



The wars that raged since the early 1990s in West Africa have left several hundreds of thousands of people dead and millions more exiled from their homes and lands.

Peace agreements eventually ended war in Sierra Leone and Liberia but armed conflict continues in Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea remains volatile.

Acute poverty, unemployment and a culture of violence remain serious threats to the fragile peace in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Conciliation Resources supports local initiatives to build peace and promote meaningful justice for people, especially those from poor and marginalized communities in West Africa.

Peace is not just the absence of the gun

Our programme in 2006 reflected our aims to prevent and transform conflict. We continued to place importance on addressing the challenges of ensuring effective participation of young people and women in the peace building processes and our work on community peace building remained central to the programme.

A critical focus was to develop the West Africa Programme strategy until 2009. This was a time to gain deeper understanding and outline the best way to sustain and develop the Programme's capacity to implement its objectives effectively and to meet partners' needs.

For most of the year, stability in the Mano River region looked like a real possibility. While regular protest and rallies were part of Liberia's socio-political climate, they were managed well enough to avoid violent conflict. There was generally forward movement in the country's political and economic administration. The international victory of Charles Taylor's capture created few ripples and some debate but the general impression in Sierra Leone and Liberia was about looking to the future.

2006 for Sierra Leone was very focussed around the forthcoming 2007 elections. Despite national and international preparations to ensure violence-free elections there have been increasing tensions. Guinea is a main source of concern for stability in the region as the president's deteriorating health, combined with deteriorating political, social and economic conditions, have all led to great instability.

The delicate task of reintegration

Reintegrating former combatants into communities is a lengthy and delicate process, because of the resentment that remains towards those connected to war crimes.

BPRM attributes its achievements in this area to the ongoing support it provides, which heals broken relationships and encourages cohesion in the community.

In a recent case, BPRM reintegrated an ex-combatant who had been captured by rebels at the age of five. Only by piecing together his fragments of memory were he and the community able to trace his family and help him discover his real name.

"One of the greatest challenges faced by BPRM in this process is Sierra Leone's culture of silence whereby discrimination towards ex-combatants often remains unspoken and, therefore, unresolved."

BPRM team member



Market traders in
Bo, Sierra Leone
© Rosalind Hanson-Alp



Including marginalized youth

Our engagement with bike riders and commercial sex workers has been delicate and challenging. Both groups have had poor experiences dealing with NGOs making false promises.

We gathered valuable information on the role and impact of young people in a post-conflict society and developed, in partnership, a way of engaging with these young people to facilitate their positive contribution to their communities.

They explained that in bringing them together with government officials, community leaders and members of the police and army, we have been able to begin the process of resolving misunderstandings and challenging stereotypes. Mutually beneficial links were created.

Above: Many former combatants work as bike riders, offering taxi and transport services using motorbikes © Rosalind Hanson-Alp

Empowering communities for sustained peace

The importance of community peacebuilding as a tool for conflict transformation work became increasingly clear as we maintained partnerships with Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement (BPRM) and Sulima Fishing Community Development Project (SFCDP). While work with SFCDP remains minimal, BPRM are resolving some long standing conflicts and receiving official recognition.

BPRM has made some real inroads into strengthening the justice system where they operate. Despite the challenges, collaboration with the police and the local court system has yielded some positive results for resolution of community conflicts. BPRM's contribution to national security is highlighted through their cooperation with the decentralized state security apparatus. Their method of analyzing conflicts made important contributions to developing chiefdom histories, a key resource preventing and resolving future conflicts.

An important achievement this year was the start of the building of BPRM's Resource and Documentation Centre. The Centre will house books, reports and videos and will be a resource for local community members, local government and staff and students from the university.

Youth participation in building peace

Working to address the socio-political and economic marginalization of young people in Kenema, Eastern Sierra Leone, our Drop in Centre addressed some of the root causes of Sierra Leone's decade-long conflict.

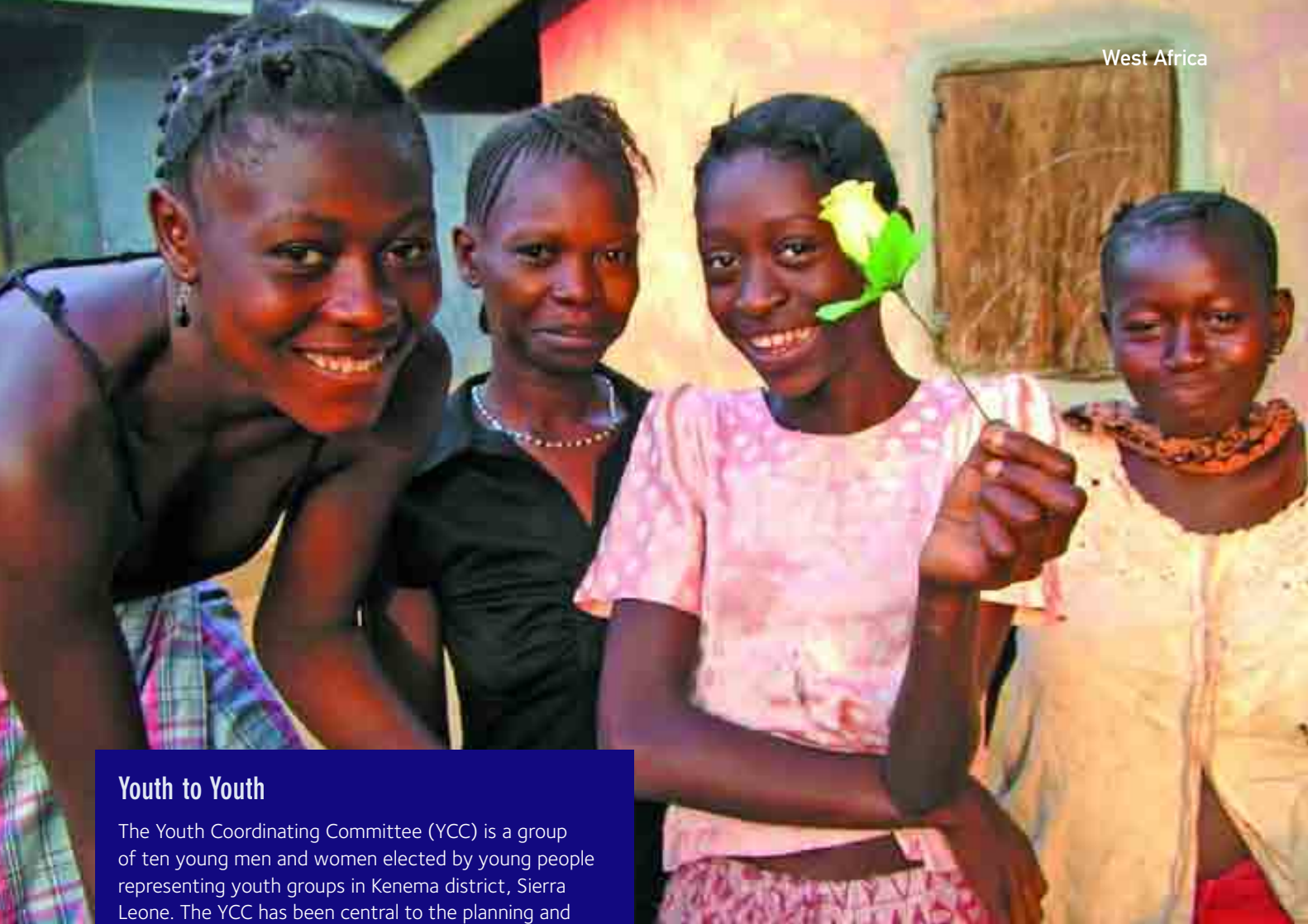
In 2006 we continued our training on issues such as conflict transformation and leadership, to enable young people to participate fully and effectively in decision-making processes. We have seen young people start engaging with local government and the Ministry of Youth and Sport. We also saw youth setting off independently to make their small businesses work, with ongoing guidance and support from community advisory groups.

Through action, research and dialogue we supported the building of key relationships between young people, the security sector and local government. This was successful in establishing important links and resolving grievances. Relationships were also developed in Bo and Kenema districts with The Bike Riders Association and commercial sex workers. These are young people who have been particularly affected by conflict, both as victims and perpetrators, and form some of the most marginalized groups of youth.

The Bike Riders Association provides much needed taxi services using motorbikes. Riders are almost exclusively male and with a large percentage of ex-combatants they are often at the centre of violent conflicts. They remain a key group to engage with if efforts at conflict transformation are to be successful.

Looking ahead

Our focus will remain the same until 2009, keeping work with marginalized youth and community peacebuilding through community partnership central. We will place more importance on strengthening our sub-regional work, addressing the interrelated nature of conflict and its costs. We also look to develop work addressing civil involvement in security sector reform.



Youth to Youth

The Youth Coordinating Committee (YCC) is a group of ten young men and women elected by young people representing youth groups in Kenema district, Sierra Leone. The YCC has been central to the planning and implementation of our work to engage young people more fully in sustaining peace.

"This project has helped me to build my skills. I have gained more confidence and now I have become an executive member of an important youth organization." Bridget, YCC member

Above: Young women in Bo, Sierra Leone © Rosalind Hanson-Alp
Below: The 'Peace Bridge' in Freetown, Sierra Leone, is dedicated to those who died in the war and is a symbol of a united peace in Sierra Leone © Rosalind Hanson-Alp

