

West Africa Update

Search for Common Ground

Situation Update

While progress is being made toward democratic governance, the situation in West Africa remains fragile, threatened by economic stagnation and political instability. As Liberia's stability is key to that of the sub region, its recent elections and the first elected female African President soon taking office present hope and excitement. In Côte d'Ivoire on the other hand, the delay of the election has intensified the political crisis around the mandate of the transitional government. Moreover, the alleged recruitment of ex-child soldiers from Liberia by the Ivorian government, as reported by Human Rights Watch, threatens to exacerbate mounting tensions in the region. In Sierra Leone, competition for leadership through the 2007 elections has already begun, raising tensions and diverting attention from actually governing the country. Ethnic clashes in the southeastern part of Guinea accentuate the country's continuing struggle with internal conflict.

Talking Drum Studio Launched in Côte d'Ivoire

September saw the launch of Search for Common Ground's (SFCG's) newest Talking Drum Studio (TDS) units in Abidjan and Daloa. An initiative that began in Liberia and later expanded to Sierra Leone, TDS uses media as a tool for peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Through the new production studio in Côte d'Ivoire, SFCG will stimulate national dialogue around critical issues. Ten local radio stations and SFCG met to explore their strengths and needs and to establish recommendations for TDS radio programming. Enthusiastic about collaborating with TDS, these stations have signed an agreement to integrate SFCG programmes in their broadcast schedules. In turn, SFCG provided training in production techniques, common ground methodology treatment of information, radio writing, interview techniques, new radio technologies, and more.

SFCG's first radio programme in Côte d'Ivoire, *Main Dans la Main* ('Hand in Hand'), was broadcast on 10 September in collaboration with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The 30-minute weekly programme, broadcast on all the partner stations as well as on ONUCI FM (the United Nations radio station in Côte d'Ivoire), revolves around humanitarian action and social cohesion, aiming to inform the population on the ongoing conflicts and the efforts being undertaken to resolve them.

The second-produced TDS programme, *Passerelle* ('Bridge'), focuses on inter-ethnic alliances and the use of traditional conflict resolution methods to achieve social harmony. Through the promotion of these alliances, SFCG is underscoring and building on the capacities that exist for non-violent resolution and conflict management, as well as adding value via SFCG's expertise in conflict transformation methods. TDS has also developed a series of short drama skits entitled *Wura Wura Tuko*, which have quickly become popular segments on the partner stations, including ONUCI FM. Developed in collaboration with OCHA, these 5-minute skits focus on the role individuals can play in building peace. Each skit is set in a taxi, where contemporary situations are analysed and commentary is provided from a 'common ground' perspective, demonstrating that regular people can examine contentious problems in ways that unite and promote the search for cooperative solutions.

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Sierra Leone

- Common Ground Investors' Trip takes participants to visit SFCG programmes and Sierra Leone's President

Liberia

- SFCG and its partners support free and fair elections in Liberia

Common Ground Investors Experience SFCG's Work First-Hand During Trip to Sierra Leone

In October, members of the Common Ground Investors Council visited the people of Sierra Leone in a spirit of partnership and solidarity, recognising that they are tackling incredibly challenging issues in their daily work to rebuild the country. Devastated by ten years of violent civil war, Sierra Leone represents the breadth and depth of extraordinary work that is being undertaken to transform conflict and bring about sustainable peace. The visitors came to learn more about Sierra Leone and how SFCG's Talking Drum Studio (TDS) and Community Peacebuilding Unit are working synergistically to deal with varied topics, such as youth issues, corruption, education, health, and women's rights.



Common Ground Investors Council members meet with President Kabbah and Minister Koroma.

Throughout the week participants met with Parliamentarians, tribal leaders, army officers, radio and music personalities, as well as with "ordinary" citizens. The visitors observed the work of TDS, considered its impact, and suggested improvements to benefit more people.

They were impressed with the transformational power media exhibits in Sierra Leone, in contrast to the relatively limited effect it has in Western nations. Referring to TDS' partner radio stations, Investor Kathryn Grody states, "I learned that to share this process of listening to the 18 new radio stations throughout the country creates an ongoing dialogue that continues long after the radios are turned off, and people are gathered around candlelight."

"I am very positive about the role Search for Common Ground/Talking Drum Studio played in the peace process." - Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Koroma

The week included a meeting with both President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Momodu Koroma. While receiving members of the delegation, including former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State George Moose, Koroma cited SFCG's work with children, particularly in giving them the opportunity to voice their concerns, such as in *Golden Kids News*. The President, a self-proclaimed regular listener of TDS's soap opera *Atunda Ayenda*, praised SFCG's role in "monitoring the election process" and was "happy because this has helped to clarify a number of issues and decreased tensions, especially as this has been a common trend in past elections."

This feedback indicates not only a successful trip, but also the impact of SFCG's engagement in Sierra Leone. Describing the experience as overwhelming, powerful, emotional, and inspiring, participants returned home with newfound gratefulness for the peace and prosperity of their home countries as well as respect for the work of SFCG. Ms. Grody asserts, "If people can come out of armed conflict in which limbs and lives were lost with a deep and profound commitment to transformation through civil discourse, then a blue [liberal] person should be able to exchange ideas and dreams with a red [conservative] person... so from Sierra Leoneans, I am inspired to make a commitment to peace and deep listening at home."

SFCG conducted a survey in Kailahun, Kenema, Kono, and Koinadugu districts in Sierra Leone to inform SFCG's Democracy & Governance programme that provides opportunities for citizen participation through radio programmes on good governance:

Search for Common Ground in Sierra Leone, Baseline for Democracy & Governance Project, November 2005

- 90% of respondents have a radio set at home; 70% listen to radio regularly;
- 80% specifically tune in to Talking Drum Studio (TDS) programmes;
- 99% stated preference for local-language programming;
- 75% said they depend on radio for information on public affairs;
- 93% of respondents considered radio a credible source of information, whereas 2% trusted the newspapers.

SFCG in West Africa is grateful for the support of these donors:



SFCG Mobilizes Nationally to Cover Liberia Elections

To support the national elections that mark the end of Liberia's transition period, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) sought to broaden the space for citizens and political candidates to participate in free and fair elections. SFCG's strategy increased citizens' interest in participating in the first elections in eight years, and increased the quality and availability of information on the election process throughout the country.

After months of voter-education activities, SFCG's election strategy culminated in a nationwide election-day reporting effort. Communication and transportation infrastructure in Liberia is limited, hindering the flow of information. Coupled with a social environment, residual with suspicions and divisions—ethnic, geographic, and political—potential was high for allegations of fraud and contested legitimacy of the elections. To increase the transparency and quality of information on the electoral process, SFCG partnered with Radio UNMIL (the station of the United Nations Mission in Liberia) and Radio Veritas, as well as local radio stations, to organise nationwide election reporting. From October 10 to 12, SFCG deployed ninety-three reporters to polling stations across Liberia. Using mobile phones or UNMIL communication links, reporters periodically called in to Radio UNMIL and Veritas to provide updates on voter behaviour and turnout, on political activities or disturbances, and on the general situation in their location. The reporters, officially accredited as observers, filed reports of the vote counts directly from the polling centres to build confidence in the legitimacy of the process and the results. To the eight local partner stations that SFCG had equipped with phone capabilities and trained in interactive elections reporting, SFCG provided additional information of interest to their region.



A SFCG partner reporter interviewing a voter at one of the polling stations.

SFCG staff members from Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire travelled to Liberia for the event, reporting back to radio stations in their home countries. Given the security concerns and consequences of this election for the entire sub-region, this strategy helped to build confidence in the process among the wider affected population. It also provided information for Liberian refugees in the three countries, keeping them informed of developments in their home country.

SFCG in Liberia's election-day reporting built on experiences in Sierra Leone and Burundi, where SFCG conducted similar election reporting during earlier elections. In both efforts, SFCG mobilised the consolidation of personnel and resources of several local radio stations, enabling more coverage than any single radio station could offer and increasing the legitimacy of the electoral process.

SFCG conducted similar reporting activities, although on a more limited scale, in support of the November 8 election between the top-two candidates: soccer legend George Weah and economist Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. This time, forty-five monitors were deployed across the country, who called in with reports to Radio UNMIL, Radio Veritas, and ELBC, the government radio station. Before the run-off election, Johnson Sirleaf and Weah appeared on a special TDS programme to outline how they would implement their policy ideas and share their views on how to advance reconciliation. TDS was the only public forum in which both candidates participated; both said that they trusted TDS to present their statements and comments fairly.

Newsflash from SFCG in Guinea:

An office space has been located and renovations have begun on the studio thanks to support from the National Endowment for Democracy. With UNICEF in Guinea, we launched a national competition to identify playwrights for the soap opera we intend to begin. Two young women placed first and second judged by a combined jury from Radio Rurale Guinee and SFCG.

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