

**COMMON GROUND APPROACH TO JOURNALISM****SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND (SFCG)****23<sup>rd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> August 2010****Bo, Sierra Leone**Co-Instructors**Abdul Rashid***Public Information Campaign Coordinator**SFCG Sierra Leone*[abdulrashid\\_99@yahoo.com](mailto:abdulrashid_99@yahoo.com)**Alimany B. Kamara***Senior Producer, SFCG**SFCG Sierra Leone*[almimamibubu@yahoo.com](mailto:almimamibubu@yahoo.com)**Rashmi Thapa***Research Consultant**SFCG*[rashmi.thapa@inbox.com](mailto:rashmi.thapa@inbox.com)**Workshop Objectives**

The workshop will specifically explore alternative systems of information exchange and the means through which local information and assessment of trends in violence can be transmitted to the wider public in order to understand how these can be better supported and acted upon by international institutions.

With respect to conflict prevention and crisis response, it will facilitate informed, evidence-based policy and programming decisions and enhance the ability of multi-lateral organizations to overcome systemic constraints to effective and timely responses. It will lead to strengthened capacity of a global network of locally-based organizations to advise and influence governments and international organizations on conflict prevention, early warning and response. On the level of civil society, the action will strengthen the space for political participation of civil society on a national, regional and international level so as to build sustainable conditions for peace and stability.

Furthermore, it will help identify and provide guidance on overcoming constraints to action and to ensure that institutions, instruments and approaches are genuinely conflict- and gender-sensitive. The action actively involves those often excluded from political analyses, conflict prevention and advocacy initiatives, namely youth, children and women. A central purpose of the work is to find ways to prevent violence erupting and to preserve stability and promote constructive freedom of speech that contribute to the consolidation of democratic processes. The overall purpose of the work is to find ways to prevent violence erupting and to preserve stability and promote constructive freedom of speech that contribute to the consolidation of democratic processes.

### **Intended Outcomes**

- a) To raise awareness about the positive and negative role that media can have on conflict;
- b) The development of a set of principles that underpin a 'common ground approach' to journalism;
- c) The development of a set of skills that put 'common ground journalism' in to practice.

### **Workshop Notes**

In our societies, no one turns to conflict or gives much attention to conflict or disagreements with two or more people until it turns violent. We, therefore recognize conflict situation only after it takes a violent turn. One must know however that conflict and violence are two different things. Various individuals and groups of a society pursue different views and styles of work owing to different goals and desires and objectives.

### **What is conflict?**

Conflict is prevalent in all sectors of the society. It is defined as a 'social situation in which a minimum of two actors strive to acquire at the same moment in time an available set of scarce resource.' (Wallensteen, 2001:16). It can be an inherent and legitimate part of social and political life, but in many places the costs and consequences of conflict, crisis and state failure have become unacceptably high (Office of Conflict Management and Migration, USAID). Conflict is a part of life. It promotes development and peace if it finds a proper way out. Otherwise, it will spawn violence and destruction.

Conflict is not always negative.

#### *1) Why does conflict take place?*

When we come into contact with different types of people, we become aware of differences in our norms, values, conduct, social practices, way of life and living style. This awareness is the starting point of conflict (Fisher et al: 3). According to various scholars conflict arises due to the following reasons:

- a. Resources: The inadequacy or unequal distribution of resources is one of the causes of conflict.
- b. Psychological needs: Almost all individuals, classes and communities have aspiration for access to and control over power. Similarly, as human beings attach very high importance to dignity and identity, conflict emerges when they feel a threat to them.
- c. Norms and values: Among individuals and communities, there is a wide divergence in the understanding of truth, honesty, duty, respect, goodwill, freedom etc. That is why; conflict emerges if one community intends to promote its own set of values or feels that its value system is threatened.

In addition to this, conflict analysts have propounded the theories of community inter-relationship, negotiation; human needs, identity, inter-cultural misunderstanding and conflict transformation for the purpose of conflict analysis.

### **What is violence?**

When conflicts are channelled inappropriately, it has the potential to intensify and erupt into violence. Armed conflict in particular can be defined as a 'contested incompatibility' of failed governments or states where use of weapons and armed forces are carried out between two parties against one another, with at least one party being the 'Government of the State'. Violence can be divided into two types: direct and indirect violence.

Actions carried out with a view to harm someone's physical existence or properties are called direct violence. Beatings, murder, assault or damage of property are some examples of direct violence.

Indirect violence on the other hand is those activities, which are carried out with an intention of damaging or psychologically affecting someone's dignity, self-respect and socio cultural identity. Discrimination against women and persecution against them on the basis of socio-cultural tradition are some examples of indirect violence.

### **What is peace?**

Peace is indispensable for the development and progress of human society. Peace is extremely necessary to protect and develop human activities. Fundamental rights and freedoms are fully protected only in a peaceful society. Peace is the absence of direct or indirect violence and the existence of social justice. The absence of direct violence, such as killing and bloodshed is not peace. In the absence of social justice, many kinds of indirect violence finds space for proliferation. Peace with social justice is regarded as positive peace. Many other issues are also linked to peace. Individual freedom, social equilibrium, supremacy of law, civilian governance, situation of the balance of power are also taken as indicators of peace. Peace is linked with basic human needs, democratic system and the guarantee of people's right. The process of peace building has no end. Similarly, a peaceful society too does not remain in the same state. As there is a vast difference of views among individuals and groups with regard to understanding in peace, it is necessary to understand it as a 'process' rather than as a certain structure.

### **What are position and interest?**

*Position* is the most important aspect in conflict where people's attention is focussed. Position entails expressions, behaviours and practices, which strengthen each other's claims and viewpoints. The confidence about strengthening one's sides can also constitute position.

*Interest* indicates bare minimum needs and this is the real cause behind one's position. Interest often remains unexpressed. Every position has an interest behind it. Some times the positions of the conflicting parties may be diametrically opposite and their interests may be the same or may be maintaining the same ground. There may be some irreconcilable needs among the conflicting parties. The conflict resolution achieved without identifying these basic needs and addressing them may not last long and the conflict may resurface again after sometime. It cannot be solved until adequate attention is given positions as well as the interests of the conflicting parties.

### **What are early warnings in conflict?**

Early warnings are a series of lateral and vertical systems of warnings of conflict preparedness or prevention. Efforts at conflict prevention are entirely different than efforts at conflict preparedness. In early warnings it is imperative to address potentials for local warnings and responses.

Traditionally early warnings in conflict have been in a vertical manner. It gets words about abuse up to higher powers so that pressure can then be brought down to the abusers. Today, prominent systems of warnings about violence are designed to trigger this response from the outside to a growing crisis.

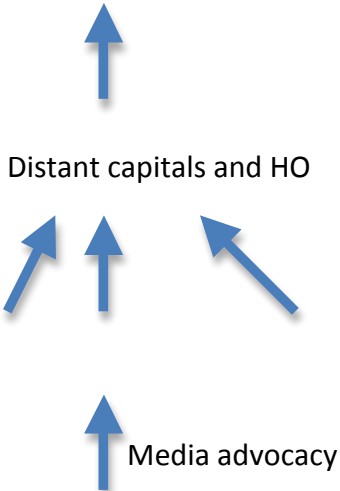
“Warnings” that is meant to control groups, which are causing harm is wired up and out-while warnings meant to get innocents out of harm's way is wired along the ground. In terms of getting warning everywhere it is needed, the conventional 'superstructure' and the 'new' structure can greatly complement each other.

**Box 1: Flow chart conventional and new structure of early warnings**

**Conventional**

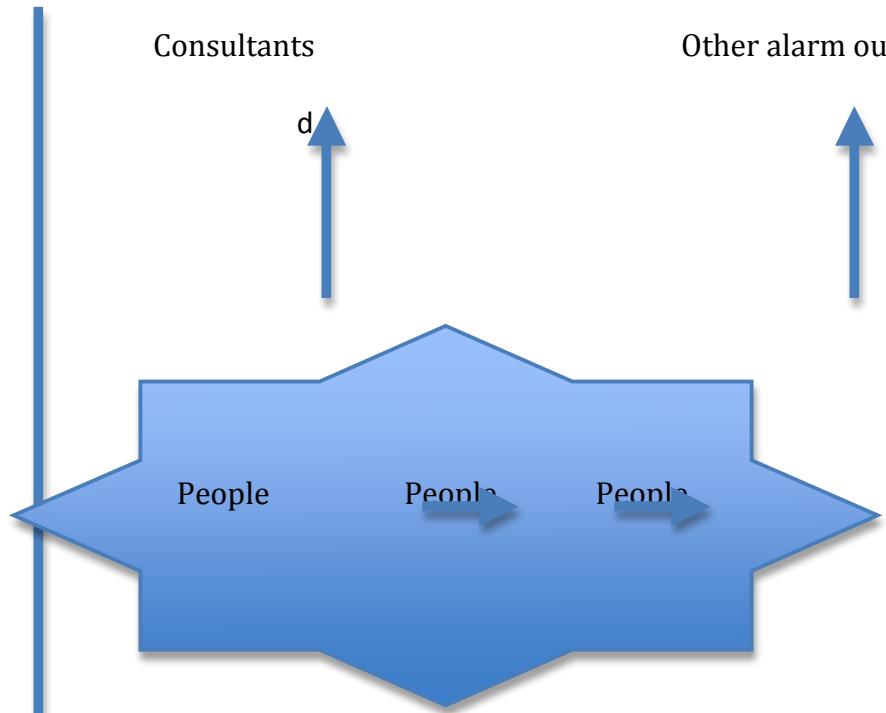
**New**

United Nations



Consultants

Other alarm out



monitoring  
Pressure  
powers on the

Evade abusive powers on the  
ground: May take hours or minutes

May take weeks, months or years.

### **How do we tap Early Warnings?**

Important to ask question- who do we assume is the best position/person to act on information in a timely, lifesaving way?

### **What do we mean by Common Ground media?**

Our approach differs from the media's usual attitude to controversial and sensitive issues, which are often to explore the extent and range of disagreement. While this is a valid function in the media it really results in common understanding or helps find a solution to the problem. In fact some media seems to exploit contentious issues for their entertainment value, sometimes leaving readers and audiences with the impression that nothing positive can be achieved and that the extremes of opinion been presented are representatives of the majority.

In contrast, common ground methodologies encourage the exploration of possible area of agreement between opposing sides in a discussion, try actively to subvert prejudices and stereotyping to promote the dignity of all sides, and to encourage a positive vision. This approach works well for sensitive political issues as it does in situation of violence-armed conflict.

### **What does the media has to do with Conflict Transformation?**

The local, national and international media is one of the strongest influences on the way people interact in most cultures, and on the way they respond to conflict. Indeed, control of the local media is often a primary consideration for combatant because people rely on the media for news and information. But news and current affairs are not only format which can have a direct impact on a conflict and in fact we use the full range of media format news through magazine programs, and features to documentaries cartoons and animations to radio and TV soap opera and comic books.

While the media is often an influence on a conflict and those involved, it is also often itself influence internally by a conflict. National or local media may find it harder to produce programs and write stories, which deals with the conflict in ways, which reflects the reality, or may exclude and /or marginalize the voices of some ethnic and religious groups or minorities. Put another way, the media in all parts of the world triggers tensions within groups either because it has an agenda (radio Mille Collines in Rwanda), or through ignorance; the media often lacks even a basic understanding of the dynamics of conflicts so it puts forward a bias and counter productive perception of reality (suggesting for example- that there is only a win-lose solution to the conflict in question).

However, conflict sensitive or peace journalism is a potentially controversial area and some news journalist find it difficult to accept that conflict sensitive or peace journalism can maintain any credibility. Put simply that question phrased as 'Does a journalist always has to consciously take the side of peace?' to which the answer might be, 'the journalist's role is not to find a solution to the conflict but to open up and widen the debate.' Conflict resolution is a process and not an instant happening usually what is written or reported by a conflict sensitive journalist is only part of a long process towards peace, which cannot be rushed. The point, though is not to be aware of both the potential for harm as well as the potential for good, which journalists carry.

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