

*Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has been active in both anti-corruption and peacebuilding in Sierra Leone and Liberia for many years. In this article, two senior staff members draw on SFCG's experiences in the field to describe approaches for implementing programmes aiming to improve governance and strengthen peace consolidation*

# Battling corruption in the search for peace: The Common Ground Approach

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In Sierra Leone and Liberia, poor government communication strategies and the manipulation of access to information support exclusionary politics, while narrow and restrictive decision-making channels shroud public actions in secrecy, all of which paves the way for corruption and conflict. These practices have roots in the way both countries have historically been governed which exacerbated popular grievances and helped plant seeds for violent conflicts beginning in Liberia in 1989 and spreading to Sierra Leone in 1991.

Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an international NGO working to transform the way the world deals with conflict, has increased citizens' access to information in the management and utilisation of public funds, mainstreamed diverse voices in governance and reform processes, and modelled behaviours to ensure the long-term viability of the peace process. The following article outlines some tools that SFCG has used in post-conflict contexts in West Africa as a means of peace consolidation. It offers guiding principles for reflection for institutions and individuals working on anti-corruption and peacebuilding.

Liberia and Sierra Leone, like many other post-colonial African countries, inherited flawed governance institutions and a system of government based on the theory of unitary sovereignty. Within this political framework, power and political authority are heavily centralised and rest within the executive branch. This power structure privileges state officials with unlimited access to state resources, which they use to enhance a patron-client political system

that excludes a great portion of the population from access to decision-making processes and public resources. These factors act as a major source of intra-state conflicts across Africa, including Liberia and Sierra Leone.

As these conflicts raged, so did the illegal extraction of natural resources, subsequently lining the pockets of rich warlords and their supporters. In Liberia, combatants engaged in illegal harvesting of timber, rubber and gold, while in Sierra Leone, the illegal mining of precious stones was the common extractive. In both cases, natural resources facilitated the procurement of arms, prolonging the wars. Although these violent conflicts have ended, the unregulated and mismanaged extraction of natural resources could potentially fuel renewed violence. In this regard, strengthening accountability in the public sector, increasing transparency, and building an engaged civil society are key factors in maintaining peace.

## Increasing access to public information

Historically, citizens from Liberia and Sierra Leone have not experienced participatory governance. Lack of access to political decision-making processes or public information has resulted in the limited opportunity for citizens to actively engage in their country's government practices.

Access to credible and timely public information establishes the foundation for an informed, active citizenry to hold

public officials accountable for the allocation, utilisation and management of resources. Elections in 2004 and 2005 in Sierra Leone and Liberia, respectively, ushered in high expectations of development and service delivery, creating conflicts between citizens and authorities who could not deliver. However, the



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evolution of community radio in both countries has proven an integral platform in keeping the national rebuilding processes on track.

Community radio has the ability to mainstream the voices and concerns of ordinary people. This builds the base of societal knowledge, creating a more dynamic, engaged and representative public sphere. Community radio is therefore a key component in developing an inclusive, accountable and transparent relationship between citizens and government. To leverage this strength, SFCG has worked with communities and their radio stations to improve the organisational and programmatic capacity of community radios to provide information to citizens on government budget allocation and expenditure.

In Sierra Leone, SFCG uses media tools such as *Accountability Now*, a radio programme which strengthens government-to-constituent service delivery by

improving communication between the two sides around the issue of financial management of local councils. When the local councils were created in Sierra Leone, high expectations arose for development. However, many of these councils have not delivered results. This shortfall occurred partly because the local councils feel obliged to report to their donors as opposed to their constituents. However, their elusive approach and lack of transparency resulted in broader implications for peacebuilding. Even though laws required local councils to publish their income and expenditure statements, most local councils failed to comply, breeding mistrust and causing communities to demand clarification for their shortfalls in the redevelopment process.

In response to this problem, *Accountability Now* provides information on the income and expenditures of local councils, presenting their prepared financial statements with supporting analysis from a diversity of voices. Civil society groups have followed up on the broadcasts by visiting development locations to independently verify the quality and quantity of inputs matched to outputs. Thanks to the information publicised in *Accountability Now*, some councils taking part in corrupt practices have been exposed and unfit public officials terminated. *Accountability Now* has also mounted community pressure on councils to improve performance and explain their actions to constituents. By facilitating discussion within and between communities *Accountability Now* prompts more accountable and transparent behaviour by leaders and citizens alike. As communities begin to ask more informed questions about how their taxes are being spent and, in exercising this oversight, the community members grow more comfortable with paying their taxes.

### Mainstreaming citizens voices in governance

A second tool used by SFCG is town-hall meetings, which provide a forum for discussion that brings together lawmakers, local authorities, civil society and citizens. Undertaken by SFCG in partnership with local civil society organisations, these forums are designed to open up dialogue on the utilisation of development funds allocated to local government and to build the relationship between civil society and local authorities. During these meetings, which

are broadcast live via radio, citizens can speak directly to their leaders and contribute to the decision-making process.

These platforms have stimulated the demand for better accountability of development funds and reduced the communication gaps between local government, citizens and civil society. In Sierra Leone, for example, townhall meetings on the progress made around basic service provision (such as food, roads and water supply) ensured the inclusion of diverse voices, bringing women, youth, civil society leaders face-to-face with government officials at all levels to engage in the monitoring of services. Each meeting covered the priorities and action plans of the councils, including the reading of the financial statements. This offered citizens the opportunity to review councillors' proposals, with time for discussion at the end.

It should be pointed out that these forums were in no way designed to be "name and shame" meetings. Part of SFCG's philosophy is that common ground must be established between the government, citizens and civil society to ensure the proper functioning of post-conflict societies. It was emphasised during these meetings that civil society has a role in encouraging government officials to enhance transparency and

accountability, and that this role need not be an adversarial engagement. In this regard, SFCG played a facilitating role; building trust into these forums



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was critical to their success. Prior to each meeting, the facilitators met with the participating panellists to ensure that the format and agenda matched the interests and needs of the forum. These pre-meetings helped to ensure that the sessions were perceived as a safe forum for dialogue and would not be used in an adversarial way that might cause participants to withdraw from the activity.

### Modelling behaviours

While institutional change is essential for the consolidation of peace in West Africa, change at the personal and communal level is equally critical. Radio soap operas are a third tool that SFCG uses toward this end. Positive characters and scenes depicting honesty, accountability and transparency in the management of community funds offer new models of behaviour and leadership. The use of satire brings humour to otherwise sensitive subjects.



PHOTO: SFCG

*Citizens waiting in line to ask questions of their Senators and Representatives about development funding in Gbarnga, Liberia*





*A town hall meeting with lawmakers, civil society, and citizens in Gbarnga, Liberia*

In Liberia, SFCG produces a radio soap called *Today is not Tomorrow* (TNT). *The Independent Newspaper's* July 4th, 2007 edition referred to TNT as the best drama dealing with corruption in Liberia. The storyline depicts a negative character using his political connections and wealth to mismanage the community development funds. Through a community audit the report

finds that he has embezzled a large portion of the money. The community demands that he goes to court where he is found guilty and given a ten-year sentence – a surprising outcome, as punishment for such corrupt acts is new to these communities. In a 2008 internal assessment, both men and women interviewed agreed that the issues covered in TNT are extraordinarily relevant to their lives and have taught them to deal with these issues in a more constructive manner.

Most participants relayed that they now understand the dynamics of corruption more clearly and this has impacted the way in which they have engaged with their communities. One man shared that when elected chairman of the community, he chose not to engage in corruption largely because of what he learned from the drama. Other stated impacts include women receiving more respect from men, greater acceptance of marginalised groups, increased youth participation in community decision-making and more accountability among local authorities.

*"What I have learned from the series of dramas that I have listened to is change in mind, change in attitude. The drama has taught me that there should be a change in the way we handle positions, projects and central funds now from the way we used to handle them in the past. That is to do away with corruption and work hard to build our nation."*

Focus Group Participant, Internal Assessment, of TNT, 2008

### **Lessons learned/Guiding principles**

Both Sierra Leone and Liberia are fragile states, and access to the information that the government uses to make key decisions, while much improved through a diversified media landscape, remains constricted. SFCG strives to provide access to information to stimulate broader participation in decision-making.

Experience in both countries has shown that the narrow channel of representation and communication has created a situation ripe for social exclusion, as well as a political environment in which the resolution of grievances has proven difficult. In the absence of a space and mechanism to voice dissenting views and injustices, citizens resort to violence. SFCG has applied the following principles to guide its anti-corruption interventions:

#### *1. Managing expectations*

Without serving as a mouth-piece for the government, SFCG's media products convey messages that manage expectations in terms of the challenges

that anti-corruption interventions are faced with, as well as the role and responsibilities of citizens in combating corruption. To ensure that SFCG is not a mouth-piece, media products intentionally reflect a diversity of voices including government, civil society and members of the community from different parts of the country.

#### 2. Maintaining neutrality

SFCG remains neutral in the conflicts and dynamics surrounding corruption. Rather than taking sides SFCG seeks to encourage and enhance ongoing conversations by mainstreaming the many different and oftentimes marginalised voices in society. In post-conflict contexts that are highly polarised and divided along ethnic and party lines, maintaining neutrality is critical as it lends the moral authority to organise and convene diverse actors to talk about sensitive issues dealing with corruption.

#### 3. Creating the demand side of governance

After violent conflicts, there is a general consensus among citizens, calling for change so they might enjoy the dividends of peace. At the same time, there often exists a disconnect between the desire for change and how that change is supposed to come about. In response to this gap, SFCG seeks to build a critical mass of diverse actors with the requisite skills to demand better governance and accountability. This is achieved through the integration of outreach programmes such as facilitating town hall meetings that are linked to the media.

#### 4. Building alliances from within

While there may be resistance to change, there are always individuals who, despite being part of the system, will desire and work for change. SFCG identifies such people and strategically engages them around key issues of accountability and transparency. Leveraging their influence and contacts, SFCG can access critical information and maintain a status as a neutral actor as compared to those who would resist change and maintain the status quo.

#### 5. Gender-sensitivity

Corruption and the mismanagement of resources is gender neutral, but interventions addressing corruption need to be gender-sensitive, reporting equally on the involvement of men and women in corrupt practices that misdirect re-

sources, subsequently undermining efforts towards achieving and maintaining peace. Likewise, the voice and input of women on issues dealing with corruption should carry equal weight and command the same influence as men on this important social issue. The public platforms and mechanisms for addressing such issues exist for all citizens to take up issues of corruption with their leaders, irrespective of their gender. Equally, those leaders should have the opportunity to respond, and should do so with proportionate concern for issues raised by both men and women.

### Challenges

#### 1. Capturing results

Showing the direct correlation between citizens' access to information and their demand for good governance, particularly on anti-corruption issues, continues to act as an ongoing challenge. Developing a system to monitor and document the results of strategic communication in a systematic way remains imperative, particularly given that the inability to show results serves as a disincentive for making further demands.

#### 2. Translating knowledge into action

Where individuals and communities lack accountability in governance, the objective is to provide them with the skills necessary for translating information into action. Yet, in a poverty-stricken environment where people live day-to-day, commitment to a higher level of engagement often proves challenging.

#### 3. Strengthening the supply side of governance

The demand for good governance goes hand-in-hand with the ability and political will of the government to respond. Because political elites largely benefit from unjust economic and social structures, convincing them that their long-term political survival depends on participatory and accountable leadership requires a shift in mind-set that often takes time.

#### 4. One size does not fit all

While SFCG's approach has been to broaden the channel of communication and representation in decision-making processes, one size does not fit all. How communities conceptualise and prac-


tice representation should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

#### 5. Understanding social dynamics in information generation

The way in which information is generated and communicated is integrally tied to the social and cultural dynamics of a community. While radio has proven to be an important channel for information dissemination, understanding the social dynamics of information processing and utilisation is becoming a growing challenge for development communicators.

### Conclusion

Ensuring structures and systems that support trust, accountability and transparency in governance is fundamental in the peacebuilding process. When violence subsides, the focus is normally on addressing the immediate problems that led to the war or could promote a relapse into conflict. However, the issues of access to information, collaborative voices in inclusive decision-making and respect for human rights are the hallmarks of enduring peacebuilding.

Effective service and information delivery mechanisms are essential for two reasons: first, such mechanisms make the government as well as local leaders more credible in the eyes of their constituents. Secondly, it also helps to mobilise support from the constituents for their government once they know that these services are reaching them in a transparent and accountable manner. By bringing these to the foreground through a focus on accountability and transparency the rule of law will build and reinvigorate civil society to mobilize a healthy relationship with government for development. 

### Bibliography

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