Building links and sustaining momentum
reflections on track two roles in Sierra Leone

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Civil society groups and citizen intermediaries were instrumental in bringing the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to the table and negotiating the 1999 Lomé Agreement that formed the basis for peace in Sierra Leone. These efforts complemented track one negotiations between the RUF and the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL), which were organized by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations and hosted by the Togolese government. Both the track one process – the formal political negotiations concentrating on power-sharing and full amnesty – and the track two efforts, which encouraged both parties to stay engaged during the difficult times, were important in reaching the final agreement. Just as the women's movement had stimulated action for the Abidjan Accord between the RUF and the new government of President Kabbah in 1996, the Civil Society Movement (CSM) and the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) galvanized a groundswell of public opinion in favour of a peaceful settlement. During the Lomé talks, the IRCSL and the CSM facilitated interaction and discussion by drawing on informal relationships, leveraging extended networks and creating an atmosphere conducive to engaging the armed parties. Their efforts remain integral to the sustainability of the peace process in Sierra Leone.

Civil society actors during conflict
Civil society responses to the war that began in 1991 developed slowly, beginning with local community efforts to protect themselves and promote human security. The formal civil society organizations did not begin mobilizing to promote peace until the RUF approached and threatened the main urban centres. By the time of the first peace process that led to the Abidjan Accord, civil society actors were very active, wresting the initiative for settlement away from the warring parties and placing it squarely in the public forum and forcing the warring parties to the table. However, the Abidjan Accord soon broke down and

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RUF leader Foday Sankoh was arrested and detained in Nigeria. On 25 May 1997 some parts of the military took advantage of the situation in a coup d’état under the auspices of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). The AFRC invited the RUF to Freetown to share power and a volatile coalition junta was formed, fully aware that it lacked the support of the international community and of the majority of the populace. In response to the occupation of Freetown, the CSM organized consultative meetings around the country and urged a virtual labour boycott, rendering the then AFRC-RUF government quite toothless.

In the coming months, civil society actors kept up their action, despite a dismal series of failed peace initiatives, broken ceasefires and coups. Nigerian-led ECOWAS Monitoring and Observation Group (ECOMOG) troops forced the AFRC-RUF out of Freetown in April 1998. The joint dissident forces again attacked Freetown in January 1999 and were eventually driven back by ECOMOG troops. Galvanized by the sheer scale of the human tragedy of these events, the CSM initiated and convened meetings in Freetown with the reinstated Kabbah government to try to find a coordinated approach to engaging the AFRC-RUF and pursuing a peaceful settlement. The IRCVL, which was formed in 1997 to encourage dialogue for peace, initiated similar activities shortly afterwards.

The RUF’s retreat into the bush made communication with them very difficult. Further, in a highly polarized society suspicious of anyone making overtures to the RUF, both organizations walked a fine line between pursuing peace while trying not to be maligned as ‘collaborators’. Meanwhile, the gulf between the GoSL and the RUF widened with Sankoh’s extradition from Nigeria and trial for treason. Through the ongoing civil society consultations, CSM and IRCVL indirectly ensured Sankoh’s release from prison in Sierra Leone to the Ivorian authorities to allow his participation in talks. The two civil society groups acquired huge legitimacy with the RUF as they had moved the government to dialogue and ultimately the Lomé peace talks. President Kabbah later said of the IRCVL, “They did a great job … they went into the bush and sat on the ground with rebel forces,” while Kadi Sesay of the Human Rights Commission said, “The IRCVL made it possible for rebels to talk with the government.”
While the RUF was aware that CSM and IRCSL were working with both sides, advising the government on the RUF position as well as encouraging the RUF to find mutually acceptable solutions, they appreciated the groups’ legitimacy derived from the public consultative processes they had conducted over the years. The RUF had confidence that, although the CSM was not neutral or even non-partisan as they lived in ‘government territory’ and worked with government, they were basically representing the interests of all Sierra Leoneans – unlike the GoSL that they felt represented narrow, elitist political interests.

The Lomé talks
In preparation for the Lomé peace talks scheduled for July 1999, the AFRC-RUF War Council developed their working document outlining their positions. The RUF consulted with Sankoh (under house arrest in Abidjan) to finalize their working draft and make amendments. They then submitted their paper to the official mediator. Omrie Golley, a civilian intermediary who had long been involved with the RUF, was chosen to represent their interests at the talks. Fourteen people took part in the Lomé peace process on behalf of the AFRC-RUF, with RUF Adjutant General Rashid Sandi as one of the younger members.

Track one roles
President Gnassingbe Eyadema and the Togolese government hosted and facilitated the Lomé talks, with Foreign Affairs Minister Joseph Kokou Koffigoh as chief mediator. They invited the RUF to the meeting and coordinated with the UN to transfer them from Vahun in Liberia via Monrovia to Lomé, where their security was assured. The RUF felt comfortable with the neutrality of the Togolese government who had shown no signs of favouring one group. There was no discrimination between the sides right down to the details of food and lodging.

On the first day of the talks to launch the peace process, the ECOWAS Committee of Seven (comprising senior ministers from West African countries) officially declared the process open. The extent of their involvement was to speak to all the parties politely and encourage everyone to reach an agreement. After the launch, only Ivorian Minister of Foreign Affairs Amara Essay, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General Francis Okelo and US, UK and Commonwealth Representatives were involved in the talks process.

President Eyadema helped facilitate the negotiation process by engaging both parties in substantive discussions about their demands and proposals before the peace talks officially opened. He helped them develop platforms that were appropriate and would generate productive dialogue, finding access points that would eventually lead to agreement. He also regularly invited both the RUF and GoSL delegations to his house (separately) during the peace talks to further encourage the process.

In an additional move to support the talks and facilitate engagement, the Togolese government provided five star hotel accommodation, transportation, food and even ‘pocket money’ to the RUF. While the RUF delegates were very excited about these benefits, and many had never experienced similar conditions, the benefits were not the primary incentive to stay involved. The delegates were committed to the process in its own right, and the benefits provided added recognition of their participation.

Track two roles
The IRCSL and the CSM were encouraged to come to Lomé by the GoSL and their international partners. The civil society groups did not receive governmental funding to attend, although some benefited from financial support from foreign NGOs. Their representatives sat as observers on each of the committees and took part in the plenary sessions, but were not included in the caucuses or smaller group work. The official talks drove the bargaining process and the eventual agreement; the track two players complemented the track one diplomacy by helping maintain the momentum, mediating the issues and easing competition and negativity between the actors as discussions became tense. Okelo admitted that he, “needed to use the IRCSL members constantly in dealing with the RUF and the government”, while US Ambassador to Sierra Leone Joseph Melrose reported that, “when things looked bad in negotiations, they kept the dialogue going”.

During the talks, the civil society actors pressured both sides to make concessions and reach agreement. While the RUF were aware that CSM and IRCSL were mainly ‘for’ the government, they had respect for their point of view and listened to the interlocutors they sent. For example, the RUF’s proposal included a provision for quality education, an idea scoffed at by the GoSL representative given the government’s financial resources. The civil society delegate Alpha Timbo pressured the government to include the provision in the agreement, saying that it was an appropriate goal for a country and a positive, productive contribution by the RUF. The RUF were pleased with this process and it raised their confidence in engaging with civil society actors.
According to the RUF, the IRCSL and CSM were most effective outside the general meetings. The CSM delegates were staying with their colleagues (teachers) and had to travel some distance to the talks every day. The RUF admired their commitment despite the fact that they were not receiving any substantial material support to play this role. The civil actors used their informal networks and connections to engage RUF delegates and appeal to them to commit to the process and pursue a meaningful peace. They started with Rashid Sandi, who was the youngest delegate at the talks, approaching him through schoolmates and other CSM interlocutors of a similar age group to the RUF who had connections with them through schools and family ties. As they made inroads in discussion with him, they were able to expand their conversations and relationships with other members of the AFRC-RUF delegation. The delegates were initially suspicious, but through connections with extended family members and other relationships they gradually warmed to the civil society representatives and were inspired by their commitment to finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict. CSM interlocutors joined the RUF socially after the talks each day, eating with them and discussing and analysing the progress and outcomes from the day. As this was their first personal contact together, the RUF group also had the opportunity to show themselves as straightforward people who could be talked to, and both found they could listen to each other and this generated a sense of hope. The civil society actors basically showed confidence in the RUF negotiating group. This role may have been especially important because of the disparity between the negotiating teams evident in the obvious age differential on either side of the table: the government represented by politically seasoned senior ministers and the RUF represented by young, battle-hardened RUF members with a few elder political types.

The practical hospitality shown by the Togolese to the negotiating parties did not extend to the civil society participants who had to rely on their own resources for accommodation, transport, etc. Their effectiveness was somewhat constrained: had they lodged in the same location as the delegates it is possible that they could have continued their individual meetings and lobbying efforts after hours and exerted further influence over the process.

**Lessons learned**

It is not the purpose of this paper to put a gloss on the Lomé Agreement, which had many design and implementation problems, but the role of track two actors suggests several general lessons that could be learned from the perspective of the RUF in the Lomé process.

Track two efforts should start early – long before formal peace talks are organized – to create the environment and linkages that can be used to foster dialogue between the groups. The CSM and IRCSL initiated dialogue about the war and how it should be handled in the public forum without an overt political or partisan agenda – wresting the initiative from an overly sensitive government and depoliticizing the issue. This initiative created an opportunity for the RUF that had not previously existed.

The involvement of track two players is essential in moving processes forward, but it is important that individuals and groups chosen be completely different from the track one actors. They should not be co-opted by government; rather they should be acknowledged as legitimate actors who are non-partisan and have a committed social agenda, as they were in Sierra Leone at this time. Their presence serves to broaden the agenda and supports addressing some of the root cause issues of the war.

Related to this, diverse track two actors should be utilized and should be identified with the interests and concerns of the armed groups in mind. In this case, the RUF were young people who were engaged effectively through their age group and schoolmates.

Finally, like track one, track two diplomacy needs support. This support should be channelled separately from that of track one so that it appears and can be perceived as independent. This recognition lends status to their role and bolsters the track two actors’ authority to speak with the armed groups. Civil society contributions are central to the sustainability of a peace process, which is directly linked to how well a political agreement can be translated into a social agreement that is embraced by the nation.