Search for Common Ground

EMPOWERING YOUTH TO BE ACTORS OF NON-VIOLENCE IN GUINEA

Children & Youth Case Study Series

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Introduction

In November 2010, for the first time in history, the people of Guinea went to the polls to vote in the country's first trule democratic election. The election was marked by a high voter turnout, and international observers deemed it transparent and credible. The elections saw the victory of Alpha Condé, leader of the *Rassemblement du Peuple de Guinée* Party, over his rival Cellou Dalein Diallo, president of the *Union des Forces Démocratiques de Guinée*. It was truly a new dawn for Guinea, and youth throughout the country dared to hope for a new future.

But despite the overall success of the electoral process, protests and violent ethno-political clashes marred the road to elections. The government imposed a state of emergency for ten days. Additionally, 2011 saw deep disagreement between the ruling party and the opposition over holding legislative elections as well as over controversies regarding the revision of voters' lists and the composition of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI).

MAP OF GUINEA, FROM NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

The electoral process exposed the deep divisions of Guinean society, further weakening trust between communities and political actors. In a country where the median age is only 18 years of age, Guinean youth under the aged of 25, which accounts for more than 60% of the population, were the primary victims of this social divide. In the period before and after the elections, young Guineans emerged as particularly vulnerable to political manipulation. Exposed to violence and encouraged to take part in it through acts of vandalism and protests, the actions of the youth served to further weaken an already fragile social fabric and ultimately undermine peacebuilding attempts. Moreover, high youth unemployment rates (reaching 60% according to government sources), chronic insecurity, and lackluster governance marked by corruption and impunity, have all driven wedges to deepen socio-political divides in the country.

During this critical socioeconomic context, youth in Guinea turned to violence. Across the country, youth gangs emerged. This was a novel phenomenon in Guinea's social landscape. Initially developing in schools, youth gangs migrated to surrounding neighborhoods where they gained so much power that a young person's personal safety was only guaranteed through gang allegiance. As these gangs engaged in violent, illegal, and threatening behaviors, they tainted the reputation of youth as a whole. Self-proclaiming themselves as victims of the system, gang members deliberately excluded themselves from social life and dialogue, and instead chose violence as alternative means of expression. The key question then became: how can the youth of Guinea overcome the draw to violence and become active, engaged, and non-violent actors in their communities?

Search for Common Ground's Approach

Search for Common Ground, the world's leading conflict transformation organization, has led activities to build community competency for peace in Guinea since 2001. In the midst of the tense the political transition in Guinea, SFCG's objectives were twofold:

Increase youth knowledge of non-violent approaches to conflict resolution

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Empower youth to act as messengers and actors of peace by helping reduce juvenile violence and prevent the political manipulation of youth.

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Guinean youth are empowered, engaged, and nonviolent.

SFCG implemented activities as part of the *Jeunes de Guinée, Acteurs de la Non-Violence* project, which was funded by UNICEF from 2010 to 2011. SFCG placed particular emphasis on the regions of *Guinée forestière* (Guinea's forest region), Conakry, Labé, Pita, Kamsar, Boké, Beyla, Fria and Siguiri.

SFCG's actions were based on the following premise:

(1) Strengthening youth's knowledge of their rights and responsibilities and providing them with peaceful conflict resolution skills encourages them to choose other non-violent means to exercise their rights;

(2) A qualitative change in behavior helps foster youth leadership capable of supporting and ensuring a united and violence free Guinea. Additionally, young people can be perceived as essential social partners in Guinean society instead of violent gang members manipulated by politicians for electoral purposes.

Implementing a Strategy for Youth in Guinea: A Three-Dimensional Approach

In order to achieve the desired objectives, SFCG's strategy relied on three primary tools: (1) trainings for youth leaders; (2) sharing of trainings results with the local communities through formal and informal youth associations; and (3) outreach and awareness to peers.

Phase 1: Training the Youth

SFCG worked in partnership with a total of 130 formal and informal youth associations nationwide. The selection of partner associations was an important step in order to meet project objectives. The participation of informal associations - youth gangs - was particularly important in ensuring the success of the project. As a result, it was essential to work with associations and gangs that were the most violent and exerted the most influence in their respective communities. The selection
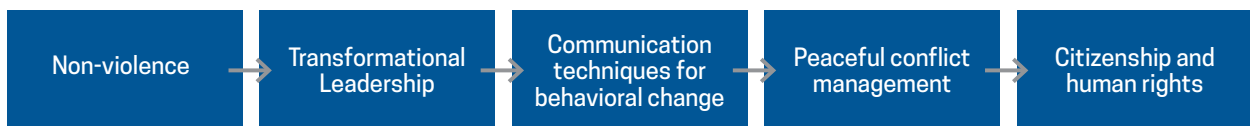
A YOUTH TRAINING AT THE LIBRARY IN FRIA

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phase started with the mapping of existing youth associations with the assistance of the Youth Ministry and prominent youth members. In Conakry for example, an initial mapping was conducted with the help of an influential member of a local gang that is active in the different districts of the city. Because of his affiliation and familiarity with the various gangs of the city, his collaboration helped to include those groups in the project from the very start. During this phase, SFCG identified and selected **16 local facilitators** and **28 adult mentors and coaches** to aid the implementation of project activities.

Once chosen, each association was asked to identify two leaders who would be trained by SFCG. The initial goal was to balance the number of men and women, but this proved to be near impossible. In the case of Conakry, only 6 out of the 42 trained youth were girls. This large disparity resulted from the overwhelming male membership of the targeted groups. The vast majority of the members of these groups, especially those with violent members in their ranks, were males. Consequently, the 6 girls who were trained were all from formal youth groups and associations.

A total of **10 training workshops** were implemented during the duration of the project. The trainings of youth leader were divided in five main themes:

Non-violence	→	Transformational Leadership	→	Communication techniques for behavioral change	→	Peaceful conflict management	→	Citizenship and human rights

Phase 2: Youth-Focused Outputs

Once trained, the project asked participating youth to share their knowledge with their respective associations and communities. This generated a snowball effect, and the original group of young people trained a large number of their peers. Once the youths were trained, they were given liberty to identify themes they deemed most relevant in respect to the challenges faced by their respective communities. Restitution was considered a crucial element in ensuring the project's sustainability and the durability of the strategy. Collaborating directly with youth associations - and especially

their leaders - ensured that the project was based on local popular structures; therefore, it raised awareness from the inside and avoided externally imposed changes. Overall, trained youth leaders organized **136 sessions**, reaching a total of **4463 youth**.

Phase 3: Awareness Campaigns and Outreach to Other Youth Organizations

The third phase consisted of an awareness campaign to youth communities at large. So that young people could become true agents of change in their attitudes towards violence, they were responsible for creating advocacy groups among their peers. As a group they could identify their problems, and then develop an outreach strategy with activities to address those issues. Of the activities proposed, football (American soccer) matches, festivals, and educational talks were the most popular. SFCG evaluated all proposed activities and then provided financial support to the youth initiatives.

Below are all the activities implemented during the awareness and outreach phase:

930 Outreach Activities	16 Festivals	11 Exchange Sessions	2 Major Synergetic Activities
• Debates • Communications via SMS and Facebook • Football matches • Outdoor concerts	• Non-violence • Peaceful conflict management	Involving • Youth • Local authorities • Mining corporations	Collaboration between youth in • Conakry • N'Zérékoré

The face-to-face activities were complemented with an **extensive media campaign**, supporting youth outreach efforts on non-violent conflict management, youth leadership and other themes related to SFCG's project objectives. The media component included radio programmes that maximised public outreach and complemented other project components. The radio portion included the airing of **88 broadcasts** on non-violence and included an interactive format, as well as the airing of **96 episodes of the *Barada* magazine** in French and six local dialects. The *Barada* magazine provided various outlets for Guinean youth to discuss actions they implemented in their communities and assess the overall impact on society. Youth used various methods such as interviews, debates, and street microphones to share their thoughts to a broader community. The magazine also offered a voice to parents, school officials, local authorities and thought leaders on themes discussed on-air. The nationwide broadcasts were supported by 34 radio station partners.

A Process Adapted for Youth

Considering the context in which the intervention was conducted, success was dependent on finding a process that allowed for direct engagement with violent youths. This proved to be a particularly difficult challenge. Of all the approaches, SFCG believed that peer-to-peer outreach

would be the most fruitful, as opposed to other activities directly held by SFCG. Youth outreach increased the exposure to marginalized youths - who had either no means or interest in listening to radio broadcasts.

THE PEACE AND UNITY CARAVAN

A national caravan on peace and national unity was organized under the theme of *"Dialogue is the Only Way to Find a Common Ground"*. These caravans made presentations in Conakry and the four regional capitals (Kindia, Labé, Kankan and N'zérékoré). The caravans consisted of various activities including walks, mass concerts, shows, conferences, and debates. The target audiences were youth leaders, youth association members and students. Their objectives were to highlight to youths the importance of sustainable constructive dialogues and allow them to share their solutions to the challenges of accessing decision-making bodies.

Adaptation of the project into day-to-day social activities of young Guineans was SFCG's priority from the very start. Since sport activities and cultural events are integral parts of youth life, SFCG capitalized on these opportunities to promote messages of non-violence and youth leadership. This was primarily accomplished through the use of local youth structures and popular local entertainers. This approach allowed SFCG to mobilize and reach targeted youth groups, and as a result, a total of 4463 youth were influenced through peer-organized campaigns.

Moreover, SFCG wanted to take advantage of the strong sense of competition between youth gangs to encourage participation. Visibility was a driving element among the gangs, and it meant they were willing to participate in as many public activities as possible. Therefore, inviting them to participate in SFCG's activities proved to be a key factor in generating interest and maximizing project outreach among young people.

Adopting a Flexible Strategy

In 2010, the mid-term project evaluation revealed increasing levels of violence in regions affected by mining activity. This was largely the result of the transitional government challenges of the contracts previously negotiated with mining corporations. As a result, the scope of the project was changed to include these areas where violence was a serious concern. The same process was used as in the original regions, with the difference being that this time SFCG learned from previous lessons and called on adult monitors to support of youth initiatives. **4 adult monitors** coached the **10 selected organizations**. The adult monitors were tasked with increasing youth credibility since local authorities were still associating youths with vandalism

NON-VIOLENCE FESTIVAL IN GUINÉE, KANKAN

and violence. Furthermore, involving staff from the Youth Ministry in the implementation contributed to the strengthening of the project's future sustainability.

In general, flexibility was required throughout the whole process, especially following the youth training phase. Once trained, youths demonstrated a great sense of initiative. They conceptualized and developed their own projects in their respective communities, many times outside the project's framework. SFCG had to adapt and support the implementations of these new projects. Flexibility was once again necessary in Conakry where different youth associations united in consortiums, which was not part of the original project. Yet SFCG responded by providing support in establishing the consortiums.

Results

Improving Youth Knowledge of Non-Violence

Results obtained from tests conducted from trainings in Conakry, Guékédou, Kissidougou, Macenta and N'Zérékoré showed significant improvements in youth knowledge of the five main themes covered in the trainings. The initial knowledge of these themes among the youth was very limited prior to trainings, with over half of them failing a pre-test. Subsequent training workshops had a clear impact on the trainees, with the same knowledge tests passed by 85 percent of participants after the trainings.

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Youth Organizations' Involvement in Non-Violence

The project's impact in mobilizing youth in non-violence is well illustrated by the words of this young Guinean from Fria:

"Following the training and output activities held in Fria, the majority of violent youths realized how their power could positively influence others and were converted to the idea. We have also noticed how an inclusive dialogue between youth organizations has played a big part in bringing peace to our town, preventing the bomb on which we're sitting from exploding"

There is an agreement among the majority of the youth that SFCG's intervention led to a decrease in non-violent behaviors:

"Thanks to Search's activities, youth association leaders from Kamsar have contributed in controlling youth, who in turn have applied the advices they were provided" - A youth from Kamsar

The example of Die Road gang, one of Conakry's most violent clans, serves to demonstrate the change in behavior that followed the trainings. After receiving trainings, the gang members joined a formal association and recorded a CD together while maintaining regular contacts with local

authorities. They emerged from the experience as true leaders in their district and positively exerted their influence by breaking up fights between youths with different political views.

The data collected two years after the end of the project indicates that behavioral changes among the youth are still taking place. Trainings held for youth gangs and formal associations had a substantial and sustainable effect on gang members, as described by this restaurant manager from Kindia:

> *"We were witnessing violent acts from youth before, but nowadays, we have left this behind, the youth are more involved in non-violence outreach than violence."*

> **We were witnessing violent acts from youth before, but nowadays, we have left this behind, the youth are more involved in non-violence outreach than violence.**

Reduction of Youth Violence Since 2010

In the final evaluation respondents, from areas where project activities were implemented, stated that they thought the violence had significantly decreased since SFCG's interventions. Three years later, this tendency is still observed: 80% of surveyed participants agree that the level of violence has significantly decreased from over the last three years, as highlighted by this shopkeeper from Fria:

> *"It's surprising to see how since the beginning of the crisis in the district, none of the youths were involved in protests. Never would we have imagined such restraint coming from youth, since many of them are known for their violence. But in today's crisis we don't see any of that happening"*

While a decrease in violence in the areas where SFCG's project was implemented can be observed since 2010, it is difficult to make similar observations about the decrease in youth manipulation for political purposes.

Challenges

The Choice of Words

During activities with youth, many challenges emerged related to communication. Not only were there conflicts between gang members during activities, gang members were reluctant to being labeled as gang members. Some felt stigmatized by SFCG through the use of this label.

The Long Process of Building Trust with the Youth

Changing the attitudes of young gang members is a long-term process. It was only towards the end of the project that SFCG's close partnership with youth finally paid off. Only then was it possible for SFCG to build trust with youth and allow them to identify their problems and the cause of violence.

While this was an achievement, because of timing it meant there was only a limited window of opportunity to work on these problems. Unfortunately, there was not enough time for SFCG to significantly build on this new sense of trust.

Risky Financial Management

Several challenges arose that were specifically linked with working with youth. For instance, a large proportion of gang members used drugs, while others were attracted to easy money and short-term gains. This led to several cases of embezzlement of the funds initially allocated to youth outreach activities.

A Difficult Relationship between Gangs and Local Authorities

Fostering constructive dialogue between formal and informal youth organizations was far from easy. More challenging, however, was the lack of communication between gangs and local authorities. This made it extremely difficult for them to engage in constructive dialogues, as highlighted by this example:

Youth organizations in Boké had cut all communication channels with local authorities, who they thought manipulated youths for political gains. Authorities then proceeded to remove youth organization that complained from project lists. SFCG's intervention was successful in defusing this situation, and convinced authorities to consider youth organizations as important elements for apolitical community development.

Youth Demands Considered Threatening

In addition, challenges also arose from inter-generational dialogues, which were initially designed to improve social peace. The community of Kamsar is a striking example of this. This particular town, where the economy revolves around an alumina factory, is divided into two parts, with only one part benefitting from the mining industry (electricity, running water, banks, and paved roads). In the face of this blatant inequality, youths from the underprivileged districts decided to engage community elders and voice their concerns about the unequal distribution of benefits. However, the town elders rejected the demands from the youth. They considered the claims to be a risk to the town's overall economic prosperity activity.

Sustaining Youth Accomplishments and Dynamism in the Long Term
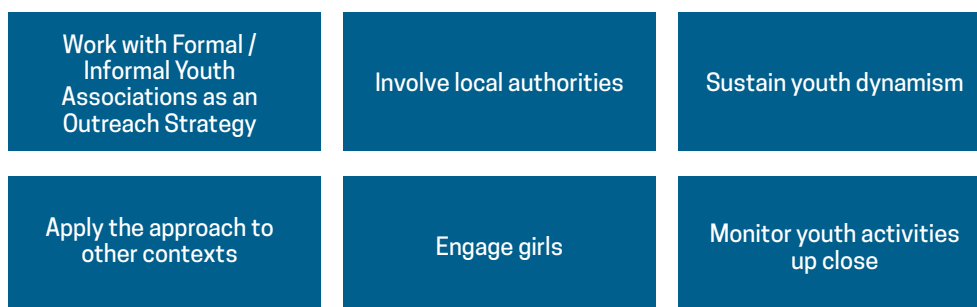
Ensuring the sustainability of the project for the following generations continued to be a great challenge for SFCG. The main problem was that as time passed, the trained youth left their associations, usually without transferring their knowledge to younger generations. In addition, municipal youth services working with SFCG rotated staff, and each new service director identified their favorite youth associations to partner with. Moreover, sustaining outreach activities organized by youth was also a problem. At the onset, local youth showed dynamism and commitment to the project, this provided the hope that these youth-led interventions would have lasting impacts. Two years later, only a third of the youth trained through the program reveal their ability carry out peacebuilding activities without the external support initially provided by SFCG.

The Difficulty of Reaching Girls with Selected Program Tools

Gender was a cross-cutting concern of SFCG. Although girls were rarely behind acts of violence in Guinea, they were though among the first victims of it. With this in mind, SFCG decided to include girls in all project activities. Girls were therefore, invited alongside boys to the trainings. In practice though, there was little representation of girls in the project activities, far below the planned quota of 30%. The challenge SFCG encountered in involving girls in the activities can be explained by three factors: 1) girls' participation in gangs and youth associations is rare; 2) social barriers and restrictions discourages girls from participating in social events and activities; and 3) outreach activities organized by youth associations did not necessarily correspond to girls' general interests, as the most popular activities, sport events, attracted mostly boys.

Looking Forward: Lessons for Other Projects

A number of key lessons can be learned from the experiences gained during the **Youth of Guinea, Actors of Non-Violence** project. These recommendations could improve future youth programs operating within similar contexts. Each lesson is described in more detail below.

Work with Formal / Informal Youth Associations as an Outreach Strategy	Involve local authorities	Sustain youth dynamism
Apply the approach to other contexts	Engage girls	Monitor youth activities up close

Work with Formal/Informal Youth Associations as an Outreach Strategy

Conclusions from the project demonstrated that the involvement and empowerment of local youth structures (associations, gangs, groups of friends, cooperatives etc.) can be an efficient strategy in maximizing the project's impact on youth. Youth structures share a common language, similar social references and realities, which makes it easier to communicate with their peers.

Involve Local Authorities

One of the key reasons for the success of outreach activities was the participation of adults in the project, most importantly officials from the Ministry of Youth. While local authority members remained indifferent during the first phase of project activities, since they were not directly involved, their attitude changed drastically once SFCG changed its approach to include them. SFCG decided to invite them to play a key role as adult monitors and support the activities designed by the youth organizations they were responsible for. Once fully involved in the project, local authorities became crucial to its success.

Sustain Youth Dynamism

The feedbacks obtained from the focus group evaluations, identified challenges to the long-term sustainability of the positive impact of the intervention. A few months after the end of SFCG's support, activities began losing their vitality. A rigorous evaluation of the project in areas where it was implemented would improve this issue. However, more than just assessing results, follow-up steps should provide financial and technical support to youth initiatives. This would ensure that youths who benefitted from trainings do not feel abandoned or lose their initial dynamism. This will only work if the project keeps the same youth associations as partners – avoiding generational problems while ensuring long-term sustainability.

Apply the Approach to Other Contexts

The approach used by SFCG in this particular case can be applied to other situations where youth unemployment and gangs are potential sources of widespread violence. However, the existence of youth structures is essential in identifying contacts and partners who can facilitate the transition between of knowledge and trainings from SFCG, while simultaneously fostering a sense of ownership by youth participants. This requires full recognition of youth associations from local authorities. Furthermore, for the project to work, there needs to be a minimum level of trust amongst all stakeholders. Successful implementation of activities depends on collaboration with young leaders and influential people who can adhere to the project design.

Engage Girls

The project was not able to meet its initial gender equality objectives due to the fact that few girls are in youth gangs with males. In fact, the field study revealed that the boys did not – or rarely did– influence their female counterparts. In order to improve girls' participation, it is recommended that project coordinators identify better means to engage young girl/woman leaders, who can mobilize and influence their "sisters". Finally, the activities themselves should be designed with the interests and needs of girls and young women in mind.

Monitor Youth Activities up Close

Giving youth opportunities to share training content and create outreach activities has certain risks. These activities can easily be manipulated to voice political claims, or hate messages towards a specific group or entity. SFCG was therefore very careful when carrying out activities and prohibited the spread of any political messages, or discriminatory speeches; and avoided references to ethnic differentiation. These efforts were successful as no major incidents of these nature occurred during the duration of the project.

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