

# Grassroots peacebuilding in Pujehun

by John Massaquoi and  
Frances Fortune

John Massaquoi is director of the Sulima Fishing Community Development Project in Sierra Leone. He has spoken about his community peacebuilding work in Sierra Leone and Liberia at several international conferences.

Frances Fortune was Conciliation Resources' West Africa programme co-ordinator from March 1997 to July 2000, based in Bo. Previously she worked with a number of international and Sierra Leonean NGOs on social and rural development programmes.

The Sulima Fishing Community Development Project (SFCDP) is an organization based in Soro-Gbema Chiefdom in the extreme southern corner of Sierra Leone, where the country's border with Liberia meets the Atlantic Ocean. It is an area well endowed with natural resources – river and ocean fisheries, farmland and forests, and beautiful beaches once enjoyed by tourists. Access has become increasingly difficult because of neglect of roads and ferries and the insecurity caused by the war.

## Beginnings

The community development project was originally established to improve living standards and promote development within the communities of Soro-Gbema. The chiefdom had been marginalized for years prior to the start of the war in 1991. Pujehun District and especially Soro-Gbema Chiefdom were the scene of the 1982 *Ndogboyosoi* War, which was triggered by election campaign manipulation by the ruling APC party and the intervention of a special squad of customs police against supporters of the SLPP candidate. There was no process of reconciliation following this violent episode. The children of those killed in the fighting, or who died in detention, were among the first to join the RUF when they attacked eastern and southern Sierra Leone from Liberia nine years later.

The 1996 elections were followed by a period of relative peace in the country and the liberation of the entire Pujehun District by the civil militia (*Kamajors*). Displaced people and refugees started to return and the SFCDP began to work on peacebuilding in Soro-Gbema, Kpaka and Makpele chiefdoms, undertaking youth vocational training, micro-credit for the destitute, resettling women, and communal fishing to re-establish the economic base of the community – all as a vehicle for peacebuilding.



## Peacebuilding in exile

The May 1997 coup that overthrew the elected government led to looting of project inputs and the suspension of funding. Most of the project staff went into exile in Liberia, where they regrouped without immediate operational support. New funds eventually enabled peacebuilding work to continue. The focus was bridging the deep rifts between pro-government and pro-RUF refugees in Liberia, particularly in camps near Monrovia and closer to the Sierra Leone border, to improve the lot of those living in exile and prepare the foundations for a return home.

SFCDP organized one-day conflict resolution workshops in each camp: the first of their kind for the refugees. These were opportunities for participants to explore the causes of the war and reasons for their being forced to flee. Chiefs, women, youths and ex-RUF combatants all took part in examining their social and political problems. From both sides of the divide they looked at individual and collective responsibility and discussed the need for reconciliation with their children in the RUF. The project team also organized refresher courses in adult literacy, training for teachers among the refugees, and camp football teams and matches that brought people of different backgrounds and persuasions together in enjoyment and fun.

## Problems of return

The ousting of the junta in February 1998 triggered a spontaneous movement of refugees back into southern Pujehun, but the pre-war problems and new conflicts generated by the war awaited them. The project team set to work organizing workshops in three chiefdoms for returnees and those who had stayed behind. The meetings included young people, local authorities, many elders and women. Similar problems were faced in all three chiefdoms: misconceptions developed during the conflict, looting and false claims to other people's property, theft, family disputes, separation and marital conflicts. Social misbehaviour was a major cause of conflict, most of which affected youths. Many youths became drug abusers and traffickers, tradition and customs were ignored as they engaged in cultivation of drugs and the destruction of sacred places. Their parents or local authorities had no control over them.

At the level of local politics, the returnees faced longstanding chieftaincy disputes caused by the deaths of paramount chiefs, the lack of civil authority, the usurpation of authority by CDF commanders, personal and community conflicts between those who stayed behind in rebel-controlled territory, and those who fled to government-controlled areas or Liberia. The disruption of existing social and political customs and allegiances

caused by the war also meant that new leaders had emerged among those who had left and those who had remained behind.

## Peace monitors

During the initial community meetings local people established a mechanism to promote the peaceful resolution of disputes. Peace monitors were identified by the community to help resolve palavers and conflicts and to ensure a just solution. Because the communities are predominantly Muslim, the personal qualifications sought in peace monitors were facility in Koranic reading and respect in the community. Each chiefdom section nominated one person, mainly Koranic teachers or mwalimus, to provide early warning of conflict within their section and to intervene before the conflicts became severe. To be able to intervene effectively, the peace monitors were trained in basic conflict-handling skills to deal with local militia personnel, community relations, human rights issues and reconciliation.

Each peace monitor was expected to work for twelve days every month, covering between ten and fifteen villages. They were given a bicycle to get around. A small stipend was provided so that each monitor could commit the required time to this work. From within their ranks the monitors nominated a principal peace monitor, through whom the project managers received their reports. The head monitor and his deputy are invited to workshops organized by the SFCDP.

When there are local grievances, the people call the peace monitors instead of turning to the native court system. The peace monitors use dialogue and the Koran to solve problems. When they encounter more complex conflicts, such as political disputes between villages or tensions between communities and the CDF, they call for the assistance of a grievance committee established at chiefdom level with representatives of all segments of the community.





### Thomas – aged 14

*interviewed by Ambrose James in March 2000*

We were attacked at Telu. My family and I ran in two different directions. My father was shot in the foot while he hid in a mosque. I was not captured. I escaped in the thick of the fighting, but this was the work of the almighty God. I came to Bo, where I met a woman who took care of me. Later she left Bo, so I went to another woman, who took me to sell ice for her. But I broke a flask in her house and I was driven out. I joined my friends and we used to sleep on verandas. My friends told me about an NGO, which deals with child protection. While I was there I was provoked by other kids and it led to me wounding one of them. So I was starved for a week and I decided to leave and found the Unaccompanied Children and Street Children Project. I think there will be hope for me because the war is coming to an end now and opportunities are coming for the young, more so with the RUF now in town.

These strategies have proven very effective to date. However, as this alternative service is free of charge to the parties in conflict, one consequence has been that the district administration is unable to generate revenue. This has led to growing official resentment. When the district officer of Pujehun District sent a treasury clerk to count returnees in the chiefdom, re-institute collection of local taxes and re-establish the native authority court, people refused. They were just starting to rebuild their lives and their communities and they had no means to generate funds for taxes. Local people also remembered the heavy fines imposed by the courts and unfair decisions based on favouritism towards one of the parties. Rebuilding that system is seen as a recipe for ongoing conflict within the community.

In individual cases, peace monitors have reported that attempts at resolving conflicts that called for financial restitution have not been successful because financial obligations are not always honoured and there are no serious measures taken against defaulters. To rectify these problems, community leaders are looking at combining all future grassroots peacebuilding efforts with a component of human rights and 'good governance' advocacy to strengthen voluntary compliance. They also hope to find some common ground with traditional leaders and local court officials through workshops on officials' and citizens' responsibilities and obligations to their community and to the state.

## Conclusion

Overall, this localized peacebuilding process has been successful. Grievances are being examined and discussed, minimising violations and abuses of power. People have an increased awareness of democratic principles and their rights and obligations. The settlement of disputes is seen to be fairer than the old court system. Community conflict resolution has helped families reunite. All this has helped lay the foundation for peaceful coexistence in the community. But there is a need to replicate and widen the knowledge and experience gained. Other communities in Soro-Gbema, Kpaka, Makpele and Gallinas Perri chiefdoms are requesting peacebuilding workshops and a system of peace monitors, as well as help in reactivating the local economy.