

# Committee for Conflict Transformation Support

# CCTS *Review 30*

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## Presentations

### Presentation by Michael Hammer

Many of the terms the three speakers have introduced in their presentations are reflected in the work that CR's partners are doing in West Africa. I want to emphasise that the work of actually building peace is being done, and needs to be done, by Sierra Leoneans, Liberians, Guineans and Ivorians themselves. I hope it will never be the case that someone like me comes into a country to build the peace for the people there and then moves away again, with the house probably falling down again afterwards. Building peace in West Africa is a huge task, and the potential for conflict and violent conflict remains very high in all affected societies.

The work CR is supporting in West Africa raises questions about the boundary between peacebuilding and policing, which also reflects the topic we were looking at before: the tension between pacification and peace building. The word 'police' derives from the Greek polis, which has to do with the community and the interplay of forces within it. In my view there is frequently a very limited perspective on what policing consists of, and it is mostly associated with the use of coercive force. However, it is not necessarily about a baton being applied against people who are transgressing but, for me, it is as much about relationships. When we encourage and support peacebuilding work, how do we define what it consists of? Where do its boundaries lie, and what are the overlaps with what people might call policing, in the sense of regulating power relationships within the community in a way that is productive and nonviolent?

In West Africa, conflicts were and are regionally interlinked, often rooted in decades of exploitation and discrimination, exacerbated by the fact that, as part of the dynamics of war economies, large sections of society are involved in the exploitative circuits of arms trade and illicit trade in resources, mostly for want of alternatives but also because many people are actively recruited as forced labour by the warring factions. There have been massive interventions in the form of peacekeeping operations, by the United Nations and also by Nigeria and Britain. We should not close our eyes to the fact that what is labelled peacekeeping very often involves military operations, and sometimes the use of mercenaries.

CR supports what is called 'peace monitoring' in communities, though this term reflects only part of the activity. A better description of what is actually going on would be community based conflict identification, mediation and, in some cases, adjudication. Essentially, we are talking about a volunteer-based group of people, who co-ordinate their efforts, going round neighbourhoods in a rural and urban setting, identifying where conflicts are happening, and having the approach that no conflict is too small for their attention. In a context where there is discrimination, where institutions are weak and arms are plentiful, something happening in a domestic setting could quickly get out of hand and result in armed violence. The peace monitors of the Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement (BPRM), or the Sulima Fishing Community Development Project (SFCDP), which are community based organisations or umbrella groups, go round to get a feel of what is happening in the neighbourhood. And, with the consent of the community, they approach and engage with the people involved in conflicts – not only conflicts that have already become violent, but also ones that are below that threshold. The starting point of regarding nothing as too small is very important for the effectiveness of this work, and for the acknowledgement that the process receives from local

people.

When CR talks to its local partners, their responses show that increasingly there is a pattern to the way they approached things. This is an important factor in the progress they have made over the last eight years. For instance with the Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement, something approaching a system is emerging – from good practice rather than from someone having an idea which is then applied across the board. In principle it entails, after the identification of a conflict, sending in a group of people who are considered to be peers of those who are involved in the conflict. If you are working on what appears to be a domestic conflict, you try to ensure that you bring in a woman and a man of an appropriate age, people who might have links through doing the same kind of work, or through belonging to the same religious community – not coming in with an external institution or the big, respected community leader, to deal with, say, a poor woman who is having a problem with her husband. You try to bring in people at peer level, and not just one individual but, where possible, a group of two or three people, so that those you are meeting can choose the person with whom they want to build up this link of confidence. And one of the good things, but also a challenge for the future, is that women and younger people, 20, 18, even 16 year-olds, are more and more taking on the role of peace monitors. It means young people are involved in the process, rather than feeling that this again is a kind of generational power play.

Once relationships have been established with the different parties, the problem is discussed in ever larger groups, until it reaches a critical threshold and becomes a public process, but in this case one where people talk not about their grievances but about their ability to come together. And that tipping point is one that in each individual process has to be determined by the peace monitors. So you try to keep matters in the smaller group until this point is reached, then with the consent of the group, you move into the wider public arena. It is important in this context to recognise that many oral societies in Africa do not work on the basis of written contracts, but of agreements made publicly, involving witnesses from the wider community.

Now even political leaders are recognizing the possibilities of this approach. For instance, over the last two and half years, BPRM has been asked to mediate in conflicts over chieftaincy positions, including that of a paramount chief, and in land conflicts involving vast resources. Political actors who want to sort out who has the right to put up a candidate for the chieftainship position, and at what point they should go public about doing so, also seek advice and help. There is still a political contest, but one that should result not in confrontation but in a joint solution. So the system that worked successfully at the small scale has proved useful also at this larger level, where the stakes are often higher.

There is clearly a need for impartial groups in society. That is the role the peace monitors are playing. The composition of the teams is an important factor in their success because it enables them to reach across gender, age and economic divides. It is not a case of the rich mediating in conflicts between poor people, or solely men mediating in conflicts between men and women, or older people in conflicts among the youth.

How does this approach interface with the re-emerging role of the state in post-war societies? The police are coming back into communities where they have been absent for ten years and, before that, for a period of forty years, and did not have any legitimacy or credibility. There is a new justice system again. The traditional authorities and the court system is changing, and offering its services again – and there are political parties putting themselves up for election on a regular basis at local and national levels.

The big question is – what does policing mean here, and how does this fit with community peace monitoring? Is the work CR is supporting a form of policing, and, if so, should there be limits on what the peace monitors undertake? Should people intervene, for example, in criminal cases?

Sometimes the police do not want the monitors to intervene because they are potentially destroying evidence, perverting the course of justice, covering up crimes and so forth. This is true in some cases. I am not very confident that the whole system is working in the way that it should – for instance in relation to accountability in rape cases. There are questions also about the limits to the mediation approach in the political process. With mediation at the chieftaincy level there is still a strong link to the community. But could BPRM be asked at some stage to mediate between two candidates of the same political party? Or should they mediate in a conflict between the leaders of rival political parties where there have been violent clashes between supporters?

CR's big task for the future is to help clarify where the interface lies between peace monitoring, the work we have been supporting, and the role of the re-emerging state institutions, so that there is co-operation and complementarity rather than rivalry. If this were clearer, people would know whom to go to for which issues. The legitimacy of the state in carrying out certain functions would also be strengthened, including on the issue of the use of coercive force, and who is entitled to apply it, and how this role interlinks with the role of other, new actors in the scene of policing, that is negotiating and regulating conflict-prone power relationships in a community or society.

The transformation of societies in West Africa towards a greater pluralism of ideas and interests has been a visible and accelerating trend for some decades. Young people challenge the dominating interests of authority: of traditional authorities, the state and established circuits of social and economic redistribution; new political movements challenge domination by the few big parties and their figureheads. This is also strongly felt at community level and in many ways has been thrown into relief by the wars.

I would probably say it is fine and even necessary to challenge the monopoly of the state on representing interests in a society, but I am not sure whether the challenge to its monopoly of violence is to be encouraged. That is exactly what happened in West Africa. Many people thought that diversification of interests also legitimised diversification in the use of violence, and the result was a series of disastrous wars.

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