

HOPE – SIERRA LEONE

Report of the Moral Foundations for
Democracy **Heart2Heart** Dialogue,

Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District

17th – 20th March 2011



INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone is the country that has gone through what many commentators refer to as the most brutish war in the history of African wars. The 11-year-old conflict (1991-2002) in this small West African country not only claimed the lives and property of citizens but also created massive socio-economic and political chaos. However, since then many actors, including government, civil society groups and the international community, have been playing significant roles in post-conflict peace building. Most of these interventions need to be critically reviewed. The lessons learnt can be useful to peace building organizations for designing future programmes and interventions in the country.

The Heart2Heart dialogue programme, initiated by Hope-Sierra Leone (H-SL), was designed in response to a careful assessment of major challenges which Sierra Leone faces today. New strategies are needed to address the complex social and political problems that frequently get compounded in the most vulnerable communities. The common factor underlying all these problems is the need for personal and community transformation. The Kailahun District dialogue has been the most successful of the five dialogues implemented so far. The Kailahun situation was so precarious that it was a flash point for civil unrest that could have caused both human and financial loss to the nation.

KAILAHUN: A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Kailahun is situated in the eastern part of Sierra Leone and is geographically bounded by Guinea and Liberia. It is surrounded by the Gola forest where many visitors come to do their research. Most people in the district belong to the Mende tribe, with a minority belonging to the Kissi tribe. Other minor tribes include the Vai and Gola. The Kailahun community strongly holds on to the customs and traditional beliefs that make it unique among the other districts.

The district is blessed with rich and fertile land suitable for agricultural production. It is full of cola nut, cocoa and coffee plantations which make it very much a centre for agricultural activities throughout the year. Huge amounts of cacao and coffee are produced, but because of the poor road network, most is taken to Guinea or Liberia and sold there.

Kailahun is the district where the 11-year civil unrest started in 1991, in a town called Bomaru, Upper Bambara Chiefdom. The district has a very large concentration of both Sierra Leonean and Liberian ex-combatants.

It is the most remote and easily forgotten district, due to its poor road network and being the farthest distance from the Capital Freetown. It is a recognised strong hold of the main opposition party in the country.

Luawa Chiefdom, which hosts the district headquarters, suffers from all the problems of the district due to its strategic position. The district has become so engulfed in inter-political and chiefdom conflict that civil society has had to intervene.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that the cancellation of election results from polling stations in the 2007 general elections mostly affected this chiefdom where the famous court barray is located. This sad episode still lingers in the minds of many as an attack on their rights. In fact, during the conflict mapping process, it became apparent that many citizens affected by the action of the National Electoral Commission may decide not to vote in 2012 as their votes went in vain in 2007. There is a dire need for all to recognize the plight of citizens in this part of the country in the interests of a better Sierra Leone.

OPENING CEREMONY



The Opening Ceremony of the 5th Moral Foundations for Democracy Heart2Heart Dialogue took place at the famous Kailahun Court Barray, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District. It started in a very unique and wonderful atmosphere with a performance by cultural dancers and opening courtesies observed.

In his opening remarks as Chairman, the Host Paramount

Chief, the Honourable M. K. Banya, of Luawa Chiefdom, said that Hope-Sierra Leone, a non-governmental organisation committed to peace building, had visited almost all the district headquarters in Sierra Leone. He remarked that he first came in contact with the organization in Kailahun during the reparations programme which he said was successfully implemented in his chiefdom.

PC Banya cautioned that political parties should not make statements during the dialogue because it was not a political programme. He appealed to all present to work towards peace and development in the country, for the sake of a better Sierra Leone.

A background to the dialogue was given by the Executive Director of H-SL, Mr. John A. Bangura. He believed that if the Heart2Heart dialogues had existed before the war, it would not have erupted. He explained the rationale of the Heart2Heart programme with its emphasis on the pairing of districts in the interest of national cohesion. He called on all present to embrace each other and learn to respect other people's political views.

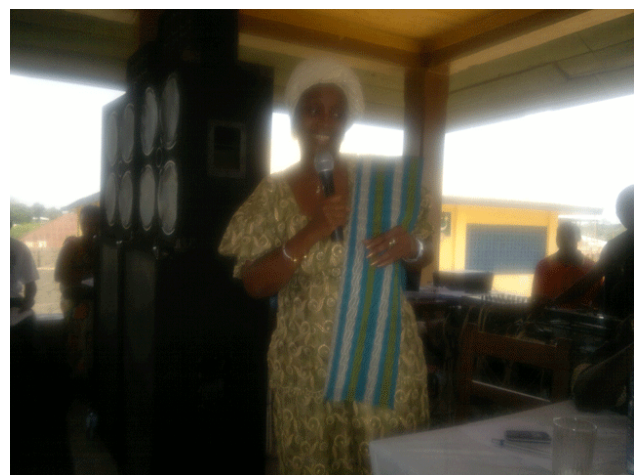
Mr. Bangura and Major T. M. Brima jointly set the scene by preparing the minds of everyone for personal reflection, using analogies and interpretations of a 'flower demonstration'. Items found in the flower vase such as a razor blade, broken bottle, stone, nail, dirty cloth, cigarette jot, etc, symbolised the character and behaviour of all present in one way or the other.

This was followed with the lighting of candles by PC Kandeh Kiha III, of Gbendembu Ngowahun, PC Alhaji Masakama III of Kholifa Rowala and PC Banya of Luawa chiefdoms respectively, followed by Members of Parliaments from both Tonkolili and Kailahun Districts.

A short, touching skit was performed by Kailahun youth. A mirror was placed in a small box and showed to all present together with the question "Who spoiled Kailahun?" The message was clear that whoever looked at the mirror saw him or herself, which meant that all were responsible in one way or the other for the troubles of the chiefdom and district as a whole.

Statement by the Host Member of Parliament, Hon. Alice Foyah

Hon. Alice Foyah said that the lack of respect for authorities is responsible for the persistent problems in the chiefdom. She maintained that, politically, Kailahun had become far more tolerant. In the past, Kailahun was known to be a strong opposition (SLPP) district. Everyone was therefore surprised when the President of Sierra



Leone, Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma, received a warm welcome from the people of Kailahun. She further added that they wanted peace and called on all to embrace the dialogue for the benefit of the chiefdom.

Hon. Alie Sankoh of Tonkolili District

Hon. Sankoh said he was very much impressed with the warm reception the Tonkolili group had received from the Kailahun people. He confessed that they had been somewhat confused about how they should respond to the invitation from Hope-Sierra Leone, considering the negative perception they had about Kailahun being a trouble spot, especially for Northerners. “We have always seen the people of Kailahun as being hostile to Northerners, perceptions which have proved to be untrue today,” he added. “The people of Kailahun proved to us that we are all one people.”



Referring to the poor road network, Hon. Sankoh said that they would remind the President of his promise to see that a new road to Kailahun was constructed. He concluded by calling on the people of Kailahun to put politics aside and embrace peace and development. He promised to take the good message of the dialogue to the people of Tonkolili district where the next dialogue would be held.

Further statements

Further statements were made by the Hon. Musa T Sam, the District Youth leader Sati Banya, and heads of political parties on the need for political tolerance, peaceful coexistence and reconciliation. The youth were admonished to be violent free and embrace development as they form the bulk of the population.

The head of each political party denounced violence and called on supporters to be politically tolerant and show respect for diversity.

Ambassador Martin Foyah represented the SLPP, John Banya the APC, and Aloysius Ngebah the PMDC parties respectively.

Pouring of Libation and the handing over of the Staff of Peace



The Host Paramount Chief poured the libation to invoke the ancestors, as customs and traditions dictate.

The peace staff, which was brought by the previous host Paramount Chief Kandeh Kiha, was handed over to the host P. C. Kailondo Banya. The former took this opportunity to ask people to reflect on the 11 years' civil unrest, stressing that the peace staff symbolized unity, peace and development. He cited some of the problems in his own chiefdom. One of these, a long-running dispute between the Minister of Trade and Hon. Kandeh C. Bangura, had been settled through the help of the Heart2Heart dialogue.

He further maintained that, together, peace could be achieved. He said he believed that the peace staff would change the lives of people of Kailahun after three days of interaction between them. He handed over the staff with a general prayer for the country.

Keynote Address by Paul Demba, Head of Civil Affairs, United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL)

Mr. Demba, who came to represent the UNIPSIL Deputy Head of Mission, expressed gratitude to Hope-Sierra Leone for inviting his boss who was unable to attend in person because of his tight schedule. He extended felicitations from his boss to the people of Kailahun. He informed all present that Sierra Leone was at the heart of the international community, because of its commitment to maintain peace, stability and development in the country. He added that the international community would not want to see situations which would return the country back to civil unrest. They were now expecting the entire

country to say “never again will we repeat our sad history.” He asked people to look back and reflect on the civil war and bring to mind the suffering that it brought to everyone.

He was impressed with the developments he saw in Kailahun as it was over three years since he had visited the district. Mr Demba concluded by stating that the UN would continue to support anyone who was ready to bring peace and stability to the country.



Monument and Museum

The opening ceremony was climaxed with a plea by P. C. Banya to have a monument built where the slaughter house was currently located as a memorial to all those from the district who had died during the war. This was the house in which hundreds of Sierra Leoneans were cold bloodedly slaughtered over so many years. It was therefore important to be reminded of it as it would serve as pointer to the evil of war. He reminded everyone that Kailahun district had suffered tremendously during the war. Today, the Kailahun slaughter house, now a dilapidated structure, was the only place where blood stains could still be seen on its walls. P. C. Banya requested H-SL to assist with the re-construction and conversion of the slaughter house into a Museum for historical and research purposes.

DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION SESSIONS

The dialogue session was handled by the facilitators with a range of topics that linked with the ensuing mediation sessions. The mediation process began with a series of stories of personal change and sharing of experiences to help prepare the minds of the participants for these sessions.

In response to the question posed by the lead mediator on what went wrong in Kailahun, Hon. Tamba Musa Sam stated that the people of Kailahun had skillfully used politics as a shield behind which to hide.



Dialogue session

Disregard for those in authority had caused problems in the community and disunity in the district. The issue of one family thinking and wanting to be superior to another had created long lasting problems that had engulfed Kailahun society.

Many of the chiefdom authorities, he said, had expressed similar views, though some limited the problems of Luawa Chiefdom to the three ruling houses of the Banyan, Ngobeh and the Fabundeh. These ruling houses had resorted to training and maintaining thugs to engage in violence during and after elections. Hon. Tamba Musa Sam reminded the people to sit quietly and have some reflection on how they could develop the country rather than create more chaos for the entire district. These families were well recognized by everybody to be the cause of much of the trouble in the chiefdom. The other major problem was the political intolerance that had become so chronic and notorious in the district.

Case Study One – PC Banyan versus Lamin Vonjo Ngobeh

The bitter conflict between these two arch-rivals began during the Chieftaincy Election in 2002. At this hearing, PC Banyan gave a flash back since he had contested the Luawa Chieftaincy election against the two Ngobeh brothers - Lamin Vonjo Ngobeh and Lamin Gbongay Ngobeh. According to him, and backed



(Left and below): PC Banya recounting his grievances about the Chieftaincy saga

up by records that were produced, he won the first rounds of the election but failed to secure the required fifty percent of the total votes. He decided therefore to form an

alliance with Lamin Gbongay Ngobeh (the elder brother) who had polled the third largest number of votes. After the second round of voting, PC Banya was declared the winner by the Provincial Secretary who had conducted the election. PC Banya appointed Lamin Gbongay as his deputy and speaker.

His strongest contender, Lamin Vonjo, who came second in both rounds, became disgruntled and took PC Banya to the High Court to challenge the results which, according to him, were fraudulent. This matter has since been in the courts for nearly seven years. The High Court ruled in favour of PC Banya and the



case was thrown out. Lamin Vonjo then took the matter to the Appeal Court, in which the Judges ruled again in favour of PC Banya. The matter is currently with the Supreme Court awaiting a final verdict.

This legal battle precipitated a wave of disrespect for the chieftdom authorities and created disunity in the chieftdom and its environs, culminating in community unrest. This impasse continued unabated

but gained prominence during the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections in which PC Banya supported the then ruling SLPP and Lamin Vonjo supported the PMDC and APC respectively.

It was alleged that Lamin Vonjo's personal links with the current ruling party were being used as a springboard to position himself as the Paramount Chief-in-waiting, in the belief that the Supreme Court would soon rule in his favour, as some community members predicted. From this position he had been able to bring a lot of youth under his influence. They were causing so many problems within the

chiefdom, including violence, disregard for authorities and the burning of farm bushes and dwelling houses.

Lamin Vonjo was also hated by local members of the current opposition party for masterminding the cancellation of the votes from 400 polling stations in the famous Kailahun Court Barray that contributed to the loss of power by the then ruling SLPP party. This fact came to light during the Heart2Heart dialogue.



Lamin Vonjo Ngobeh giving his own version of the conflict

Case Study Two – Lamin Vonjo Ngobeh versus Lamin Gbongay Ngobeh (Chiefdom Speaker)

Ever since the elections the chieftaincy conflict between the two brothers Vonjo and Lamin Gbongay Ngobeh has continued to spread its tentacles. This family feud has crippled the Ngobeh family to such an extent that, at the family compound, one brother cannot visit the premises of the other. **(Right): Lamin Gbongay Ngobeh explaining to participants where it all started.**



This family impasse also affected the smooth running of the chiefdom as the Paramount Chief was often away in Freetown on parliamentary business. However, as acting Paramount Chief, the Speaker found that he often had little authority over his subjects because Vonjo and his cronies disregarded his authority and set a bad example to other peace loving citizens.

Case Study Three – PC Banya versus Chief Wonneh Lansana and the Gbobu Gao People

The third thorny issue affecting the peace and security of the chiefdom was clearly elucidated by Chief Wonneh Lansana, the Section Chief of Gbobu Gao, one of the largest sections of the chiefdom located just two miles from the Liberian border.

(Below): H-SL vehicle had to pick up the Gbobu Gao people 27 miles from Kailahun Township and bring them to the Dialogue Centre



It all started when a logging investment company named TAKOR from Italy came to invest in the chiefdom. According to Chief Lansana, he had recommended another company called TROPICAL Logging Company to PC Banya for the reason that they had promised to build schools,

hospitals and construct roads in their section.

This in his opinion was not accepted in good faith by PC Banya. Chief Lansana then held a meeting with his people in the section and informed them of this disagreement. It was at the meeting that he declared that he would no longer work with PC Banya. Instead he pronounced Lamin Vonjo Ngobeh as his paramount chief. PC Banya was booed and prevented from holding a meeting in the section. Such disruption was encouraged by Vonjo Ngobeh who also seized the opportunity to galvanize support against PC Banya.

From the Paramount Chief's side of the dispute, PC Banya stated vehemently that the TROPICAL Company was not registered to carry out its activities. He was responsible to government and therefore could not allow a logging company to operate in his chiefdom without a license. He confessed to all present that he had tried to persuade the company to regularize its status, but this had proved fruitless. A few months later, the Government of Sierra Leone banned the export of timber. Even so, rumours were still circulating that he had refused permission for the TROPICAL Company to undertake logging.

(Right): Chief Wonneh Lansana of Gbobu Gao

A consequence of this dispute was that the paramount chief had dismissed Chief Wonneh Lansana as section chief of Gbobu Gao. This resulted in the burning of houses (photo below) and destruction of public property. Many youths were arrested and taken to court. It appeared that Chief Lansana was very popular among his people. Any



attempt to broker a peace deal would be very challenging with all these cases still in court. An additional factor was that all parties to the conflict were trying to win government approval for their particular stance.

DIALOGUE ACHIEVEMENTS



The disputes outlined in the three case studies above were found to be surmountable when the stakeholders concerned were willing to reach a negotiated settlement.

A wonderful and remarkable reconciliation parade after the mediation

- ❖ Paramount Chief Kailondo Banya and Lamin Vonjo Ngobeh both agreed to reach a peace agreement by shaking hands and hugging each other which most people found very surprising.



(Left): The long awaited reconciliation that broke the silence in Luawa Chiefdom between PC Banya and Vonjo Ngobeh

- ❖ Members of the two fiercely hated ruling houses were able, for the first time, to process from the dialogue centre to the premises of each ruling house. It was more or less taboo for any member of one rival ruling house to visit the other.
- ❖ PC Banya after reconciling with Chief Lansana promised to reinstate him at a later date.
- ❖ Chief Lansana in turn promised to respect the Paramount Chief and his section people.
- ❖ The Chiefdom Speaker, Lamin Gbongay Ngobeh, and his younger brother, Lamin Vonjo Ngobeh, at last agreed to settle their differences.
- ❖ The two family tyrants Lamin Gbunumbu Ngobeh and John S.K Banya who used to create civil unrest by galvanizing their respective youth supporters, publicly denounced violence on each other and promised to work closely for the development of their chiefdom.
- ❖ The dialogue enabled prayers to be offered in each of the graves of late family members in all the three ruling houses.



L-R: Representative from the Fabundeh family, Chief Lamin G Ngobeh, Vonjo Ngobeh, PC Banyar, Hon Sankoh, PC Masakama and others during prayers offered in the compound and grave site of the Ngobeh family.

- ❖ A lamb was sacrificially offered at the Kailahun Cotton Tree for peace and tranquillity to prevail in the Chiefdom and the District at large. The cotton tree, according to history, is where the township started and it has always been the place where such symbolic events have taken place to appease the gods of the Chiefdom.



Prayers were offered before the slaughtering of the sacrificial lamb for peace and unity to prevail in the chiefdom.

- ❖ All parties present were able to accept their faults honestly and publicly with no attack on anybody during the course of the dialogue.



Animal Offering

**A demonstration of unity
between the aggrieved
parties**



- ❖ A delegation of fifteen was invited to the Tonkolili District dialogue in order to share their experiences, and to live and eat together after so many years of continual disputes.

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Kailahun dialogue, which lasted for four consecutive days, was the longest and most successful dialogue held so far by Hope-Sierra Leone. The proactive measures utilized by the organization, which meant calling immediately on key stakeholders from Freetown who had wanted to boycott the dialogue process, were seen by many as the right step in the right direction. The Kailahun case has been so protracted and compounded that it has been extremely difficult for government to intervene without being branded as taking sides.

We have examined the causes of the Kailahun conflict and considered its impact, especially in relation to the destruction of properties and the possibility of provoking widespread civil unrest. We have reviewed the involvement of the various actors in the conflict and gradually arrived at a consensus.

A recurring theme in the report is the view that there has been too much interference by past and current government, resulting in the fuelling of the conflict for political gains. This interference undermines the sustainability of the peace and reconciliation drive that is so much needed in the run-up to the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections. It has to be remembered that in this part of the country a significant number of youth in the community are ex-combatants and are driven sometimes with very little regard for the socio-cultural and political realities of the chiefdom.

However, there are visible signs of unity and coordination between the conflicting parties and their various supporters, especially in the implementation of development programs in the district.

Although a significant number of ex-combatants have been disarmed and demobilized, the majority have not been reintegrated into civil society due to factors such as resistance from community members, unemployment, lack of capacity of communities to accommodate these ex-combatants and lack of resources.

In the absence of government funding to enhance the proper reintegration of these former fighters in places like Kailahun – and the conflicts continue – there is the likelihood of disruption of the post-war peace and stability. Therefore, all hands must be on deck to promote peace, reconciliation and political tolerance for national cohesion.

The successful realization of such a programme hinges largely on the availability of funds and the support and commitment of government and civil society organizations.

CHALLENGES

- Due to the terrible road network it was difficult and expensive to access Gbobu Gao, which is over twenty miles from Kailahun township, to bring key stakeholders to the dialogue.
- Many stake holders who were involved in the dialogue were taken by H-SL from Freetown to Kailahun. This, of course, has logistical implications.
- The road network generally made it difficult to reach Kailahun and its environs.
- The expected number catered for at the initial stage rose dramatically after the dialogue gained considerable momentum within the township.
- Most importantly political leaders invited to such programmes always made a lot of financial demands which were not part of the original plan, and these tended to sabotage the process.
- The long distances to the district made it very difficult for some invitees to attend the programme.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✚ There is a clear need for all Kailahun stakeholders to hold a bigger forum in which all and sundry will discuss the way forward for the development of their district.
- ✚ All court cases should be withdrawn for out of court settlement by all parties in the conflict.
- ✚ The government should not get involved in local disputes so as not to encourage people from taking advantage of the situation and derailing the successes achieved.
- ✚ The government must be seen to be neutral when handling sensitive issues in places like Kailahun where there are significant numbers of ex-combatants.