

Vulnerability of border communities: are we protecting them enough?

Mariama Conteh, Conciliation Resources (2005)

The past decade has seen major conflict across the sub-region. Whichever way one approaches this history that all countries in the Mano River Union and even beyond share, it is obvious that the conflicts that we have witnessed are highly interconnected. In many ways the border areas between Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and between Guinea, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire have not only often been the focus of fighting with heavy impact on the civilian population and local structures, the border areas have also been areas of constant movement and exchange during the time of conflict, exactly because of the strategic advantages that the proximity of borders offered.

While this history points to the particular value inherent of border areas and the people living there, the role that the communities themselves in this area play is apparently not yet fully valued in Sierra Leone and possibly even sub-regionally. These are the communities where one finds that the foundational principles of peace, unity and community which are at the basis of the African Union, ECOWAS and the Mano River Union (MRU) in daily life become realities. In a region that has been plagued by the interrelated violent conflicts in recent years, these are communities that we should give particular attention. They are vulnerable because of their physical, social and political distances from the centre and should particularly be included because of their strategic position to enhance peaceful co-existence.

What we have in the communities that border Liberia and Guinea, is an illustration of the divisive character of the colonial boundaries that separate our states. These are rich cultural centres. People cross over the borders on a daily basis, farming on one side and living on the other. The cultural linkages between people of the same or affiliated ethnic groups that were arbitrarily separated mean that because of their language and other cultural practices people move back and forth across the borders. Here we see the embodiment of the Mano River Union in spirit. It ceases to be mere rhetoric. Enhancing these linkages is certainly a bold step towards a more communal and peaceful sub-region.

Trade is another particular value of communities at the border that are in a much better position to exchange goods than those in the interior.

Koindu International Market established in 1932 was one of the most thriving markets in the sub-region. Traders from Liberia and Guinea and as far away as Senegal came to market and buy goods. It is such interactions that help to bring a sense of solidarity between different people that governments can use as a tool in developing systems of peaceful co-existence in these communities. These sub-regional gatherings are the height of diplomacy and international relations; the practical, less abstract manifestation. It is such promise that the MRU governments should build on and encourage as a basis of cordial neighbourly relations, but also national and sub-regional security and stability.

It is when these senses of solidarity are developed that we may see less of the violence crossing borders that we have done in the past. When you have good relationship with your neighbours and you see their house burning, you will help put out the fire, both because you are genuinely concerned about the wellbeing of your neighbours as well as the knowledge that if their fire is not put out, your house will also burn. We would then not have situations such as those we had in the recent past where arms are smuggled inside palm oil containers out of Sierra Leone for Liberian fighters to hand over so they could receive disarmament packages while they hold on to their original weapons.

But despite their cultural value and particular importance to the security of the country, some of these strategic communities are left vulnerable. The state does not seem to reach them or when it does, the agenda does not necessarily seem to focus on lending support to the local communities to build stability based on cooperation, communication and exchange with the neighbours. In consequence the communities are left vulnerable to the security risks of their particular environment and location as well as the state's inability, for various reasons, to operate as effectively at their periphery as they would do at their centre.

We do not see them nurture these border communities. If we take Sulima in Pujehun District which borders Liberia, for example, one finds that they trade in Liberian dollars. You will be much more likely to find someone speaking Liberian English than Krio. Another example is Kailahun where trading of palm oil for higher prices to Guinea, particularly during times of scarcity in Sierra Leone causes consternation within the local population and government. While it is important to work towards consolidating the national economy and ensure the provision of goods especially for daily needs across the country, we need to comprehend the levels of marginalization of these

areas that has made it necessary for them to make closer linkages across their national borders, and also there may be reciprocal gains.

Governments also need to look at ways they can make it more attractive for these communities to engage more with Sierra Leone. If the roads are good and communications infrastructure is better then this would be more likely. Similarly there needs to be inclusion at the social and political level. But for now it would not make much economic sense for producers in Koidu to try to sell their palm oil in Freetown rather than in Guinea because of the high cost of transporting these goods inside Sierra Leone. People have to survive and they will make choices that maximize this possibility.

The results of marginalization can be disastrous and we are all too familiar with this in Sierra Leone. The failure of the state to engage sufficiently with some of the problems in these border communities also enhances their vulnerability to threats to their security. A current example is the border dispute occurring in Yenga, a village in Kailahun District that borders Guinea. Kailahun is one of the most strategic points in terms of sub-regional security for Sierra Leone as the district shares a border both with both Guinea and Liberia.

Since the end of the war in 2002 the Yenga border dispute became an issue in Sierra Leone. Guinean soldiers had advanced well into Yenga which was supposed to be Sierra Leonean territory. Though tensions rose, Guinean soldiers eventually moved further back, but still remained in Yenga. The matter was resolved diplomatically when President Lansana Conteh publicly acknowledged that Yenga was Sierra Leonean territory. This led to a signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in Conakry on the 2nd of September 2004 which stated that the village of Yenga belongs to Sierra Leone. The river which was once thought to mark the boundary between the two countries – the Makona Moa River – was stipulated in the agreement to belong to the Republic of Guinea.

These boundaries were defined and contained in the Anglo-French Treaty of 1912 and renewed by the agreement signed between Sierra Leone and Guinea in 1972. At a meeting of the three Mano River Union heads of state held in Koidu in March 2005 it was agreed that the boundary was after the river and had previously been marked by beacons. These beacons were subsequently lost but now, under the guidance of the UN, Guinea and Sierra Leone agreed to have cartographers redraw the boundary. President Alhaji Ahmed Tejan Kabbah then declared in Sierra Leone that Yenga was no longer an issue.

But much evidence shows otherwise. This is where the vulnerability of such border communities are highlighted. The diplomatic and governmental definitions of what constitutes a concern, and that of the community affected do not seem to meet. One possible reason for this mismatch lies in understanding of the issue as a border issue. For the government it appears to be about demarcation of territory, for the communities it is more about access to and control over their resources. For the local communities the problem is not even necessarily that the Guinean soldiers are based in Yenga, but that they are farming on people's land without permission and hindering the community from using the land. At one time soldiers had apologized for their action and asked that the community allow them to harvest their crops and then they would leave. Unfortunately once they harvested they proceeded in ploughing even larger areas for planting the next season.

For a community that relies predominantly on farming for both its income and subsistence this is a major blow. But what is more important is there seems to be intimidation and lack of respect in this type of action by the Guinean soldiers involved. They are armed and they leave civilians feeling powerless to make decisions over their own property. There is a tank on top of a hill that gives the most clear warning. What makes this interesting is that Guinean soldiers were invited by the Sierra Leonean government in to help in the defence of these border areas that were of strategic security importance to both countries. In 1993 the first base for Guinean soldiers was Nongowa, another border crossing in Kailahun. A base was set up in Yenga in 1994. Their presence in Yenga was an act that illustrates the power of cooperation in the Mano River Union and they were instrumental to the countries defence. Somehow the situation has changed and it is leaving many perplexed. The presence of the soldiers and their behaviour has now become an issue about respect and cordial neighbourly interaction.

The recent detention of a group of women from the Mano River Women's Peace Network, followed a few days later by the detention of UNAMSIL should alert us to the fact that there are still questions that need to be asked. This adds to the feelings of vulnerability in the community in Yenga in particular, in neighbouring villages, and in the towns of Koindu and Kailahun,. For some people this is turning to frustration and they do not feel protected by their own security forces who are severely limited in capacity. Here we see that the decisions made at state level by the presidents are not translated into reality at local level in terms of the behaviour of the soldiers which impacts on

the livelihood of ordinary people.

Guinean and Sierra Leone governments have clearly placed great importance on the need to resolve this dispute, and they have certainly made special efforts to do so. It is likely that the situation is highly complex at diplomatic and governmental levels, possibly beyond the comprehension of the majority of the Sierra Leonean population. As it may take some time for politicians to resolve the issue at governmental level, it may be useful to make attempts to better the civil – military relations in the area already in the meantime. Tensions are rising and we should not wait to see what the consequences of marginalization and frustration can be. Perhaps the challenge now is for civil society to find a way to work with the government and stakeholders at local level in achieving this goal. This way the tensions in Yenga can be eased. It is also important that civil society groups search for solutions that can be documented and formalized. There is a wonderful friendship and fraternity between Presidents Kabbah and Conteh, but should the actors change we could be dealing with a different scenario and this is why it is crucial for the local population and for peace at this level to ensure legitimization of processes and decisions. This is a case where we hope to see some early response to the early warning that we observe. Action in this respect will go some way in illustrating that we are placing the importance and value on these vulnerable communities that is due to them.