Discussion
paper

Nov 2016

Dialogue for Peace

Reflections and lessons from community peace
platforms in the Mano River region

**CONCILIATION
RESOURCES**
working together for peace

NGO partners

This project has been implemented in partnership with the following national NGOs:

ABC Development is a registered NGO in Guinea, established in 1998. It is a member of the West Africa Action on Small Arms and WANEP in Guinea. In partnership with Conciliation Resources, ABC Development set up the DPD in Forécariah, which has led dialogue between mining companies and communities in the surrounding region.

Institute for Research and Democratic Development (IREDD) was founded in Liberia in 2000 (as the Liberia Democratic Institute) and serves on several civil society networks in Liberia that engage in policy influencing. It works to strengthen citizens' voices and engender a culture of local participation in policy development and implementation.

Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD) in Sierra Leone is an advocacy and peacebuilding national civil society organisation, established in 1988. It has a wide range of experiences working in partnership with national and international institutions to build capacities, create and influence policies on mining, governance, peace and security and youth empowerment.

West Africa Network for Peacebuilding–Côte d'Ivoire (WANEP-CI) is the Ivorian branch of WANEP, a leading regional peacebuilding organisation founded in 1998 operating in every ECOWAS member state. WANEP is experienced in bringing people together through dialogue platforms to promote social cohesion and reconciliation, and coordinating regional civil society engagement.

Acknowledgements

Supported by the:

Cover image: Bohi Nazère (R), Toulépleu DPD Chairperson, talking with a local Police official and Forest Ranger ©Conciliation Resources

Sierra Leonean Police checkpoint at the Bo-Waterside border crossing with Liberia ©Conciliation Resources/Aubrey Wade

Introduction

Conciliation Resources and our national NGO partners believe that one way to mitigate tensions and violent conflict is to help build the capacity of local people so that they have the ability, opportunity and motivation to be positive agents for change in their community. Since 2010, Conciliation Resources has worked in partnership with national NGOs to establish and empower a network of 18 locally owned peacebuilding structures, called District Platforms for Dialogue (DPDs), in the border regions of Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. These community peace platforms are supported to mitigate local conflicts and to advocate duty bearers to respond to insecurities in a more appropriate manner, which takes into consideration the concerns and views of local populations.

The network of DPDs has steadily grown through a series of projects. Six DPDs were established in 2010 as part of a UK Department for International Development funded project to address governance, transparency and accountability issues in the border districts. A further four were established along the Ivorian-Liberian border in 2013 to build local capacities and strengthen resilience in the face of cross-border attacks. Most recently, eight DPDs

were established in 2015 as part of a project to address tensions exacerbated by the 2014-2016 Ebola crisis.

Conciliation Resources has constantly looked to use the lessons from each project to adapt and improve the effectiveness of the DPDs and the support they are offered. This report represents an effort to document some of the key lessons from this period. It is hoped that these reflections will be a useful resource for others who are currently adopting, or planning to adopt, a model that utilises similar community peace platforms. This report provides an outline of the structure and operating model of the DPDs, the role that international and national partners can play in supporting the DPDs, and then reflects on eight of the most pertinent lessons from our work for improving effectiveness and the prospects for long-term sustainability.

Background: Instability in the Mano River border regions

These platforms look to respond to decades of instability and insecurity in the border districts of the four Mano River region countries – Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The porous borders in the Mano River region means that security threats and political tensions from one

Map showing the location of DPDs and the geographical range of their work ©Conciliation Resources

country regularly spill over into neighbouring countries and threaten the whole region's prospects for a durable peace.

Weak civilian-government relations; high levels of economic, social and political marginalisation; accusations of endemic corruption; and a deeply divided society that has not dealt with the legacies of civil wars and political uprisings drive societal tensions in the Mano River region. Whilst these issues are pervasive across the region, it is in the border regions that these tensions are particularly prone to escalating into violent conflict. In the border regions feelings of marginalisation are particularly intense as justice, education, healthcare and security mechanisms remain largely ineffective and insufficient whilst populations continue to lack sustainable livelihood opportunities. Border region communities perceive the centre-periphery political, social and economic dynamics of the region to be indicative of the respective governments wilfully maintaining historic inequalities. This enduring sense of marginalisation has resulted in very weak civilian-government relations in the border regions.

In addition to this, the porous borders, lack of effective security apparatus and weak infrastructure mean that the Mano River border regions have tended to attract militias, armed groups and ex-combatants. These non-state armed actors tend to use the border regions as a base to recruit, train and launch attacks from. Local communities in the border regions have been the victim of not just violence from these groups, but also of extreme pressure and abusive actions from the military and other security institutions during times of political tension or instability. The relationship between border region communities and government is therefore further weakened, as they question not just the government's capacity to protect them but also their desire to do so.

It is in this context that the devastating 2014-2016 Ebola crisis took hold. The crisis served to accentuate the pre-existing mistrust and sources of division within society. The rampant suspicion of national governments led to widespread accusations that governments were purposefully harming their citizens. Whilst the World Health Organisation declared the epidemic over in June 2016, the legacies of the crisis and the associated tensions remain.

An introduction to the DPD model

The DPDs are a network of community-based structures working to mitigate local conflicts through dialogue and mediation in 18 border districts of the Mano River region. The DPDs work on four interlinked streams

Tewor District DPD facilitate dialogue with community members in Camp 3, Liberia ©Conciliation Resources/IREDD

of work: they identify emerging conflicts, undertake sensitisation on the conflict issues, facilitate dialogue to mitigate the escalation of violent conflict, and engage duty bearers to advocate for more appropriate responses to community insecurity.

Conflict and context analysis

DPDs have been trained to undertake regular participatory conflict and context analysis in their respective communities. This allows the DPDs to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying drivers of tensions, the power relations of the stakeholders in conflict and any opportunities for peace. To ensure conflict-sensitivity and to enhance the prospects for peace it is critical that this process is fully inclusive and reaches out to listen to the perspective of all parties in conflict and other stakeholders in the community. Regular conflict and context analysis has served as an early warning tool, which allows the DPDs to respond to growing tensions before they escalate into violent conflicts.

For example the DPDs identified deteriorating trust and weakening relationships between communities, families of victims, survivors, health workers and security officials during the Ebola crisis as a potential risk to the relative peace in the region. It was this analysis that directly led to

the current 'Responding to Ebola-driven conflict: Facilitating dialogue in the Mano River border regions' project, funded by the European Union.

Community Sensitisation

DPDs provide information to communities to raise awareness and sensitise the local populations about sources of conflict within the communities. This has included providing information about current national and regional policies and their implications for citizens living in the border regions, informing people of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and raising awareness of major developments in their districts.

At the height of the Ebola crisis DPDs played very significant roles in their communities in raising awareness around the Ebola virus and how it could be managed. This included informing communities about national and international response mechanisms, including the byelaws implemented as part of the State of Emergency, the quarantine process and restrictions on the movement of people. This community sensitisation helped demystify the taken-for-granted beliefs and broke the cultural barriers that could have led to some of the most pervasive tensions arising from the management of the Ebola crisis.

Advocacy in Pujehun: Case study

In Sierra Leone, Ebola burial protocols continued to be implemented even after the Ebola outbreak had been officially declared over in order to protect against any further outbreaks. This means that all bodies, whether the cause of death was suspected to be Ebola or not, needed to be swabbed and removed by a specialist burial team. However, as the outbreak declined and international assistance departed, the number of designated burial teams was steadily reduced. The remote nature of the border regions and the small number of burial teams means that there was often a delay of 3-5 days to pick-up bodies.

Engagements by the Pujehun DPD highlighted these delays as a prominent driver of tension in the community. The DPD worked with the Pujehun Burial Team Supervisor to successfully advocate for government to decentralise and expand the number of district burial teams from two to four. Increasing the number of burial teams and decentralising them has drastically improved burial team response times in the district. The DPD's early warning of and quick response to the emerging tensions helped mitigate the risk of them needlessly escalating any further.

Facilitating Dialogue

DPDs create safe spaces to facilitate local dialogue and mediation to prevent and mitigate tensions in the border region. This provides all parties with the opportunity to express their grievances and propose possible solutions in a constructive and peaceful manner. It is critical that these dialogues are fully inclusive and provide those who tend to be marginalised or unheard in these processes with the opportunity to present their grievances. Having heard from everyone, the DPDs support all parties to work together to identify common solutions to resolve the tensions. Upon finding a common solution to conflicts, the DPDs continue their engagement with the respective parties to monitor whether the commitments are being implemented and to track how the reconciliation process is going.

Advocacy and early warning

DPDs are supported to channel their findings and the voice of local communities to local and national duty bearers. Being comprised of a range of local people with community trust and goodwill, the DPD has a strong collective voice with which to engage government and security officials and other influential stakeholders. The DPDs strive to embolden these duty bearers to employ more conflict-sensitive approaches, which consider local concerns and needs, when engaging with communities and responding to emergency situations. In working collaboratively with local authorities and security officials the DPDs have positively stimulated effective early responses to local concerns, which could have easily escalated to violent conflict.

The role of Conciliation Resources and national NGO partners

Conciliation Resources works in partnership with the Institute for Research and Democratic Development (IREDD) in Liberia, the Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD) in Sierra Leone, ABC-Development in Guinea and the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Côte d'Ivoire to support the DPDs. Conciliation Resources and these national NGO partners provide the DPDs with the skills and knowledge to implement their work more effectively. Conciliation Resources and partners also assist them with the leverage and connections to access prominent local and national actors. This enables them to better raise the voice of border populations to the national, regional and international level.

This support to improve the effectiveness and impact of the DPDs' work is achieved through a number of different work streams, which includes providing training, capacity-building and shared-learning opportunities; coordinating the DPDs' strategic interventions; and undertaking advocacy with actors that the DPDs themselves are unable to access.

Training and accompaniment

DPD effectiveness is enhanced through the provision of training and resources, expertise and accompaniment from national NGO partners and Conciliation Resources. DPD members are empowered to understand the role of the DPD and be active citizens working for change in their community.

DPD members possess a myriad of pre-existing expertise, which are of immense value to their work, however they do not always have previous knowledge and experience of peacebuilding. It is important to supplement the skills and expertise of the DPD members in a way that makes the most of their pre-existing skills whilst also ensuring their capacity to effectively mitigate local tensions. To guarantee a universal minimum standard, all DPD members are trained in conflict transformation, dialogue and mediation and tools for social accountability.

In addition to this, many of the DPDs, especially those most rooted in remote community areas, have limited prior experience and knowledge of the systematic and formal planning, monitoring, reporting, advocacy, and gender and conflict sensitivity that is required for effective project implementation. The DPDs are therefore also trained and supported to build their skills in these areas. These skills are invaluable to the long-term sustainability of the model.

Whilst each DPD is an individual entity working on their own issues, they collectively comprise a network of 18 platforms spread across four countries. Across this network, there is a huge range of experiences,

approaches and ideas from which other members could learn from to improve the effectiveness of their own work. In recognition of this, Conciliation Resources and partners support the DPDs to undertake peer learning and shared exchange programmes. This is done both through formal workshops but also through strengthening links and communication within the network. For example, the Sierra Leone DPDs are connected through a WhatsApp group that enables them to share information and insights on an ongoing basis.

Coordination

Conciliation Resources and partners support DPDs to think about how they can use their resources to intervene in the most strategic and impactful way. This includes supporting them to identify opportunities for intervention and how to use their financial and human resources to best achieve this. This support is provided remotely, through regular accompaniment in the region and in quarterly review meetings where they plan and budget their upcoming work.

DPDs report their work and lessons on a monthly basis. This allows Conciliation Resources and partners to monitor the progress of their work and the challenges they face. This provides the opportunity to identify ways to overcome barriers to their work in a timely manner.

Advocacy at the national, regional and international level

The DPD model emphasises the need for local ownership of peacebuilding initiatives and promotes local agency in advocating for change in their communities. For this reason, advocacy and duty bearer engagement forms a key element of the work of the DPDs. However, Conciliation Resources and our partners recognise that the DPDs, as locally based actors, have limited capacity and leverage to influence policy at the national, regional and international level. In these instances, we collate the lessons and messages from the

"We listen to the DPD because they are like family. They are our brothers and sisters..."

Seny Lamah (L), who was stigmatised after losing seven family members during the Ebola crisis, explains why she and her community listened to members of the Nzérékoré DPD, such as Hélène Zogbelemou (R) ©Conciliation Resources

actors in the border areas and raise their voices and recommendations to these duty bearers. Where possible, we facilitate some DPD members to participate in national and regional meetings so that they are represented, their role is acknowledged and they are able to verify the messages.

Lessons Learnt – Improving the effectiveness of community peace platforms

Since 2010, the DPDs have faced many challenges but also had significant successes. Learning from these experiences has allowed Conciliation Resources, national NGO partners and the DPD members to continuously modify and adapt our work and how we support one another. Over this time, there have been many lessons however this report has identified eight of the most critical lessons for improving the effectiveness of community peace platforms.

1. Community trust and confidence is key

At the core of the success of the DPD model is that it is owned by and representative of the communities that it serves. This enables timely, well-targeted and relevant interventions as they are able to quickly

identify and respond to the sources of greatest concern and emerging conflicts in their communities. The locally based nature of the DPD provides them with a deep understanding of the social, cultural and political dynamics of the communities they work. This intrinsic knowledge allows for more conflict-sensitive, and therefore effective, interventions.

Most importantly however, the locally owned and representative nature of the DPD enhances their trust amongst the local population. For the DPD to be viewed as representative of the community, it is critical that the members are respected individuals committed to change drawn from every part of the community. To achieve this, when a DPD is established community members, community-based organisations and associations and other local stakeholders are responsible for identifying and nominating the members of the DPD. The diverse, democratic and locally owned nature of membership ensures the DPD, as a collective, is trusted by and has the confidence of all sectors of society. These key characteristics provide the DPD with the ability and legitimacy to bring together and mediate between any divided groups in their community.

In addition, this legitimacy amongst a wide range of the community means that the DPDs are viewed as possessing a

representative voice that can express the concerns and needs of the whole community.

One of the most prominent drivers of tension throughout the Mano River border regions is the mistrust and suspicion that pervades the relationship between local citizens and their local government and security officials. The DPDs use their voice to serve as an intermediary between local authorities and the communities. The DPDs work with local communities to raise awareness and provide information about important issues. They also provide local communities with the skills and confidence to use this information and knowledge to engage with state actors in a proactive and non-violent manner. Over time, this can erode the mistrust and suspicion and lead to a more constructive and collaborative relationship between the local authorities and the local population.

Recommendation: Processes must be established to ensure every sector of the community has a sense of ownership over community peace platforms and they know that they are free to participate in its activities and will be heard.

2. Widening the reach of the DPD

On first glances, the DPDs' influence and work appears to be limited to just 18 border communities. However, in addition to where they are based, the DPDs work in remote communities nearby that ask for their assistance. This allows for the DPDs' efforts and interventions to reach many more people. To reinforce the community-based approach of the DPDs and promote local ownership of initiatives yet still be able to cover multiple communities effectively, the DPDs utilise a focal point system linking them to these more remote border communities.

Each community the DPD works in designates a community member to serve as a focal point who will maintain regular communication with the DPD, alert them to any emerging conflicts and provide updates to the community of the DPD's work. Focal points do not always have to be formal

members of the DPD and in these instances their role is primarily to serve as a liaison between the communities and the DPD without actively being involved in the implementation of the DPD actions.

The focal point system allows for the DPDs to expand the geographical scope and reach of the work so that, as of present, the 18 DPDs work in a total of 170 border region communities. This system also serves to reinforce the linkages between the DPD and the local communities and, in so doing, enhances the early response of DPDs to emerging conflicts.

Recommendation: Decentralising the structure of community peace platforms helps to widen the scope of efforts to more remote communities, furthers local ownership and enables quicker responses to conflict.

3. Recognition of and collaboration with other actors

Community-based peacebuilding initiatives need to be attentive and considerate of the roles, skills and value of pre-existing interventions and the government. DPDs and other similar initiatives must have the self-awareness to recognise not just where they can add value but also their limitations and when other actors are better placed to intervene. By doing this, interventions complement one another rather than unnecessarily duplicating efforts and resources. This complementarity is one of the DPDs' greatest strengths, as explained by Musa Sesay, District Coordinator for the Office of National Security:

"The DPD takes over and does what we [district state authorities] are not able to or find very challenging. They can go places, talk to people and do things we are unable to do. If they weren't doing it, no one would be."

Being rooted within their communities, one of the DPDs main ways of adding value is by

Dialogue in Bossou
Case study

In Bossou, a small town located in a remote corner of Forest Guinea, the residents had heard of the deadly Ebola virus, but knew little about it.

But when a number of people in a neighbouring village died of the disease, fear and rumours quickly spread. Like many communities throughout Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the residents of Bossou were highly suspicious of the government's role with few trusting the sincerity of the government's warnings or response to the crisis.

So when it was announced that an Ebola Treatment Centre was going to be built on the outskirts of the town, there was uproar and fear in the community and tensions rapidly escalated with the local authorities.

The town's Mayor and other local government officials were accused of purposefully bringing Ebola to the community and, in an effort to have them replaced, a group of female Elders attacked his office. Meanwhile Bossou's youths attacked and burnt down the Ebola Treatment Centre on the day that it opened. Tensions were even further exacerbated when the military were sent in to detain the youth and bring the unrest under control.

With tensions rapidly escalating, key community members turned to the local Nzérékoré DPD for help. They quickly responded, and their first priority was to address the rumours about the Ebola virus and how it was spread.

Using this as the entry point for discussions, the DPD dedicated itself to improving the relationship and trust between the community and government authorities. The DPD engaged all sides individually and encouraged them to reflect on their concerns before bringing everyone together to collectively share their grievances and explore common solutions. A mutual understanding of one another began to develop and the mistrust and suspicion that had pervaded relationships between the community and local authorities slowly subsided.

The easing of tensions between the community and local authorities also meant that a humanitarian response could be safely implemented in Bossou. Nyanda Bamba a youth leader involved in the attack on the Ebola Treatment Centre, said:

"From that day [the day we spoke to the DPD], when we saw Ebola vehicles coming through here, we did not touch them."

Mayor Cyrille Lizo Doré, who is now once again welcomed by the community, credits the DPD with reconciling and bringing peace to Bossou. He praises them for enhancing trust and confidence within the community and says:

"We are very satisfied with the DPD's work, very satisfied. Thanks to this platform, where the people of Bossou were not talking to each other, today we talk… There is real harmony in the community today thanks to this platform."

Watch the Dialogue for Peace: reconciling communities post-Ebola *short film to learn more about the DPD's work in Bossou.*

using their trust amongst the community to serve as an intermediary and link between the community and other actors who are perhaps less trusted. Therefore, whilst the DPD may lack the knowledge or capacity to deal with a particular issue, they play a key role in opening up communication channels and creating safe spaces for better placed actors to implement their work. In turn other actors recognise and understand the role of the DPD and regularly refer cases to them.

In this manner, the DPD has played a key role in reinforcing the social contract between governments and their citizens by enabling state service delivery. A Koinadugu District Councillor, Hajia Bintu Mansaray, summarised this by stating that:

> *"As representatives of the government, it can be difficult to talk to the community. They think you are just doing politics. They listen more when they hear it from the DPD who are not seen as politicians and can act as middlemen...They help us fulfil our duties by providing us and the community with opportunities to interact, raise issues and share stories without aggression."*

During the Ebola crisis, historic weak governance and a lack of trust between the population and the region's governments meant many were sceptical of the Ebola virus and questioned the motives for the subsequent responses to the crisis. The rampant rumours and misinformation at the time led to significant tensions between communities and those charged with enacting national and international responses to the crisis. This lack of trust hampered the emergency response as international humanitarian organisations and health, security and government officials faced difficulty in accessing communities and carrying out their duties. The imposition of quarantines, introduction of controlled burials, the closure of markets and restrictions on movement were just some of the responses that the communities rebelled

against. The DPDs worked in affected communities to sensitise the population and create the requisite space for officials to go and implement their work. This has continued in the wake of the Ebola crisis as the legacies of mistrust continue, for example the Tewor District DPD in Liberia negotiated access for UNICEF officials to implement a Polio vaccination programme.

Recommendation: Community peace platforms must understand and respect the roles of other initiatives in the community. Community peace platforms should seek collaboration with other actors, recognise the respective strengths and weaknesses and identify who is best placed to do what.

4. Transparency and regular communication enhances trust between actors

It is only by having constructive and cordial relations based on mutual respect and trust that there can be effective collaboration and complementarity in actions. To mitigate any notions of competition or rivalry between actors it is critical that they are transparent and regularly communicate with one another. Therefore, to enhance this trust and understanding of one another it is crucial that the DPDs, local authorities and other community-based actors engage with one another proactively, persistently and in a non-adversarial manner.

The importance of this has been reinforced to Conciliation Resources, our partners and the DPDs on a number of occasions over the past six years. For example, as touched upon above, the DPDs are aware and committed to strengthening the social contract between governments and their citizens by providing an enabling environment for the implementation of state service delivery. However, if insufficiently explained these actions can be seen as challenging the authority of local government. In Kolahun, Liberia, the District Commissioner's office initially perceived the DPD as trying to undermine them and accused them of having a future political agenda. This

DPDs have established cordial and trusted relationships with local security and government officials by regularly sharing information. Here, a security official engages with the Toe Town DPD and the wider community ©Conciliation Resources

misunderstanding arose because the DPD members had not communicated their intentions, purpose and activities to the local authorities from the outset effectively enough. Instead, the Commissioner's Office was hearing indirectly about the DPDs work and interventions from third parties. A series of engagements clarified the situation and repaired the DPD's relationship with the Commissioner's Office and the DPD now works in harmony with them and other local authorities.

Instances such as this have been relayed to other DPDs to reinforce the importance of transparency and regular information sharing between themselves and other actors. As part of this, every DPD is encouraged to:

○ Inform actors of all planned activities whether it is an issue that directly concerns them or not;
○ Provide a post activity summary of all activities, covering discussion points and agreed follow-up actions;
○ Set up monthly or weekly briefings with relevant actors, including local authorities, highlighting any changes and developments in the community.

To further systematise this sharing of information and transparency between different community actors, DPD members have been invited to participate and join

other networks and community structures. For example, many of the DPD members are part of local District Watch Teams, District Security Meetings or the Mano River Union's Joint Border Security and Confidence Building Units. This proactive, regular and sincere information sharing has been critical in creating durable relations between the DPDs and other actors in the border regions, including local authorities. This mutual trust provides the foundation for all subsequent collaboration between actors.

Recommendation: Community peace platforms must liaise with all other actors in the community from the outset and continue to share information regularly and proactively throughout the course of their work. If possible, this should be systematised through the establishment of official meetings.

5. Resolving conflicts is a continuous process

The DPDs' work is most effective when attention is given to the whole process of addressing tensions rather than on the implementation of discrete events or activities. While mediation and dialogue sessions are critical in finding a durable solution to local conflicts, they are just part of a much wider and often less visible process that includes continuous

engagement; identification and analysis of issues; awareness raising; research; and relationship building so that different stakeholders are happy to even participate in subsequent dialogues. A durable solution to conflicts can only be achieved when attention and support is provided at all stages of this process

Elements of the effective process include:

○ Creating a safe space to listen to communities' issues and concerns.
○ Mapping issues through community forums and events and identifying areas where the DPD can make a difference.
○ Identifying information gaps and sensitising communities to address those gaps.
○ Developing trust and learning more about where tensions lie through these sensitisations and discussions.
○ Identifying key stakeholders and preparing them for discussions with other parties / communities.
○ Facilitating a series of inclusive dialogues with the concerned parties to jointly identify solutions to the different tensions and grievances ensuring they are locally and collaboratively developed.

Diagram showing that dialogue is just one stage of the conflict resolution process ©Conciliation Resources

○ DPDs continue to engage the concerned parties and monitor the implementation of the mutually agreed solutions to ensure accountability, and reconciliation.

Recommendation: Encouraging community peace platforms to understand conflict resolution as a continuous process rather than one-off activities and events increases the prospects for reconciliation at the local level.

6. Flexibility and adaptability improves effectiveness

Across the four countries, there is a huge diversity in local capacities, levels of infrastructure, cultural practices, the type of tensions being faced and the presence of pre-existing dialogue mechanisms. All of these factors and more influence how the DPDs can work most effectively and, as such, it is critical that the DPDs do not proscribe to a pre-defined rigid model and are instead able to adapt to the most appropriate approach for their particular context and needs.

Due to the nature of the decentralised governance practice in Sierra Leone, DPDs in Sierra Leone tend to be based in their respective district capitals so that they benefit from easier physical access to local authorities. Their presence in the district capitals also means that they have longer standing relationships with the local authorities. This has proved effective in enabling local authorities to participate effectively in listening more to community grievances and responding proactively. However, in contrast, government is less decentralised in Liberia than in Sierra Leone and, as such, it offers little benefit for the DPDs to be based in district capitals. Instead, DPDs in Liberia are based in the 'hotspot' communities that are most prone to tensions and conflict. This means that the DPDs in Liberia are more rooted in the communities that they work and, as such, are able to respond even more promptly to emerging tensions.
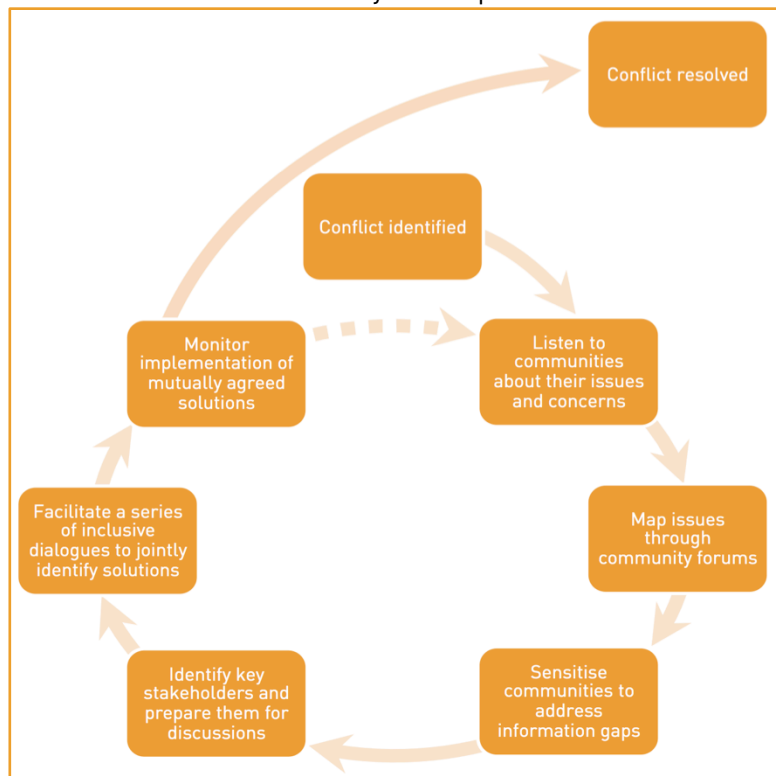
This comparative example highlights how the flexibility of the DPD model and other similar community peace platforms allows for the most appropriate and effective approach for each particular context. Having said that, community peace platforms should constantly be looking to improve and acknowledge that each different operating model has specific strengths and weaknesses. Shared exchanges between these platforms offers an invaluable space to learn from one another and see how these alternative strategies could supplement their work.

Recommendation: Avoid proscribing to a rigid model across highly diverse contexts. Models and mechanisms must be flexible and adaptable to ensure that the most appropriate response model is used for each context.

7. Gender balance enhances gender sensitive responses

The DPDs strive for a gender balance amongst its members and the various leadership positions. As part of this, each DPD has guaranteed that both sexes comprise a minimum of 30 per cent of its membership. Given the deeply patriarchal society in the region, this has served to enhance women's active participation in the DPD and their empowerment to be effective agents for change in their communities. One of the most significant benefits of this gender balance within the DPD has been the ability with which the DPD has been able to reach and impact the lives of women in the community.

A gender balance amongst the DPD ensures that it is representative of the whole population and therefore reinforces their legitimacy. The messages that the DPD are spreading are therefore able to reach a wider section of the population. On countless occasions, women community members have stated that they listen and adhere to the advice of the DPD because there are women in the group who corroborate the messages.

A gender balance in the DPD has also served to provide alternative outreach methods within the community. Given the patriarchal nature of society in the Mano River Region, women do not always feel comfortable attending or actively participating in community events. It is clear that women DPD members are able to reach sectors of society, who would otherwise not engage with the DPD. For example, in Forécariah, Guinea a group of women ran away during the Ebola crisis to hide from the health authorities and international NGOs through fear that they may be suspected of being infected and thus taken away. The only way it was possible for the DPD to locate and talk to this group of women was by the women DPD members taking the lead. After gaining their trust and building their confidence, the women began attending DPD dialogue sessions and eventually returned to the community.

Active women's participation in the DPD has clearly raised women's engagement in the work of the DPDs and allows for the raising of gender issues as information is shared from, with and through different channels. It is therefore imperative to have a gender balance not just amongst the membership as a whole but also amongst the roles and duties assigned.

Recommendation: Community peace platforms benefit from setting minimum quotas for both sexes regarding membership and participation in activities. Both men and women should be encouraged to raise their voice and listen to each other so that all voices are heard.

8. Long-term sustainability

One of the greatest challenges to the long-term sustainability of the DPD model and many other community-based interventions is retaining the internal capacity, knowledge and motivation necessary for them to work effectively.

Levels of commitment and involvement are variable, with all DPDs having some members who are less motivated and the

burden of work falling on a number of more committed individuals in the network. We have repeatedly seen that over time DPD membership falls as the less committed members drop out. For example, many of the DPDs are initially formed with 30-40 members, however over the next one or two years the membership tends to fall to a core of between 12 and 24 people. So long as the number of members stabilises, this process of members dropping out should not necessarily be alarming as all the DPDs report that their effectiveness is higher having fewer more committed members than it was when they first began. Having said that, the voluntary nature of the DPD poses a threat in the long-term for a further decline in the number of members as it raises the risk that income-generating activities may need to take priority.

In addition, whilst the commitment of the remaining members to being actors for change in their communities is an undoubted strength of the model, it can also act as a weakness. Most DPD members are already activists and civil society actors who are extremely active in their organisations and communities. The DPD structure relies on well-connected, informed and trusted community members but these individuals are, by their very nature, extremely busy with a number of commitments. Therefore, there is a risk that some DPD members are over-engaged with other commitments and severely limited in the time they can give to the DPD.

To prevent further decline in the number of DPD members and to allow already busy DPD members to easily engage with the DPD's work, it is critical that any unnecessary burdens and potential disincentives that hinder the efficiency of the DPD are removed. This requires planning for the sustainability of the model from the outset and providing them with the necessary knowledge and physical resources to undertake their work efficiently in the long-term. The DPDs have also been encouraged to use the focal point system to further decentralise themselves and thus reduce travel times and costs. The DPD

model also ensures that the social capital and knowledge of the DPDs is diversified and spread throughout the platform rather than concentrated in a few individuals. This mitigates the risk to the DPDs long-term viability caused by individual members becoming less active over time, whether it is through a fall in motivation or commitments to other initiatives. This ensures that any one person's lack of availability or departure from the DPD does not overly limit the capacity of the DPD to work because at least one other member will possess the same knowledge and skills.

By doing this, the capacity, knowledge and desire to be positive agents of change has endured beyond the lifespan of previous projects and this will hopefully continue in the future. This was evident no more so than at the outbreak of the Ebola crisis when they undertook hugely inspiring and unfunded work to address misinformation and tensions arising out of the epidemic using the foundations and skills they had developed with Conciliation Resources and partners a few years previously. It was their commitment and work to respond to the needs of their local communities that directly led to the design and implementation of the EU-funded project that has looked to mitigate the escalation of societal tensions during and after the epidemic. Therefore, whilst it should be anticipated that the scope of the DPD interventions will decline in the absence of resources, the DPDs will remain ready to mobilise and have the necessary capacity to intervene whenever their community most needs them.

Recommendation: There must be recognition that without funding, there will be a decline in membership and activity levels. However, community peace platforms must be empowered to maintain their presence and respond at times of need regardless of funding. This can be achieved through the incorporation of long-term sustainability plans into initial project design.

Summary

For decades the border districts of the Mano River region countries – Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone – have been prone to instability and insecurity. Conciliation Resources and our national NGO partners have looked to help alleviate tensions in the these areas by building the capacity of local people so that they are empowered and have the necessary skills to be positive agents for change in their community.

We support a network of 18 community-based peacebuilding structures, called District Platforms for Dialogue (DPDs). These are comprised of trusted community members who are trained to identify areas of conflict, facilitate dialogue and advocate duty bearers for change. Over the past six years, our experiences have highlighted eight key lessons for improving the effectiveness of community platforms:

1. **Community trust and confidence is key:** At the heart of the success of the DPD model is that it is owned by and representative of the communities that it serves, enabling timely well-targeted and relevant interventions.

2. **Widening the reach:** Decentralising the structure of community platforms enables them to reach more remote communities, furthers local ownership and enables quicker responses to conflict.

3. **Recognise and collaborate with other actors:** Community-based peacebuilding initiatives need to consider the roles, skills and values of other initiatives in the community and recognise where they can add value.

4. **Transparency and communication between community actors:** Central to effective collaboration between actors is developing a relationship based on mutual respect and trust. Vital to achieving this is the proactive, regular and sincere sharing of information and complete transparency.

5. **Conflict resolution is a continuous process:** The work of community platforms is most effective when they view and understand conflict resolution as a continuous process rather than a series of one-off activities.

6. **Flexibility and adaptability:** Across the Mano River region, communities have vastly different capacities and needs. To enhance effectiveness, it is critical that community platforms are not forced to work to a pre-defined model but are able to adapt their approach for their particular context.

7. **A gender balance:** The DPDs strive for a gender balance amongst their members and leadership positions. Men and women are empowered to raise their voice and listen to each other so that all voices are heard. This gender balance enables alternative channels of outreach and sets the foundations for gender issues to be raised.

8. **Long-term sustainability:** Long-term sustainability has to be a key factor in the initial design of community-based programmes. Community peace platforms must be empowered to maintain their presence and respond at times of need regardless of funding, which can in part be achieved by removing any barriers to their work and diversifying the skills and knowledge throughout the platform.

CONCILIATION RESOURCES
working together for peace