

## Building mechanisms for conflict resolution in south-east Sierra Leone

### The Sulima Fishing Community Development Project

**This paper by John Massaquoi, the Coordinator of the Sulima Fishing Community Development Project, was presented at the First Conference on All African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, Addis Ababa, November 1999.**

The Sulima Fishing Community Development project (SFCDP) is a Sierra Leonean community-based organization established in Soro Gbema chiefdom to improve living standards and promote development within the chiefdom. Soro Gbema is well endowed with natural resources — fish, timber, and agricultural land — but access to the area is difficult. Prior to the civil war, political manipulation and lack of social cohesion mitigated against development in the area.

The Sulima team, working in extremely difficult conditions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, has blended the promotion of long-term community and national reconciliation, with practical crisis intervention and foundational work for the economic and social revival of their war devastated communities just along the border with Liberia.

The members were engaged in community conflict resolution activities among Sierra Leonean refugees within Liberia and, since March 1998, among returning refugees in southern Sierra Leone. Activities have included regular public consultations on peace issues, facilitated dialogue between former members of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and pro-government refugees, as well as specific interventions with senior militia leaders and Sierra Leone government officials. More recently the activities have included the inauguration of a chiefdom-based peace monitoring system, the setting up of grievance committees, rehabilitation of bridges, roads and temporary schools and the resumption of fishing and fish marketing activities.

The general objectives of the organization include:

- Restoration of social cohesion, social support processes and hope for a better future among communities in southern Pujehun District;
- Developing community peacemaking skills and inclusive, participatory, problem-solving processes that involve all

- sectors of the community in issues involving peace, resettlement, reconstruction, as well as peace education and counselling for community leaders;
- Providing vocational training in local building construction, the production of traditional building materials, traditional and modern boat building and fishing techniques for community youths and others, as well as revitalising the economy of the area;
- Developing an income-generating credit and small-scale enterprise schemes for women, based primarily but not exclusively on fish processing and marketing;
- Developing and sharing the lessons learned from their peacebuilding activities with other organizations, opinion leaders, ordinary Sierra Leoneans and interested parties outside Sierra Leone.
- This paper aims to share some of these experiences by providing an overview of the peculiar conflict that has afflicted Sierra Leone for more than eight years with particular reference to our area of operation and also provide some specific examples of our ongoing community peacebuilding activities.

## Background

Soro Gbema chiefdom, in Pujehun District of Sierra Leone, is adjacent to the southwest Liberian border. Pujehun District was the scene of the Ndogboysoi War in 1982. Election manipulations and armed intervention triggered this conflict by the ruling All People's Congress (APC) government against supporters of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) candidate. The conflict ended when the people surrendered to the Sierra Leone army, though the issue was never satisfactorily resolved. When the RUF – with the support of Charles Taylor's National Liberation Front of Liberia (NPFL) forces –invaded Sierra Leone in 1991, many children of the chiefdom joined the rebellion at the behest of their parents who saw it as an opportunity for revenge. This was the incursion that launched Sierra Leone's war.

Terror tactics in the civil war have devastated hundreds of towns, villages and hamlets throughout Sierra Leone. The war has been marked rapes and amputations, the targeting of community leaders and their traditional symbols of authority, the desecration of sacred sites, hostage-taking or forced recruitment of men, women and children into both rebel and pro-government ranks. Women and girls have been the victims of rape and other forms of violence. Child soldiers have been recruited or forced into service by all fighting forces. The elderly have also been victims of gross abuses and

deprivation. These tactics and the destruction of homes and the despoiling of crops drove about half the country's population from their home areas. (About two million people are now living in relatively secure urban areas or camps for the internally displaced within Sierra Leone and refugee camps outside the country.)

Soro Gbema chiefdom was a major RUF base for more than five years of the war. As a result, there was a mass exodus of people into exile. Some headed across the border into Liberia; others fled into Guinea, others towards Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, or to the Southern Province centre of Bo. The population of Sulima town was approximately 2,400 people before the war. The surrounding 18 villages had an estimated population of about 4,000. Eight years on, many of the chiefdom's fishermen, farmers, traders, and craftspeople, and the surviving members of their families, were concentrated in Freetown, Gondoma displaced camp outside Bo, in refugee camps in Guinea and in Liberia.

Despite the human misery and devastation of the community caused by the war, Soro Gbema civic leaders maintained as best they could communal decision-making practices and a self-help structure based on what remained of the Village Council Development Committee (V CDC), covering the 19 villages in the Soro Gbema area. Community leaders were also involved in face-to-face dialogue with units of the RUF near the Liberian border in an attempt to establish communications between family members on both sides in the conflict and to encourage rebel forces to engage in peacemaking.

In anticipation of recent progress made towards a national peace accord between the civilian government and the RUF and the possible implementation of a national process of demobilization, reintegration and reconstruction getting underway, community leaders have developed a local process of community peacebuilding, family reunification, and economic revival. These activities are seen as a means to restore social cohesion and hope for a better future within the community in the near-term and to begin reconstruction in and around the chiefdom.

The first peace initiative in Sierra Leone's civil war took place on the Liberia-Sierra Leone border at the Mano River Bridge in December 1994, when the Soro Gbema leaders, acting with the approval of the military National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) government, met with RUF field units. The talks failed for various reasons but especially because of a government radio announcement that threatened bombing the rebels should they be recalcitrant. High-level negotiations

continued between the RUF and the NPRC government and also between the rebels and the civilian government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah elected in March of 1996. This led to the signing of the Abidjan Peace Accord between the government of Sierra Leone and the RUF on November 30, 1996. However, six months later, the Kabbah government was overthrown in a coup d'état and forced into exile in Guinea. The junta, an alliance consisting of disaffected military officers and men and RUF rebels, held on to power for eleven months. During this time southern Pujehun was the scene of heavy fighting as the junta sought to wrest control of the Mano River Bridge linking Sierra Leone to Liberia from the Civil Defence Force (CDF) locally called Kamajors, who controlled the area.

The southern province had been protected mainly by local CDF units, composed of local hunters who had undergone a special initiation, knew the terrain and were more mobile in the bush than the army, initially established to protect local communities. The Kamajors were the response of Mende society to general insecurity. However, with the prominence of the CDF in positions of power, civilian and civil authority became dominated by the CDF authority often creating problems for the community. In Soro Gbema, because the Paramount Chief had died long before the war and many section and village chiefs died during the war, civilian authority was weak when the people returned to their chiefdoms.

At present, roughly half of the pre-war population of the chiefdom has returned home. The border between Liberia and Sierra Leone was closed on numerous occasions; refugees were unable to return home. As a result of the war there are no permanent structures in the chiefdom. People have constructed temporary structures made of sticks, mud and thatch. Tarpaulins are a luxury. With the onset of the "hungry season" — the tail end of the rainy season -- there was a lot of anxiety in the chiefdom as the staple food, rice, was largely unavailable. People were eating breadfruit and mangoes, which had also become scarce because of the sudden demand.

People were gradually re-engaging in farming activities and have prepared large farms near the roads. However, rice seeds were lacking and even cassava stakes were hard to find. Women are still walking on average 36 miles from villages in the interior to Sulima, situated on the coast, to buy fish to sell in their villages. There is no public transport in the chiefdom.

There are no formal health care facilities available in the chiefdom. A pregnant woman had to walk over 15 miles and cross the Moa river to

be attended to.

Schools have re-opened in some villages, although only about 20 per cent of the school-age children are attending. This is due to the food insecurity throughout the chiefdom. In these villages temporary school buildings have been built and SFCDP has supplied them with school benches. Others have constructed temporary buildings but are in need of benches.

### Peace Initiatives

SFCDP has been engaged in various activities and processes for conflict mitigation and resolution, educational, recreational activities to promote social cohesion and groundwork for the reintegration of ex-combatants within the wider community. During the period of the junta rule, SFCDP continued its work in the refugee camps in Liberia and returned to Sulima to carry on the programmes with returnees in Sierra Leone. These activities have included peacebuilding and peace education workshops, training and deployment of peace monitors, support for schools and literacy programmes and income generation activities.

For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the peacebuilding activities, which involved training workshops and practical community conflict resolution and problem solving initiatives during and after the period of exile in Liberia.

In Liberia, where the majority of refugees had settled in camps near Monrovia and villages closer to the border, SFCDP organized one-day conflict resolution workshops. These were the first of their kind for the refugees and provided an opportunity for them to explore the causes of the war and the reasons for their refugee status. Participants included community chiefs, women and youths and ex-RUF combatants. It was a unique opportunity for people to explore their social and political problems together from both sides of the divide. They looked at individual and collective responsibility and raised awareness on the need for reconciliation with their children in the RUF. This was foundational work for the eventual reintegration of the ex-combatants. Recreational activities provided a unique avenue of bringing people of different political persuasions together in enjoyment and fun. Support was provided to organize teams at each of the refugee locations and footballs were provided.

Similar workshops to those organized in Liberia were held in three chiefdoms for returnees and other community members. With

participants including youths, local authority officials, Imams, elders and women, these workshops explored chiefdom-specific conflict issues and the way forward for reconciliation. These three chiefdoms had similar problems, which included longstanding disputes caused by the death of paramount chief, lack of civil authority, the usurpation of this authority by CDF commanders and many other issues emanating from the war.

During these workshops the community established mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflicts in the chiefdom. Each section, which is a sub-division of the chiefdom, was provided with a person to serve as 'peace monitor'. These peace monitors were mandated to serve as early warning tools of conflict within their sections and to intervene in the conflicts before they boiled over.

At the workshops the community also supported the establishment of grievance committees. Local conflicts were expected to be brought to this committee, which would then arbitrate or mediate as necessary. Each committee had representatives of all sectors of the community. The workshops were critical for reducing tensions that the years of war, hardships and lack of civil authority had created within the community.

The twelve peace monitors -- mainly respected Koranic teachers or mwalimus -- were given a two-day induction to understand their mandate and enhance conflict resolution skills. Advocacy for peace, unity and development, identification and intervention for conflict resolution and promotion of reconciliation were their main terms of reference. Each peace monitor, was expected to work for 10 days every month and covers between 10 and 15 villages. They were given bicycles to ensure their mobility. A small stipend was provided at the end of each month to ensure they could commit substantial time to this work. From within their ranks they nominated a principal peace monitor through whom the project management receives their reports and liaises on other issues. The head monitor and his deputy are invited to workshops organized by the SFCDP.

In June 1999, the peace monitors had their first in-house workshop which provided the opportunity for them and the newly-reconstituted Chiefdom Council Development Committee (CCDC) to come together to discuss common problems encountered within the community, shared experiences of resolving local conflicts and the impact their work had on the community.

The peace monitors had another opportunity to share their experiences, receive constructive criticism and helpful suggestions

about their work and learn new skills from others. Last December the two head peace monitors from the chiefdom attended a collaborative workshop between Council of Churches Sierra Leone (CCSL) and Conciliation Resources. At this workshop participants lengthily examined the SFCDP models for peace building in the chiefdom.

When there are local grievances the people call the peace monitors instead of using the traditional means of resolving conflict through court actions. The peace monitors use dialogue and the Koran to solve these problems. When the peace monitors encounter conflicts between villages, they call in the assistance of the grievance committee established at chiefdom level to help with the resolution. These strategies have proven very effective to date.

However, one of the impacts of this alternative approach is that the district administration is unable to generate revenue in this chiefdom so there is a growing official resentment. Traditionally conflicts are resolved through court action. Recently, 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 (NA) court where local problems are arbitrated. However, the people refused to pay taxes and rejected the reinstatement of the court because they were just starting to rebuild their lives and community structures and have no means to generate funds for taxes. As farmers, they claimed no one has helped them with seeds and tools, as if the government has forgotten about them in these terms but not in terms of taxes. A summons fee of Le 10,000, which lines officials' pockets, was decided on but to date this channel has not been used by the people, preferring the assistance of peace monitors to settle their conflicts, misunderstandings and petty differences, without incurring any expenses. Also, people have refused to use the courts to resolve neighbour disputes because they believe that it does not augur well for peace within the community.

### Community Conflict Resolution: A Case Study

The nature of conflicts resolved by the peace monitors vary, but most involve individual conflicts such as property ownership and social behaviour. Some of these problems result from looting and unlawful claiming of property. There were numerous conflicts of this nature in which people were looted and their properties sold to others. In the course of resettling, most people went to retrieve their looted or unlawfully seized properties. Social misbehaviour was another reason for the high number of conflicts, most of which affected youths. Youths became drug abusers and traffickers, traditions and customs were

ignored as they engaged in cultivation of drugs and destroyed sacred places. Their parents or local authorities had no control over them. They became lawless and disloyal.

The Wai section of the chiefdom had two inter-linked problems that were potentially explosive. A leadership crisis had erupted, creating chaos. People were not prepared to listen to the section chief. And this problem could not be resolved because of a related incident. Neither the paramount chief nor the section chief could resolve the leadership question because they did not appreciate the presence of an underlying problem.

A specially convened meeting provided a forum for all in the section, including women and youth, granting all equal opportunity to tell the entire community what was on their mind. A grievance committee was established comprising the paramount chief, tribal authorities, peace monitors and other elders to consider any matters that required resolution. During this process of resolving the leadership crisis an issue that was complicating the problem was revealed. This issue had to be resolved before the leadership problem could be decided as explained below.

### Leadership Crisis

Makpele River evenly divides the 12 villages in Wai section. The people on the west side of the river believe that the people on the east side -- who are closer to the road -- feel that they have the right to be the section's headquarter town, with a clinic and other facilities. The east side, with the headquarter-town of Wai, has traditionally controlled all leadership positions in the section. Customarily they believe that the Feika family should provide the Imam and the Kawa family should provide the chiefs and the other families in the section with surnames such as Swaray and Konneh etc. should pray for them--the Feikas and the Kawas. This was the traditionally accepted arrangement and practice. In recent times people became dissatisfied with this arrangement. During the course of the war, people took on leadership roles in various locations they found themselves: displaced and/or refugee camps, bush hideouts, etc. From that experience, people developed a new awareness that everyone could play leadership roles in the community. The six villages on the west side of the river, historically underrepresented at both the section and chiefdom levels, wanted their own representatives within the section's leadership hierarchy. They want to share power. They proposed that if the section chief comes from one side of the river then his deputy should come from the other side. Before returning home, the returnees had resolved

that no leadership position would be offered to anyone who lived in the chiefdom during the rebel occupation, as they were likely to be rebel collaborators.

Wai's leadership problem erupted as more people returned to the section and new leaders had to be chosen. The section chief, from Wai on the east side of the river, survived the war, while the deputy died. Two deputy section chiefs existed and controlled one half of the section respectively. The west side, which had felt historically underrepresented, preferred their own candidate who had served as deputy section chief in the displaced camp.

From the east side, a deputy was appointed temporarily until an election could be held. But he had stayed in the chiefdom during the rebel occupation. Both men were vying for the same position. But the returnees did not want the acting chief. Both men were backed by their constituencies on either side of the river. The section chief, elected before the war, was unable to control the people. When he called for communal labour to brush the road or fix the school, the community refused to do it. The paramount chief was asked to intervene and he was not listened to.

The VCDC, elected in February 1999, requested SFCDP's assistance in resolving the crisis because both the paramount chief and section chief were unable to control the section or resolve the issue. The project team was also asked to intervene because the peace monitors, through their work, commanded respect among the people.

After discussions with each of the representative groups with time allowed for each side to provide insights into their thinking, they agreed on a process: They would hold an election by secret ballot for a deputy section chief. Both sides agreed to support the outcome. However, during the course of the consultation it became apparent that there was an underlying problem that needed to be resolved before the election could be held. This problem was first addressed and concluded amicably. And the incumbent Deputy Section Chief Kandeh Lukally, who had remained in the chiefdom during the war, won. It is significant to note that although the returnees had vowed not to accept "collaborator" accepted the results, some even voted for him. In the end the conflict revolved around power sharing and equal representation.

We will now look at why the second incident had to be resolved first before the leadership question.

**Theft issue**

A village, Tindor, on the east side, claimed that another village, Borborbu, on the other side of the river, had stolen their property from where they hid it during the war. Prior to being displaced, the people of Tindor hid their property including money -- nearly 50 million leones -- and other valuables deep in their forest. The people from Borborbu did not run away and were moved by the RUF from their own village to a village on the road during the rebel occupation. As the government soldiers moved closer to the area and the rebels started panicking the Borborbu villagers moved away from the road and crossed the river to stay in Tindor, which is actually on an island. When the Tindor people came back home, they found that all their property hidden in the forest was missing and they accused Borborbu people of theft.

The Tindor people, as the aggrieved ones, were allowed to explain their story first -- accusing the Borborbu people of stealing. They said that their property, including shoes and country cloths, were seen with some people from Borborbu.

Now the Borborbu people's spokesmen recounted that because of the pressure from government soldiers fighting the rebels they moved to Tindor and eventually found the property of the Tindor people where it had been hidden in the forest. They said they were concerned that others could easily find this property just as they had found it, so they called on a relative of the Tindor people to come and remove the money and valuables. The woman said that she was afraid that if she moved the money the rebels would know about it and things could get difficult for her. So they reburied the things in the same place. Later on, the Borborbu spokesmen explained that one of them, a popular fellow who was the only literate person in the village of Borborbu, was seen with items from the cache in the forest. But because he was a member of the RUF, his family was afraid to ask him why he had stolen the items, so the matter was left unresolved.

The group then asked the alleged thief to defend himself. He started explaining with a long-winded story that was clearly fabricated. He was warned that this was his only opportunity to tell the truth without retribution. Everyone appealed to him to help resolve the matter. At this point, he threw himself on the ground, a considerable feat for an aged man, and begged for the people's forgiveness. He went to the grievance committee members and begged each one of them individually. Then he again fell on the floor to beg the people of Tindor. They accepted his apology.

The conflict was resolved because the Tindor people were able to hear and accept the explanation of the Borborbu people, who actually

accused one of their own people in the process. This resolved the issue between the two communities.

### Project's Impact Assessment

Generally, this program has made significant changes in community social relations, individual conflicts and the replacement of societal values traditions and customs. There is a need for more conflict resolution workshops to be organized to enable more communities to benefit from the knowledge imparted. There are requests from other communities in Soro Gbema, Kpaka and Makpele Chiefdoms for more peace building workshops, since the on-going programme was limited in scope. People want more Peace monitors to be trained to cover new chiefdoms that are highly' interested in the peace monitoring work.

- Old grievances are been examined and discussed, laying the foundation for peaceful co-existence in the community.
- Participants recommend solutions to community problems. Grievances settled in workshop sessions lay a good foundation for peace within the community.
- Violations and abuse of power had been minimised, The presence of the project within the chiefdom, avoided a situation where the CDF could have been capitalising on its position in the absence of civil authority to maltreat and harass innocent.
- Also, members of the community shown local authorities that they do not need any court system for summoning their brothers. They say that peace monitors settle their disputes without them incurring any expenses.
- The Community is now aware of their civil rights and obligations. For instance, a man from the near-by villages of Sulima said to his brother: "It is not right to punish a child for making a mistake. Everyone has a right even if it is a child. The rights of everyone are being taught in workshops in Soro Gbema. It will be better for people like you to try to attend these workshop sessions so that some of your views could be positively changed."
- Finally, many families have been reunified.