

GOAL 2: **Provide opportunities for dialogue** and improved relationships within communities and across conflict divides at all social and political levels

Building or repairing relationships through dialogue is an essential part of resolving violent conflict. It can lead to a shared understanding of difficult problems and help restore trust or open up communication between people bitterly divided by war.

In 2008 we created opportunities for dialogue and exchange in all the places where we work. A meeting in Istanbul in June with the Heinrich Boell Foundation and University of California (Irvine) enabled frank discussions among 18 Georgians and Abkhaz on some of the most pressing and sensitive issues of their conflict at a time of extreme tensions between their leaderships. Despite the war that erupted soon after, partners remained in contact.

In Southern Sudan and Uganda we supported traditional leaders to hold the first in a series of problem-solving workshops dealing with violence and other common challenges faced by border communities. Our partner's peace clubs in northern Ugandan schools continued to offer young people, including ex-child soldiers and abductees, a safe space to learn how to resolve their differences through dialogue rather than violence.

An independent evaluation concluded our Strengthening Citizens' Security project in Sierra Leone had improved relations between civilians and security forces and made people living in Kenema and Kailahun districts more confident about their safety.

CASE STUDY: WEST AFRICA

Building bridges between civilians and security forces

"Ten years ago it would have been impossible to have civil society and security sector representatives discussing security issues openly," said Ishmael Tarawali, director for provincial and border security at the Office of National Security (ONS) in Sierra Leone. "This conference has achieved that."

His remarks came after spending two days with 40 other participants from Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, sharing experiences and insights into regional security challenges.

Historically, relations between civilians and security officials in the Mano River Union region have been beset by mistrust and repression. In Sierra Leone, post-war reforms aspire to establish effective civilian oversight of the new security agencies. Building these bridges however remains a real challenge.

This unprecedented conference in May 2008 was an attempt to improve cooperation. It formed part of our pilot project Strengthening Citizens' Security, which aimed to make the security sector more accessible and accountable to ordinary people.



Sallay Bayoh from the Mano River Women's Peace Network, one of the partners involved in the conference

Participants told us they had gained better understanding of the different security structures in the region. Their final public statement called for more civil society involvement in security matters, especially by women. They also demanded better information on regional protocols and border tariffs, plus stronger official commitment to stamp out corruption and abuses.

Local print media and radio covered these appeals widely. A Sierra Leonean official raised issues from the conference at the Mano River Union summit in Liberia two weeks later.

CASE STUDY: THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONFLICT

Picking up the pieces

Just four months after the August war, we brought together 14 young Georgians and Abkhaz in London. Opportunities for such contact are very rare – most young people have never met their peers from across the conflict divide.

Emotions ran high as the group shared their personal experiences. Some of the Georgians had been called up as reservists and saw military action in South Ossetia at first hand. Several Abkhaz had signed up as volunteers, fearing the fighting would spread to Abkhazia.

The realization they had come close to facing each other down the barrel of a gun gave depth, urgency and honesty to the discussions.

"Some of us were about to take arms and fight each other," said one. "Instead, we have met here and fought our conflict using words."

Our youth dialogue process offers opportunities to understand life on 'the other side', talk together about what can be done about the conflict, and also to be self-critical.

Over five days the group debated issues passionately, took part in a roundtable with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, attended lectures and film showings and socialized together.

"I'm now convinced that dialogue is necessary. Stereotypes were shattered here, and we talked as equals," said one. "I went home wanting to change my own society," said another.

These young people and others will continue to meet and work together in 2009 to take their experience beyond their immediate circles.

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Participants in a youth dialogue meeting in London discussing the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict

