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Sierra Leone: A Long and Difficult Journey to Reconciliation—The Role of Civil Society

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Background

Sierra Leone is an Anglophone country in the West African sub-region that shares borders with the Republic of Guinea in the north and Liberia in the south. The country is endowed with many natural resources and has a small population of about 4.5 million people.

In 1991, the bloody civil war broke out in the country, destroying the social fabric and traditional values. Families were painfully and brutally separated from their communities and loved ones. People lost hope, trust, faith, and confidence in their leaders and society at large. As a result, people were displaced, many moved from their towns and villages to safer zones and neighboring countries as refugees. In the same conflict, many families were wiped out, leaving children as orphans. Many people were forced to take up arms. Taking up of arms was the only means of survival in the hands of brutal rebel commanders.

As a result of the conflict, many lives were disrupted and a whole lot of visible and invisible wounds were inflicted on people. What used to be abnormal became normal and dangers like drug abuse, sexual harassment, rape, killing, and amputation became the order of the day.

Since the country's 11-year war ended, an internationally designed Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has come and gone, while the United Nations-backed criminal court is about to wrap up its final deliberations in the prosecutions of about 10 men deemed most responsible for fomenting the conflict. The Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) was set up jointly by the government of Sierra Leone and the United Nations (UN). It is mandated to try those who bear the greatest responsibility for serious violations of international humanitarian law and Sierra Leonean law committed in Sierra Leone since 30 November 1996. Currently, the three cases being heard in Freetown have been completed, including appeals. The trial of former Liberian President Charles Taylor is in the defense phase at The Hague.

In order to maximize civil society input in the implementation of these institutions, two coalitions were established: first, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Working Group (TRCWG), which was tasked with coordinating civil society input into a credible TRC, and, later, the Special Court Working Group, which was renamed the Coalition of Justice and Accountability. This paper will detail the activities of the Working Group.

The TRCWG was established in 1999, immediately after the Lomé peace agreement. By 2000, it had established a national secretariat in Freetown and started developing programmes to carry out nationwide sensitisation at the community level on the need for and design of the TRC. To actualise such a sensitisation programme, the TRCWG established functional structures across the country using offices of partner NGOs as secretariats in the provincial towns of Bo, Kenema, and Makeni.

Political and Social Environment

After President Kabbah sent a letter to the UN in 2000 asking for assistance in establishing a court to try members of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group, the government of Sierra Leone became more interested in revenge or trying RUF members. This development posed a

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serious threat to the TRC process that was agreed upon by the fighting factions during the peace talks.

The UN Office of Legal Affairs (OLA) in New York led the discussion that resulted in the establishment of the SCSL, while the discussions that resulted in the TRC were led by the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva.

The SCSL and the TRC running parallel led to confusion in the minds of ordinary Sierra Leoneans, who asked why we need two courts, as in their understanding the TRC was a form of court.

Consequently, CSOs led a campaign to sequence these institutions in order to avoid the confusion and maximise their impact. This campaign prompted several meetings involving OLA, OHCHR, the TRCWG and the government of Sierra Leone to discuss the possibility of sequencing and look into the issue of primacy.

It was resolved that neither institution should have priority over the other and that the two institutions would run parallel. This left details of the issue of primacy in the hands of the judges of the SCSL and the commissioners of the TRC to resolve as and when the need arose.

However, the agreement that established the SCSL when ratified in parliament gave the court primacy over the TRC. This event signaled the beginning of several problems:

- The first challenge was dealing with the issue of confidentiality of testimony at the TRC. People believed that testimonies given before the TRC would be used to try them or other people at the SCSL.
- The second challenge was the legal one of getting people indicted by the SCSL to testify before the TRC. Legally, this was not possible, therefore the TRC could not get the testimony of the key players in the conflict, who were in the custody of the SCSL.
- Finally, the TRC did not enjoy the government's support as did the SCSL. The TRC had a limited budget of about US\$4-6 million, which the SCSL was given over US\$250 million.

With all these challenges, the TRCWG had to explain to the people why it is important to support the TRC process and allow the smooth implementation of the agreement establishing the Special Court.

Description of Lobbying Activities

In December 2001, members of the TRCWG held a two-day national consultative conference in Bo with one of the leading truth commission experts, Brandon Hamber, as external evaluator. The conference was aimed at setting up a standardised national administrative structure and formulating an activity plan for the years ahead that would be responsive to the challenges we would face. During the conference, participants agreed to delete the word 'commission' from our name and the coalition became known as the Truth and Reconciliation Working Group (TRWG). The rationale was that the group was not working for the TRC but rather preparing the ground for the commission, facilitating the establishment and workings of the TRC. We decided that our mandate is not limited to the time frame of the TRC but would include monitoring of the implementation of the commission's recommendations by the government and facilitation of community healing and reconciliation programmes (Fambul Tok) after the work of the commission was concluded.

The TRWG worked relentlessly to sensitise the public on the need for a credible TRC. It also facilitated community participation at public hearings. Most of the TRC statement takers and district and regional coordinators were members of the group.

Other activities undertaken by the TRWG included the publication of a regular newsletter called *Truth Bulletin* to highlight issues and challenges both for the entire membership and for policy members. The newsletter was distributed widely and carried articles from guest writers from around the world. In order to learn and network with civil society groups in other parts of the world

as part of our network experience sharing, a delegation from the TRWG paid a working visit to South Africa, Zimbabwe, Guatemala, and Germany.

Post-TRC Activities

After a clear manifestation of the government's reluctance to implement the TRC's recommendations, the TRWG continued its campaign, this time in collaboration with the Sierra Leone Association of Amputees and the War Wounded-Victim Coalition. We conducted several grassroots consultations with the aim of keeping the issue on the radar of policymakers. These activities, which lasted several years, led to the successful launch of the Special Fund for War Victims and the Reparations Programme in 2009. We also conducted an initial evaluation of the TRC in 2005.

The TRC report, which is over 7,000 pages divided into four volumes, was difficult to access by ordinary Sierra Leoneans, with only 4,000 copies in circulation. The TRWG printed about 50,000 copies of a reader-friendly Senior Secondary School and a Story Tell version of the report to help disseminate the findings and recommendations of the TRC throughout the country.

As a coalition, we did our best to lobby government for a credible TRC, one that enjoyed the confidence of the people, but there were serious limitations to the official commission, such as the usual short time frame and an overcentralised process in big towns. In addition, the SCSL and the TRC were running parallel. I am happy to say that CSOs succeeded in some areas, but still the journey to reconcile victims and perpetrators at the community level was far from over. This is what led us to take the path of Fambul Tok to facilitate sustainable reconciliation at the community level.

The Way Forward: Fambul Tok

After what I would describe as failed efforts to reconcile post-conflict communities through the TRC, I was able to team up with a colleague in the United States to create what is now called Fambul Tok.

Overview

Fambul Tok—Krio for “Family Talk”—facilitates post-war community-owned reconciliation in Sierra Leone, with a long-term, gender-inclusive process led by each community. The national and district Fambul Tok Sierra Leone (FTSL) staff works with communities to create opportunities for confession, forgiveness, and ongoing reconciliation. FTSL has successfully initiated healing ceremonies and follow-up activities to sustain the reconciliation process throughout Kailahun, Moyamba, and Kono districts and has recently begun work in Koinadugu district. Over the next three years, FTSL aims to initiate ceremonies and grassroots reconciliation processes in all 14 districts in Sierra Leone to allow individuals and communities to heal from the trauma they experienced during the war, rebuild the spirit of community, and establish an undivided Sierra Leonean family, particularly as we approach the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections. In March 2011, FTSL will launch a year-long “Wina wan Fambul” (We are one family) National Unity Campaign as build-up to ensure violence-free 2012 elections.

Background and Accomplishments

With the TRC over and the SCSL coming to a close, FTSL is meeting the demands of this new phase in the country's post-conflict landscape. Although the TRC provided a detailed account of the war and opportunities for a limited number of people to tell their stories, Sierra Leoneans have expressed a need for opportunities for victims, perpetrators, and communities to address the wounds and issues from the war, which continue to divide families and communities and could, if unaddressed, lead to renewed violence. Fambul Tok addresses the roots of conflict at the local level, helping war-affected individuals reflect on the past in ways that enable them to be a part of averting renewed aggression. It also helps create healthy communities capable of building new

foundations of peace by honouring and building on traditional methods of reconciliation. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for sustainable development at the community level.

FTSL was launched in late 2007 through consultations with community leaders in all of Sierra Leone's 14 districts to determine their reconciliation needs. The pilot implementation began in March 2008 in Kailahun district, where the war started in 1991. The programme then moved into Moyamba, followed in 2009 by Kono and Koinadugu districts.

Throughout these districts, FTSL has established extensive, gender-balanced reconciliation structures at the sectional level, and thousands of people have participated in over 75 village-level ceremonies to date. During these bonfire ceremonies, scores of perpetrators have come forward in their communities to confess to their victims and ask for forgiveness. With the support of family, neighbours, and elders, victims and perpetrators have been embraced by the community and "cleansed" as part of the traditional ceremony following the bonfire.

The Fambul Tok process includes follow-up activities after the ceremonies, and Fambul Tok communities have created community farms that provide additional food and income for the villages, dedicated peace trees where community members can address ongoing issues and conflicts, and reconciliation football matches for both boys and girls. Of special note, women in every Fambul Tok section have organized Peace Mothers groups to identify common needs and implement programmes to address them. The Peace Mothers are also producing radio broadcasts throughout their districts, sharing their stories of reconciliation and pleading for those who fled to return to their communities and reconcile. Local and district organisational structures are sustaining the Fambul Tok process in these follow-up activities and preparing communities for development.

Approach

Drawing on Sierra Leone's "family talk" tradition of discussing and resolving issues within the security of a family circle, Fambul Tok is a distinctly Sierra Leonean initiative. Rather than being rooted in western concepts of crime and punishment, it reflects communal African sensibilities that emphasise the need for communities to be whole, with each member playing a role.

The Fambul Tok approach is grounded in a commitment to the following values:

- Being non-political and non-partisan;
- Meeting people in their communities to listen and learn;
- Walking with communities to find their answers;
- Respect for and revival of traditions and culture;
- Total community participation and ownership;
- Transparency and accountability in relationships and activities;
- Honesty and respect for all people;
- Sharing experiences, stories, and learnings; and
- Restoration of dignity and the right to truth.

To meet these values, Fambul Tok works at the sectional level, working three to four months to prepare a section for their Fambul Tok bonfire. This allows the staff to establish the network of local structures that is the hallmark of the programme and enables full community participation, ownership, and sustainability. Following a district-level consultation, a diverse group of leaders (chiefs, religious leaders, women, and youth) forms a District Executive Committee to identify contact people in each chiefdom, who consult with the communities to identify sectional outreach teams and reconciliation committees. Fambul Tok incorporates gender balance at every level of these structures.

After receiving extensive training from the Fambul Tok staff, the contact persons, outreach teams, and reconciliation committees take on the responsibility of educating their communities about Fambul Tok, mediating conflicts that divide the community, gathering community members to plan a reconciliation ceremony, and supporting follow-up activities. A district coordinator and two

deputies are chosen from each district to become national staff members. They are the key points of contact in the district.

The bonfire ceremonies are only the beginning of the reconciliation journey. Understanding that reconciliation is a process and not a one-time event, Fambul Tok staff works with communities on a long-term basis, supporting reconciliation activities and continuing to support local reconciliation structures until they are strong enough to support themselves.

As part of education programme on Fambul Tok, we are also working on a film and a book.

The film *Fambul Tok* tells the story of victims and perpetrators of Sierra Leone's brutal civil war who come together for the first time in an unprecedented program of tradition-based truth-telling and forgiveness ceremonies. Through reviving their ancient practice of fambul tok, Sierra Leoneans are building sustainable peace at the grassroots level, succeeding where the international community's post-conflict efforts failed. Filled with lessons for the West, the film explores the depths of a culture that believes that true justice lies in redemption and healing for individuals, and that forgiveness is the surest path to restoring dignity and building strong communities.

The book, a photo-intensive companion to the film created in collaboration with Nan Richardson of Umbrage Editions, will be published in early 2011 to coincide with *Fambul Tok's* film festival premiere. Essays by the creators of the Fambul Tok programme and from leading thinkers in the conflict-resolution and peacebuilding worlds will explore in more depth themes raised by the film and will further illuminate the values and practice of this remarkable reconciliation programme, as well as the significance its lessons hold for individuals, activists, and policymakers. The book will also feature photographs and an essay by *Fambul Tok* producer-director Sara Terry, an award-winning photographer, whose stills are a key element in the film.