitrating, mediating and resolving them as necessary. Conflicts resolved range from domestic disputes to the reintegration of ex-combatants and decades-old inter-chiefdom power struggles. Local people consider the peace monitors a fair alternative to the chiefs and court chairmen who have long abused their power to the detriment of their communities.

CR's 'Peace Monitor Learning and Dissemination Series' makes an attempt to understand and share the reasons for the success of this approach. A 'learning seminar' in November 2002 began by examining the peace monitors' work and extracting critical issues. Many of these issues have national relevance, particularly with regards to access to justice and legal reform. CR was able to connect these to the national agenda in subsequent dissemination seminars in Bo, Pujehun and Freetown, facilitated by conflict specialist Dr. Funmi Olonisakin from King's College, University of London.

Important issues considered at these seminars included the sustainability of such work and its operation alongside the recently reinstated justice systems. The roles of women as peace monitors and

of human rights education and training were also discussed.

Vigorous debate occurred among participants, who included chiefs, civil society organisations, local government representatives, police officials and the peace monitors themselves.

The Freetown seminar in January 2004 was accompanied by a short documentary about the peace monitors' work, 'A Path to Peace', which will also be shown at an upcoming London seminar in May.

Commonwealth Foundation funding enabled citizens from Nigeria and Ghana to attend the Freetown seminar alongside participants from Guinea and Liberia, who shared lessons from their work through presentations and discussion.

This cross-fertilisation of ideas threw light on the possibilities of copying the peace monitor's approach throughout West Africa.

"What I have observed of the peace monitoring system is it does not run counter to the traditional ways of resolving conflict. It can only strengthen them," said Musa Alhassan, from Tamale, Northern Ghana. "When I go back we will consider something similar, not copy wholesale, but look at our own circumstances and try to see what we can incorporate."

In a field that gives indigenous initiatives little profile, it is crucial to highlight those communities where men and women are crafting solutions to their problems in the absence of formal structures of justice and governance.

Reconstructing Sierra Leone is a huge challenge and this is one small but critical step.

"This workshop held by CR had the unique ability of attempting to change the individual, the village, the small community, with a view to ultimately impact the greater issues that affect the nation," said Raphael Abiem from the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) who attended the Freetown seminar.

"The size of things that change the world are not always massive and great. It could be just a grain that is the genesis of the birth of an idea that is capable of changing the world. At least of changing Sierra Leone at this point."