Building Paths to Peace

Bo Peace & Reconciliation Movement
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Sierra Leone
Bringing together traditional and modern methods of peacebuilding

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conciliation resources
Dedicated to the children of Sierra Leone who have the humility and understanding to know that friendships and love make the world a better place.

A young girl from Koribondo, southern Sierra Leone
Foreword

It is amazing to see the path that the partnership between the local community peacebuilding organization, Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement (BPRM) and an international organization like Conciliation Resources (CR) has taken after over a decade of working together. We have moved from supporting a group of individuals who followed a deep desire to see peace and the healing of the psychological and physical wounds caused by ten years of brutal war in their communities.

Now we are in partnership with a formidable organisation, one respected for their dedication, impartiality, and success in resolving conflicts from the domestic level to power related chieftaincy disputes, some of which had remained unresolved for thirty to forty years. The success of their work is based on using a core of ‘Peace Monitors’, respected individuals who facilitate the conflict resolution processes. This complements the greatly valued role of mediator that is an integral part of Sierra Leone’s culture.

Building peace in a nation that has been ravaged by war means to involve government, civil society and dedicated individuals. In the war that Sierra Leone experienced from 1991 to 2001 most of the violence and carnage was played out at rural community level. The war reached almost every corner of the country. It was clear to CR and BPRM that in order for a peace process to mean something genuine to the people of the country it needed to be felt at community level.

The causes of Sierra Leone’s war are varied and complex although often simplified to being about resources, namely diamonds. A long history of economic mismanagement, political violence and social and political marginalisation are some of the main factors.

The bridge from central to western Freetown was re-named the Peace Bridge, as a symbol of national peace and in dedication of the war victims, supported by the Government and the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC).
As we work with our partners on peacebuilding issues at the community level we see how these root causes continue to destabilise communities. Larger conflicts are still caused by imbalance of power between rural and urban areas and within rural communities. Despite a national government and its decentralised local government apparatus through local councils, Chiefs continue to hold major political power. They are the government of the people, and also traditionally mediators in conflict. Misuse of this power, however provided a foundation for many vengeful acts during the war, and continues to fuel conflicts today.

Another root cause of the war was the disenfranchised youth. Youths made easy conscripts for the war, not only as a result of the lack of economic opportunities but also because of their social and political exclusion. Solutions to the current marginalisation of youths need to acknowledge this. Added to this the war reversed traditional social hierarchies. Elders, who were traditionally protectors of the community, fled to safety while the youths stayed to defend their villages and also to commit atrocities. When the elders later returned to take their ruling positions it was hard for the youths to relinquish their power, some of whom had high-ranking positions within their militia.

These scenarios continue to drive conflict and tensions in Sierra Leone’s communities. The challenge is to facilitate them in a way that leads to their resolution, reconciliation, and also prevention as communities and individuals develop the skills and capacity to manage conflict and engage in development more effectively.

Over five years after the official end of the war, many of its causes remain unaddressed. Conciliation Resources in partnership with the Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement will continue to place a focus on community peacebuilding, trying to make the links at the national and international levels.

Mariama Konneh
West Africa Programme Director
“The search for peace has been pursued against daunting odds”

Dr Dennis Bright, 2000

Top: Life has been given a different meaning to the young members of the Amputee Sports Club, most of whom were victims of the war, as their dedication to sports is an inspiration to many people in Freetown. Below: In Selenga Bajja Kargobai sits in front of the remnants of her home, burned down by rebels.
Building the bridge from conflict

Linking communities for peace
1997 BPRM launched a movement to build bridges of peace between conflicts

The war in Sierra Leone devastated more than lives and national infrastructure. It created a population traumatised by their experiences, displaced from their homes and families, lacking trust in one another and vulnerable to anti-social behaviour.

Historical disputes in communities were often dealt with during the war through personal vengeance, widening social divides. After the war ended and during the processes of building peace, some community disputes were superficially addressed without resolving the root causes of the conflicts that helped perpetuate over a decade of warfare. With the large number of disenfranchised youths and without genuine peace, some community disputes spiralled into violence, acting as an obstacle to re-building community infrastructures and unity among the people.

In July 1996, Conciliation Resources (CR) responded to an invitation to the southern region of Sierra Leone to see how civil society groups were involved in engaging with Revolutionary United Front (RUF) combatants to promote their demobilisation and re-integration. Following a series of meetings with civil society representatives in Bo town, Conciliation Resources realised that if peace was to be truly sustained it was essential to promote local organisations’ practical involvement in the peace process.

As a result, Conciliation Resources held its first workshop to train interested local organizations in contemporary conflict resolution skills, so that they could more effectively help to resolve some community disputes that might otherwise have continued to evolve into violent conflicts at national level.

Inspired by the training and determined to contribute as citizens to upholding peace in Sierra Leone, civil society groups recognised the need for a more structured locally-based organisation capable of resolving various conflicts. With support from Conciliation Resources, nine civil society organisations from varying backgrounds worked together to develop the concept and to form what is now known as the Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement (BPRM). BPRM is a community based, voluntary peacebuilding organisation made up of a union between the Amputees Dependent Association, Drivers Union, Ex-combatants, Jaiama-Bongo Descendants Association (JAGBONDA), Sierra Leone Awareness Movement, Muslim Youth Movement, Sierra Leone Red Cross, Teachers Union and the Petty Traders Union. Over a decade later, BPRM are recognised at national level for helping prevent and resolve over 1,000 cases of both armed violence and community disputes, acting as a bridge between conflicts, linking communities to peace.

Top: After careful preparation, a young ex-combatant returns to his village and is welcomed by his family (photo © BPRM). Below: David Ngombu documenting the process of a workshop.
Working Partnership

Conciliation Resources (CR) works to prevent violence, promote justice and transform conflict through supporting people to develop effective solutions to their social, economic and political problems. CR provides opportunities for dialogue and improved relationships within communities and across conflict divides at all social and political levels.

Conciliation Resources started working in West Africa in 1995. CR facilitated the development of BPRM at a time when Sierra Leone was in dire need of peace intermediaries. Initially, Conciliation Resources focused on giving essential capacity building support to BPRM in the form of conflict management and negotiation skills and later leadership and facilitation training. In 1996, Conciliation Resources opened an office in Bo town that also hosts offices for BPRM to carry out their work.

Over the years Conciliation Resources' partnership function has evolved at each stage of BPRM's development, from the role of mentor to that of supportive guide and capacity builder. Conciliation Resources believes that long-term support to local partners is vital to sustaining peace in politically volatile areas like the southern region of Sierra Leone. CR’s continued support has enabled BPRM to face the challenges of preventing conflict and improve their practices of peacemaking.

Conciliation Resources staff in the south, work closely with BPRM, providing training, strategic thinking and support for organizational development. BPRM's coordinator, Hassan Feika recognises the value of this partnership, “Conciliation Resources trains us, offers us facilities and daily contact for us to discuss methods and budgets in a way that has benefited our growth.” As CR’s Programme Officer in the South, Marion Gorvie states, “Peace is in the hands of the citizens.”

Conciliation Resources Programme Officer in the south, Marion Gorvie, training BPRM staff in workshop facilitation skills
“to me this is real partnership, based on mutual learning, sharing and exchange, where we compliment each others weaknesses and strengths within the dynamic conflict context”

Mariama konneh
West Africa Programme Director, Conciliation Resources
Vision for Peace

BPRM work to prevent and transform conflict into opportunities where peace, reconciliation, human rights, and participatory governance can be established in order to stimulate social and economic development in communities. BPRM’s approach significantly helps to reduce some of the aggressive and negative impacts characteristic of a war-traumatised nation.

Some of the conflicts that existed among communities and individuals before the war were magnified by reprisals during the war leaving a legacy of deep resentments. It is BPRM’s aim to work with communities to unravel these simmering conflicts and heal the bitterness in order to make way for a more compassionate and development-focused population, with the abilities to manage future conflicts before they escalate.

BPRM also attempts to address the substantial resentment that still exists towards those who are connected to atrocities whether they were forced or participated voluntarily.

Reintegrating ex-combatants into communities is a lengthy and delicate process. One of the greatest challenges faced by BPRM in this process is that the stigma attached to ex-combatants discourages them from admitting their identity for fear of retribution. Another challenge is that for the war victims, letting go of their grievances and forgiving perpetrators takes time and requires a great deal of support. A focus for BPRM is to encourage communication and cooperation between the youths and elders to help reconcile the rift between them that was further aggravated by the war.

Their successes can be attributed to their ongoing personal support given to individuals and communities that helps the healing of broken relationships and encourages cohesion in the community.

Top: Young men and boys try to make a living as ‘wheelbarrow’ pushers, offloading trucks and bringing them to the shops. Below: As an early morning ‘poda-poda’ transport bus stops to load up passengers, traders use the opportunity to sell their goods to passengers through the window.
“Training in conflict resolution has built pillars under our Chiefdom and reduced tension making brokering relationships between elders and youths possible”

Salieu Issa
Voluntary Peace Monitor, Massa
Making peace building work

Top left: BPRM Monitoring Officer, Andrew Karim, training Peace Monitors. Bottom left: Participants work in a group to identify some of the potential areas of conflict in the 2007 national elections, during a consultative meeting facilitated by BPRM and Conciliation Resources. Right: Workshop notes displayed on the walls of the meeting room.
The process of peace

Since the war affected mainly rural communities, BPRM believe that the long-term process of building peace and reconciliation needs to take place in these communities. They do this by supporting community and traditional authorities to explore and develop alternative approaches to conflict resolution.

The key to BPRM’s success lies in their approach. A foundation of their methodology is the use of ‘Peace Monitors’ These are individuals highly respected by society as sensitive and, more importantly, neutral intermediaries. This innovative system relies on the provision of regular conflict management training of BPRM’s Peace Monitors. As well as focusing on key aspects of conflict resolution, training is on issues of justice and human rights. This is combined with recollecting local traditional methods of compromise and conflict settlement. Their approach in resolving conflicts has developed over time because of good practice and learning lessons along the way. Conflicts are first identified through the Peace Monitors’ links to communities or through direct approaches to BPRM by parties in a conflict.

In the larger disputes, BPRM sends in a select group of staff and Peace Monitors to assess the details of the conflict. BPRM then draws up a strategy for intervention.

They ensure that members of the initial assessment group are of a similar age, sex, political standing, and sometimes religious affiliation to their peers involved in the conflict. This allows for a connection between the facilitators of peace and conflicting parties that instils confidence.

Depending on the type of dispute, the process of achieving a resolution is long and requires months of meetings and dialogue. After relationships have been established with the various conflicting parties, BPRM facilitates small groups where community members analyse the causes, consequences and solutions to their conflict using several methods including skits and role-plays. Critical to the sustainability of a resolution is BPRM’s inclusion of marginalised groups, such as women, youth and those who had committed atrocities, allowing them to dialogue with those who traditionally hold the power. These forums become larger and larger until they are a public one where there is commitment to finding ways forward. BPRM’s Coordinator, Hassan Feika believes that “done well, peacebuilding presents opportunities for collective decision-making and for young people and women to participate in developing and governing their communities. It also creates the right conditions for people to make a living.”

Top left: BPRM Field Officer, Margaret Banya, helps students identify causes of conflict. Right: BPRM hold a workshop on preventing conflict in elections
This process is also strengthened because BPRM’s members have a deep understanding of the social and cultural practices within which their peacebuilding work takes place. Their understanding of the importance of religious beliefs or traditional practices allows them to fully engage with community members. A great deal of importance is given to the pouring of libation. Traditionally this ceremony is to appease the ancestors or gods and often takes the form of pouring a beverage on the ground or reading parts of the Koran, depending on the communities’ beliefs.

Another key element of their approach is that BPRM’s Peace Monitors help to identify and train community members as voluntary Peace Monitors who, in turn, form Chiefdom Peace and Reconciliation Committees (CPRC’s). These Committees empower communities to deal with new disputes, effectively maintaining peace and stability. They also allow BPRM’s work to have wider impact. BPRM have prospered and left a legacy of citizen-groups who don’t wield weapons but carry the tools of reconciliation.

A team of 18 Peace Monitors are made up of representatives from the nine organisations that form BPRM. Peace Monitors are not only able to help negotiate local peace agreements but also to identify and address early signs of potential conflict within communities. This can range from discrimination to veiled discontent that has created fundamental social divisions that could potentially develop into violence.

Peace Monitors help perform parts of the traditional role of community elders by intervening in disputes and negotiating a peaceful solution, albeit outside the local court system. With the knowledge that Peace Monitors do not issue fines, as local and state courts may do, people seek their help in settling disputes and their participation in larger conflicts. As facilitators, they face many challenges, but as their successes grow and people are inspired by the simplicity of learning to respect and understand others, BPRM hopes to bring peace of mind to the people of southern Sierra Leone.

“Some Chiefs will pardon our mistakes, but others will give heavy fines which drives youths to move to other Chiefdoms to dig for diamonds.”

Aliu Sheriff
Youth Leader, Koribondo
Kemoh Gendehe Bassie is BPRM’s youngest Peace Monitor. At 26 years old, he has been solving mainly domestic conflicts and building peace between families and neighbours since 2004.

Kemoh is a member of the Jaima-Bongo Descendants Association (JAGBONDA), a local organisation which forms part of BPRM and was set up to help bring people together for peace in the Jaima-Bongo Chiefdom in Bo District. He first witnessed BPRM’s work at one of their organized Peace and Reconciliation Carnivals, where Chiefdom communities come together to celebrate the unity BPRM have helped create, make new friends and play sports together. Now Kemoh works as a BPRM Peace Monitor mainly based in Bo town although he sometimes accompanies other BPRM staff to the rural communities to help in the process of reconciliation, which he considers exciting as he learns more skills in the art of conflict transformation.

Kemoh admits that he has learned a great deal since he first started. “I now have the confidence to settle disputes between people, like domestic arguments and street fighting. I don’t like animosity between people.” Most of the conflicts he deals with are domestic. Despite his youthful appearance, which people react to with scepticism at first, his calm and caring manner bring out a mature wisdom.

Recently, Kemoh was called at night by a neighbour who knows him for his mediation skills. He was asked to intervene in a domestic fight where a husband was beating his wife after discovering she had been unfaithful. Kemoh arrived at the house to find the husband in a rage and tried to calm him down but he wouldn’t listen. After some hours, the man’s aggression subsided and he agreed to talk. The man admitted that if Kemoh had not been there he may not have been able to control his anger. Together with a fellow Peace Monitor, Kemoh visited the couple the next day where they talked with the couple’s family to find a solution to their domestic problems. Eventually, the couple agreed to work at their marriage and both were sorry for their behaviour.

When thinking about his dreams, Kemoh is clear, “in future I would like the opportunity to do peace-building in other countries, wherever there are problems.”

Left: Kemoh discussing a case with his colleagues. Middle: Bo town highway stalls. Right: Young boys selling imported caps in Bo market.
“I just have a sympathetic heart for my people, that’s all.”

Kemon Degenhald Battle
Peace Mentor
“A Kamajor ex-combatant who was born here but was afraid to come back, wrote to ask me if I would talk to his people to forgive and accept him. I did and they agreed to take him back so I collected him from the Liberian border, promising nothing would happen to him. Up to now, his people like me because I brought their child back to them. He has the same respect for BPRM that I do”
believes honesty and speaking truths is an important part of his life. Formerly a combatant with the Kamajor forces, Amadu is now a self confessed convert to solving conflicts with words.

Amadu Wundu lives in Georma-Jargo, Sowa Chiefdom, a large village in the southern province. In 1992 BPRM were asked to intervene in a conflict between youths and the elders of Sowa. Many young people were Kamajor fighters and still carried their weapons. Kamajors were a nationally organised group of civilians trained in traditional warfare to protect their communities from the rebel forces. Amadu describes how young people felt empowered by their weapons “we had guns and didn’t have to listen to the elders. When I had a gun, I was a different man and would easily get into violent fights”. In turn, the elders feared and rejected the youths, using their regained positions of power to discriminate against young people by issuing high-level fines in court cases. Amadu held a senior position among the Kamajors who defended Sowa but felt that “many people were ungrateful for what we did and even jealous of our power”.

BPRM started gathering people, encouraging talk and offering food on a single table where both elders and youths would sit together. This gesture of goodwill is more than sustenance, it is considered by most communities as a true sign of sincerity and neutrality, adding to the belief that eating together is a mark of friendship.

Once dialogue was open, BPRM invited both Kamajors and elders to train as voluntary Peace Monitors that would form the Chiefdom Peace and Reconciliation Committee. Amadu believes that the training showed elders that the court system of levying fines for young people was partly responsible for the generational divide that is considered one of the root causes of the war. He also believes that it taught young Kamajors how to deal with their aggression.

There is no doubt it has changed life in Sowa. Chiefs no longer issue high fines and mutual respect is evident. For Amadu his life has been transformed “I say the truth and believe in honesty. I have worked as a voluntary Peace Monitor since 2002 and know that when you talk peace between two people you have to lead by example, otherwise your message will not go through.”

Left: Women pound rice together in unity for community celebrations in Georma-Jargo. Right: Voluntary peace monitors, from left; Fatmata Bockarie, Amadu Wundu and Salia Turay.
Bringing Change to the Chiefdom

One of the common challenges faced by BPRM throughout their work is gaining the commitment of individuals and communities without a financial incentive to be trained as voluntary Peace Monitors. When BPRM first enter a dispute encouraging communities to participate in 'new' methods of peacebuilding sometimes people respond by saying “this is not how our grandfathers worked” and questioning the need for improved methods of reconciliation.

As a rule, BPRM will only enter a situation if both communities and their leaders agree to their intervention. Traditionally, negotiating and settling community disputes is the responsibility of the elders and Chiefs who preside over local courts and determine penalties. This system however, has been fraught with challenges. Some Chiefs and elders have been biased in their judgements, particularly when they have been personally involved in the dispute and have benefited financially from the 'old' system of court rulings. To some, therefore, the work of BPRM can appear as a conflict of interest.

Despite these challenges, BPRM persevere in bringing conflicting parties to the table. Crucial to the process of negotiation is the selection of voluntary Peace Monitors who will form a Chiefdom Peace and Reconciliation Committee (CPRC) and be guided through the process of mediating their conflict. Rather than blaming those who are at the heart of the conflict, BPRM bring them into the process of finding an amicable solution as part of the CPRC. Joseph Zombie, a voluntary Peace Monitor, has seen the benefits, “BPRM taught us not to tell people they are wrong. They do not point fingers and say you are wrong, they will talk to each person and ask questions. Through this process people see where they have gone wrong and admit their faults.” When the antagonists become the mediators, genuine peace is sustained.

Paramount Chief Alhaji George Gbanyei Njibo II was a key part of the conflict in Niawa-Lenga Chiefdom and is now an active member of their CPRC and deeply grateful to BPRM for their help in bringing peace among his people. “the year the peace came to my chiefdom, we approved the building of a community barrie and later a primary and secondary school. I know that BPRM are a blessing because if someone can bring two sides in conflict together, join them, eat together, that somebody is blessed.”

Above: Paramount Chief Alhaji George Gbanyei Njibo II. Below: BPRM Coordinator, Hassan Felka, with CPRC members and elders in Massa village.
“Man or woman, if there is palava in the Chiefdom, people appoint me to talk for them”

Zainab Dabo
Town Chief & CPRC member

Women join together to prepare food for a community celebration in Geoma-Jargo.
“It took years before I could Talk to my sister-in-law... if she greeted me, I would ignore her... the conflict was deep.”

Peace Monitor Ibrahim Alpha

“even our children who went to the same school would not talk to each other... It didn’t feel nice”

Town Chief & Peace Monitor Zainab Dabo

Zainab and her brother-in-law Ibrahim can now enjoy sharing food from the same plate after years of conflict forced them apart.
Wonde Chiefdom

The conflict that resulted in an acute split between families and friends in Wonde Chiefdom can be traced back to underlying political tensions in 1986. More than sixteen years later people were still gripped with hatred and mistrust. Two of Wonde Chiefdom’s ruling families were involved in politics and when family supporters backed each of the political candidates, they effectively drew an unspoken division between the Chiefdom. By 1997, as the war raged throughout the southern region, those divisions took on a more fatal nature as unrelated acts of violence against communities were blamed on the opposing families and revengeed.

When the resident Minister approached BPRM in 2002, he was desperate to bring an end to the conflict. International development agencies had come and gone, without unity within the Chiefdom all development projects were sabotaged and the situation became intolerable. BPRM wrote to all four sections of the Chiefdom inviting them to a meeting but discussions were slow and yielded little progress. No-one wanted to talk about the conflict or share their version of Wonde’s history. Eventually people agreed to talk, but only following the sacrifice of a sheep to appease the ancestors and God and to dissolve all the negative feelings of the past and help guide them.

By working with the communities to analyse the conflict and openly share views and feelings, BPRM was able to start the process of peace. Communities elected members to be trained as voluntary Peace Monitors as part of a new Chiefdom Peace and Reconciliation Committee (CPRC), and now they actively advocate for peace and development.

Chief Koroma admits that he rules differently “I don’t fine people anymore and even persuade our elders to follow this way”, and he is eager to show how people now actively participate in developing their Chiefdom. “We now have a school, a health centre and water wells”.

Ibrahim Alpha and his sister, Zainab Dabo, were caught on different sides and refused to talk to each other for over five years. Even their children ignored each other. Brother and sister are now part of the CPRC and work together. Zainab believes that the training from BPRM helped her to be elected as Town Chief. “Because of the training, I know how to stand and talk to my people, and how to solve cases." She joined BPRM’s “family of peace makers to be able to talk to people about peace” and quickly noticed the changes “people started to feel free, little by little and I saw the start of community between us.”

Left: A young girl sits outside her mother’s shop in Wonde. Middle-left: A young boy collects water from the well. Middle-right: Wonde Chiefdom’s CPRC members have the luxury of making jokes together now the conflict has ended. Right: A basket of palm nuts after the stringy flesh has been taken off to produce oil.
Margaret Koroma is an entrepreneur, skilled in trading, tailoring and hairdressing. Margaret has built a business that takes care of her 5 children while serving as one of Niawa-Lenga’s highly respected voluntary Peace Monitors.

Margaret’s old school teacher, Goba Smith, tells everyone how as a child Margaret was spirited. “When she was bad and I wanted to cane her, she would hold the cane and challenge me.” Corporal punishment has now been banned which poses a challenging change for teachers. Margaret Koroma admits that she was outspoken and sometimes aggressive as a young teenager which, particularly for a girl, would not have put her on favourable terms with the community as she would have been considered to have ‘bad behaviour’.

Margaret is now thirty-two years old and a single mother to her five children. Her outlook on life has changed, but it has not been an easy journey. When rebels entered Negbema they burnt homes and left the village scattered with bodies. Margaret ran into the forest with her two young children where she spent two weeks trying to find enough food and water to keep them alive. She managed to walk many miles to Bo town, taking refuge in friends’ homes. When the rebels left Negbema, Margaret returned home and tried to rebuild her life.

Conflicts within the community brought BPRM to Negbema where they held a workshop to mediate tensions. Margaret attended the meetings and asked many questions, eager to understand the process of reconciliation. A challenge for women is that Sierra Leone’s patriarchal society has favoured educating boys who are groomed to be at the forefront of decision-making. This leaves a large population of illiterate women often without the confidence to speak out in a public forum or, in some cases, the permission to attend meetings. Margaret was not deterred by this, and when the community was asked to elect people to be trained as voluntary Peace Monitors, she was elected. Aside from participating in solving the conflict between two Chiefdoms, Margaret is asked by community members to mediate conflicts and take part in important community development meetings.

Margaret is now a highly respected Peace Monitor and community member and confesses that initially “people didn’t take me seriously.” Margaret’s relationship with her mother has improved after feeling resentment for the fact that she was not encouraged to be more independent, “I now see her worth, my attitude has changed towards her which has inspired her to be more encouraging to me.”
“I was afraid to stand in front of people and talk... but I’m no longer afraid. Nothing will shake me and I say what I want to say.”

Margaret Koroma
Voluntary Peace Monitor

Niawa-Lenga’s Voluntary Peace Monitors from left; Edward Johnny, Juliana Goba, Emanuel Josie, John Kobbay and Margaret Koroma.
“I was there when they made the boundary.... Damballa was my Motherland”

Andie Yamba is Niawa-Lenga’s oldest community member and remembers the day when the Colonial officials came to mark Chiefdom boundaries when, as a young girl, Yamba met the District Officer by the river. Her own family was split because of the conflict.
Ever since the Colonial Government sent officials to survey Chiefdom boundaries in 1964, Niawa-Lenga and Selenga have been in conflict.

In 1964 British Colonial officials arrived on the border of Niawa-Lenga and Selenga Chiefdoms with maps in hand. They were marking Chiefdom boundaries. At that time both Chiefdoms were integrated, through marriages, friendships and cooperatives. The borders were not clearly defined as people shared the farmland on the periphery of their chiefdoms. There was no protest when villages were merged and new boundaries set as the Paramount Chiefs were close friends. However, as the years went by and the Chiefs passed away, the union between the chiefdoms weakened and people resented the merger and made claims to the bordering farmland.

Conflicts between farmers and their families spread, and the border became a danger zone, with both sides destroying each other’s crops, property and traps that lay at the edge of the disputed land. Thirty years later, after severing many family bonds, tensions were still high and, with the presence of a significant number of ex-combatants, people feared it would become more violent.

District Councillor Joseph Bindi heard about BPRM when they made a presentation of their work to the local council and requested their intervention in helping find a solution to the conflict. BPRM sent an assessment team to identify the root causes and key players in the conflict. After several months of talking with both communities and training those involved in the conflict as voluntary Peace Monitors, BPRM called for a ‘libation ceremony’, a traditionally valuable seal to the reconciliation process. A draft peace agreement was drawn up by conflicting parties, but it took BPRM another eleven months of consultations before the final agreement was accepted by both chiefdoms, and subsequently filed with the National Council of Chiefs.

Nearly a year after BPRM started mediating and after more than 30 years of conflict, over 300 people witnessed the signing ceremony of the peace agreement between Niawa-Lenga and Selenga Chiefdoms. In a closing statement Councillor Joseph Bindi said that he “believed that the signing would provide the basis for genuine love and unity in the hearts and minds of every citizen, which would promote sustainable peace and development for both Chiefdoms.” Three years after the ceremony both Chiefdoms continue to enjoy their peace and families have been reunited.
“...the mind understands, but the heart changes, so we Talk to the heart... so that it too can rest”

Abu Bakarr Swaray
Voluntary Peace Monitor

Sleeping under the Elephant

Today traders ply the road between neighbouring Helebu and Massa villages and farmers work the land helping their neighbours to plant their crops. Sixteen years ago, the situation was very different. The road was not visible, overgrown bushes closed the entrance and all contact between the villages. People from Helebu and Massa used another longer route that meant many miles of walking around the villages, just to avoid having any contact with their neighbours.

In 1991, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels reached Pejeh Chiefdom and invaded Helebu and Massa villages where they abducted young men and destroyed homes. It was alleged that Helebu was collaborating with the rebels and Massa with the Sierra Leone army. Such rumours gave rise to hatred and malice and there were cases of subsequent revenge, but as Salihu Issah admits, “we didn’t even think of calling our neighbours and asking them if they were working against us or to explain what had happened.”

When the rebels and army finally left, the villagers’ contempt for each other transferred into Helebu and Massa each blaming the other for their suffering. Intervillage marriages were broken as sons and daughters who married on the other side were called back to their family village. Over the next decade, several attempts to broker peace between them failed.

BPRM were asked by the concerned members of the district to arbitrate a peaceful solution. As part of their method, BPRM identified some of the key people who had perpetuated the conflict and trained them as voluntary Peace Monitors, channelling their deep-rooted resentments through conflict prevention skills. The Chiefdom Peace and Reconciliation Committee chairman, Abu Bakarr Swaray, describes how BPRM “helped teach us how to resolve conflicts, not to blame one person but to bring understanding between them and find peace.”

BPRM held a meeting in a neutral village where people from all sections of the chiefdom agreed to cooperate in the mediation process. After much groundwork two days of intense discussions and emotional expression, the citizens of Helebu and Massa realised the need to make a pact of peace. BPRM presented gifts, a lantern and Koran to both villages as a symbol of unity. To this day the lantern is lit and parts of the Quran read to signify the peace between them.

Helebu village’s name comes from it’s founder, a hunter who was in forest late at night and tied his hammock to what he thought were tree trunks, only to wake in the morning to find the trees were actually legs and he was sleeping under the belly of an elephant.
No-one would use the Road between Helebu and Massa.

Main photo: Helebu’s homemade road sign showing the direction to neighbouring villages. Top: Massa’s traditional barrie offers a resting place to the community. Middle-top: Massa village homes. Middle-below: The road from Massa to Helebu is now a trade route for the communities. Below: A Helebu home displays a poster appealing to young men to vote in the 2007 elections.
“BPRM’s role is commendable as they are complimenting the efforts of national security to ensure there is peace & harmony within communities & the nation”


Top: Ismail Tarawali. Below: Sierra Leone Police during a Consultative Meeting on the General Elections of 2007, facilitated by the BPRM.
Collaboration with the State

As a rule BPRM will only intervene in the larger conflicts if both communities agree and state authorities are aware of their involvement. However, mistrust can sometimes stall the process and postpone BPRM’s participation and frustrate a speedy solution to the conflict.

With the prevalence of national apathy towards the failing justice system, BPRM are working to promote an alternative approach to justice by incorporating representatives of both the traditional and formal justice system in their methods of reconciliation. Chiefs represent the traditional system while Court Chairmen represent the formal system.

BPRM have worked hard to develop links with decentralised local government structures and traditional administration that includes the chiefs, the police and the Office of National Security (ONS) which is responsible for the coordination of state security. Such links are fraught with challenges. In some cases chiefs admitted that they made income through fines during their traditional role as mediators. BPRM’s free service posed a threat to this, yet they still valued their intervention and dialogue continues to help manage losses.

The ONS’ Provincial Security Coordinator in the south, Ismail Tarawali, believes that BPRM is well structured to collaborate with on conflict cases as they are able “to gain the confidence of the factions as a neutral body” and being at community level are “well placed to identify potential conflict areas.” BPRM have cooperated with the ONS on a number of cases, including the Niawa-Lenga conflict which Ismail Tarawali “was deeply involved in together with Councillors. We gave policy acceptance to BPRM which means that (their intervention) is recognised by Government.”

Some voluntary Peace Monitors also hold the position of Court Chairman within the traditional court system. They are more likely to ask opposing parties in a case if they want to seek a neutral negotiating body, like a Peace Monitor, to try to solve their case outside the court in order to avoid potentially heavy fines from the court. This allied relationship helps to promote the concept of collaboration to achieve justice for the community. Increasingly, traditional chiefs and elders are requesting training in leadership and peace building skills, which is a positive sign that they interpret BPRM’s methods as worthy of adopting in their roles as community leaders.

Left: Police Family Support Unit (FSU) vehicle. Middle: BPRM strategising with the ONS and Police. Right: Chiefdom Court in session
Protecting Children

With help from CR, mutual understanding and increased collaboration has developed between BPRM and the police. Clear guidelines were set defining BPRM’s limit within the newly functioning legal system such as non-involvement in criminal cases. The Officer Commanding at the Family Support Unit in the southern province, Mrs Sento, was impressed with BPRM and believes their contribution is valuable “if others would do the same as BPRM, crime would decrease.”

Sarah Karim is one of BPRM’s Petty Traders Union representatives and a Peace Monitor. In a recent abuse case someone came to Sarah’s house and told her of a child who had been burned and beaten by her mother. The case was shocking as the seven year old girl was severely burnt on her tongue and mouth for having allegedly ‘bad-mouthed’ her mother. Sarah reported the case to the police and took the girl to hospital where she was treated for third degree burns. The mother was arrested and charged.

BPRM’s Senior Field Officer, Alex Nallo, attended the court hearing working within the formal legal system, as mandated in criminal cases, to advocate for the young girl. The magistrate ruled on six months imprisonment. Sarah brought the little girl into her home where she was nursed for over a month before it was agreed she was fit enough to move in with her grandfather.

The challenges of child protection are vast and Mrs Sento admits that “we have constraints”. Then there are taboos when it comes to talking about child abuse, she says “there are sexual abuse cases that relate to early marriages, but when we make arrests they just say they paid the dowry for the child.” Sarah is helping to bring these cases into the open and continues to work with the Family Support Unit.

Top: The Family Support Unit (FSU) office in Bo. Middle: Sarah Karim discussing a case of child abuse with the FSU’s Officer Commanding, Mrs Sento. Below: The Grandfather of the young girl who was burnt, Pa Sillah, selling kola nuts in the market.
“I took care of her until she was Better, then her Grandfather took her home”

Sarah Karim
Peace Monitor
main photo
“BPRM are moving forward, achieving their goals... so we collaborate”

Ismail Tarawali
Provincial Security Coordinator-South
Office of National Security

Letters from the Provincial Security Committee endorsing the work of BPRM and inviting them to a meeting to discuss cases of conflict in the region.
The Path Ahead

Due to their growing national recognition and success more dispute cases are reported to BPRM from other districts across the country requesting their intervention. BPRM is doing its best to ensure they prioritise intervention in order not to stretch limited resources. The greatest challenge is sustainability and this requires Conciliation Resources’ help to build the capacity of the Movement to generate funding to support their work in the future. BPRM plans to continue to work with international partners, benefitting from the mutual exchange, while also pursuing alternative ways of generating further income for their work.

In looking to the future, Conciliation Resources has helped BPRM start the construction of a Peace Resource Centre in Bo town. BPRM’s Coordinator, Hassan Feika explains that, “based on our experience in communities, the peacebuilding work we have done and the training of community volunteers, we realise that our work has helped stimulate development in communities. For this reason we wanted to start to focus on supporting skills training programmes. We want to make economic justice a component of social justice. Our new centre could cater for training Peace Monitors in economic as well as reconciliation skills”. Hassan recognises that “conflict has arisen out of economic justice. In Sierra Leone, if a man cannot provide for his wife and children, what can he do? This creates a significant number of domestic conflicts” that help spark larger community conflicts. He believes that if they can support some livelihood training needs, particularly for youths, “it will help to maintain the peace as they will not want to go back to what they came from, conflict.”

The Centre will also be a base for training and exchange visits for Peace Monitors and Chiefdom Peace and Reconciliation Committees, which has proved so successful in terms of motivating volunteers and helping people share their experiences, both of conflict and peace. Hassan is deeply committed to the work of BPRM and is quick to note that his colleagues are equally devoted. Indeed, the dedication of all BPRM staff and volunteers has led them through over a decade of challenges and with support from Conciliation Resources they have become a household name in southern Sierra Leone. They received a prestigious award in 2007 Local Organisation Best Performance in the Southern Province, Sierra Leone, from the UK based Bo District Descendants Association. If public feeling is anything to go by, BPRM will live a long life, as Paramount Chief Kargoi II put it, “to me BPRM are life, because he who brings peace brings life.”

Left: Bringing people together to analyse a conflict and work together to find a solution is a strong component of BPRM’s work. Middle: BPRM’s Coordinator, Hassan Feika, with the award they received as Local Organisation Best Performance in the Southern Region, 2007. Right: BPRM’s new office is planned to be complete by the end of 2007.
Key Lessons Learned

Maintaining peace at community level can make a critical contribution to greater national stability as local disputes from small-scale domestic violence to larger political and chieftaincy conflicts all have potential to escalate into major conflicts if left unaddressed;

Balancing a deep understanding of the cultures and social norms of the communities within which conflicts are being resolved with the ability to carefully challenge the traditions that are central to the conflict dynamics has been critical to building stable and cohesive communities;

Involving the whole community, including traditionally excluded groups such as women and youth, was key to sustaining peace and also made a greater contribution to social justice as the benefits of inclusion were demonstrated by tangible results;

Involving all parties to the conflict in the process of its resolution, including those who have been perpetrators of violence, has been a central factor to having sustained rather than short term resolutions to conflicts, because each feels that his or her perspectives have been taken into account and needs addressed and so feels responsible for living up to the agreement;

In a post-conflict society such as Sierra Leone’s, it was essential to ensure that an initiative providing alternative justice and filling gaps was able to function alongside re-emerging state institutions, fostering complementarity and avoiding rivalry;

Supporting a community-based organisation to strengthen its capacity to work effectively at local level and have national impact has involved daily support and long term commitment, sustainability has been enhanced through partnership with an international NGO for over ten years.

A group of women beat rice together and sing as they prepare for a grand community feast, Geoma Jargo.
Bo Peace & Reconciliation Movement Staff

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Alex Nallo Senior Field Officer
Andrew Karim Monitoring Officer
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Haja Baindu Kallon Chief Peace Monitor

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Mohamed Barrie
Hassan Feika

BPRM Union Members
Amputees Dependent Association
Drivers Union
Ex-combatants
Jaima-Bongo Descendants Association
Muslim Youth Movement
Petty Traders Union
Sierra Leone Awareness Movement
Sierra Leone Red Cross
Teachers Union
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It is clear that BPRM would not be where they are today without the continued support of the large family of committed individuals who form CR’s staff in Sierra Leone.

BPRM’s staff and volunteer Peace Monitors have given new meaning to the word commitment, working tirelessly to help maintain peace in Sierra Leone. Their wisdom and experience is a valuable asset to the nation.
“If the achievement of peaceful co-existence in local communities lies in the hands of the people themselves, then peace building carries more weight and becomes more effective”

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