

Although civilians bear the brunt of violent conflict, they rarely get a chance to take part in the political processes to resolve it. Consequently, peace negotiations and agreements often do not reflect their needs. Conciliation Resources aims to open up peacemaking by encouraging activism and helping ordinary people have a say.

Promoting greater civic participation

In 2007 our partners in northern Uganda organized a Peace Week that brought communities together to share experiences and analyse the barriers to their involvement in the Juba peace talks. Non-governmental partners in the South Caucasus, including those from marginalized groups, worked to improve local governance and address social and political problems in their own communities on either side of the Georgian-Abkhaz divide.

Work began on a new Strengthening Citizens' Security project to help make Sierra Leone's security sector more accessible and accountable to ordinary people. We also took part in peace conferences on the conflict over Kashmir, promoting wider public participation in the peace process.

CASE STUDY: GEORGIA

Helping displaced people be heard

Even as one of the groups most affected by the unresolved Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, internally displaced people (IDPs) in Georgia have little opportunity to influence the peace process. Politically, they are marginalized. They also face challenges such as unemployment and a lack of housing, health, education

and social services. Many live in isolated settlements with other IDPs, exacerbating their sense of separation.

To help IDPs get their voices heard at national and local levels, we support a network of over 20 organizations working on issues affecting IDPs.

The network acts as a forum for information exchange and, increasingly, for joint analysis and action. In 2007 it issued several communications, including a letter to the Georgian authorities expressing concern at the bureaucratic and undignified process for registering as an IDP, which elicited a response. They also sent a statement of dissatisfaction with the belligerent rhetoric heard on TV in discussions about the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

This consolidated response was an important step in the network's development in advocating for change.

"It's one thing for a single organization to lobby the authorities," says network member Manana Darjania. "But quite another for a network of 20 to do so. They are much more likely to take our concerns into account when we have a united position."

Representatives from two national political parties also addressed an IDP network meeting in June. Members were able to raise issues of special concern for their community and quiz the politicians on each party's policies toward the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process.



"We actually end up playing a mediating role between ordinary people and the authorities," says Manana Darjania. "Thanks to the work of our network I'd say the [Georgian] government is much better informed about the problems of IDPs."

CASE STUDY: WEST AFRICA

Getting women involved in security

The horrific and systematic violence against women during Sierra Leone and Liberia's wars showed how women remain one of the most vulnerable groups when security breaks down. But women are also key to preventing violence, resolving conflict and consolidating peace. Security institutions must include and deal with women's special security needs, especially in post-war countries reforming their security sectors.

In December 2007, we organized with the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) a sub-regional conference to look at security challenges and opportunities for women, as part of our pilot Strengthening Citizens' Security Project.

"Women experienced untold miseries during the wars and continue to do so. They therefore desire to be actively involved in order to forestall any future hostilities,"

explains Jeannette Tucker from MARWOPNET. "They desire recognition, support, authority and legitimacy from the national security apparatus."

Security representatives, NGOs, civil society organizations and community representatives from Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia attending the conference analysed the barriers that exclude women when security policy is developed and put into practice.

Discussion focused on women's involvement and dealings with existing security structures within the MRU countries and how women's voices could be better represented. Common concerns were their protection around border crossings, domestic violence and rape, barriers to women's involvement in security decision-making processes, and too little engagement between governments and civil society in these areas.

Recommendations for more effective involvement of women in security issues and outcomes from the conference will be presented to regional leaders in 2008.

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Speakers at the 'Women in Security' conference included the Assistant Inspector General of the Sierra Leone Police, Kadi Fakondo (right), Amelia Ward from our partner women's organization MARWOPNET Liberia, and Brigadier Alfred Nelson-Williams, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff, Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (left).