EVALUATION SUMMARY
Internal evaluation of the project ‘Strengthening civil society’s voice in national reconciliation and dealing with the past’

EVALUATION THEME
1. Relations within and between communities

INTRODUCTION
This summary outlines the findings of an evaluation of the ‘Strengthening civil society’s voice’ project in Liberia. The project, implemented by International Alert, NARDA and CJPS, aimed to support meaningful reconciliation in Liberia in the interests of building a lasting peace. The project was active between August 2012 and February 2015 and the evaluation took place in April and May 2015. The aim of the evaluation was to assess the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of project implementation, and identify achievements against expected results and objectives.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT
The project’s overall objective was “to contribute to meaningful national reconciliation and social cohesion in Liberia in the interests of lasting peace”.

The specific objective was “to enable the National Civil Society Organisations Advisory Committee (NCSOAC) to effectively represent its constituency and to improve consultation and understanding between communities and policy-makers on conflict risks and opportunities related to the implementation of the TRC recommendations”. Two expected results were specified under this specific objective:

- ER1 – “By the end of the project NCSOAC has improved its governance, increased its outreach, and is a credible interlocutor for government to shape discourse around national reconciliation policies – specifically the TRC report.”
- ER2 – “18 communities in Bong, Nimba and Lofa have access to information regarding the implementation of national reconciliation policies (specifically the TRC report) and are empowered to identify shared, local solutions to dealing with the past, feeding into national reconciliation planning and implementation.”

Following the launch of the project, the specific objective and expected results had to be revised, to reflect changes in the context taking place as the project received approval. To reflect these changes the TRC report was replaced with the National Reconciliation Roadmap (‘the Roadmap’) and the NSOAC was replaced by the NCSCL (which is what the NSOAC became at this time).

Activities to achieve these expected results took place in three of the most conflict-affected counties in Liberia (Lofa, Bong and Nimba) and 18 predominantly rural communities within these counties. Alert provided overall project management and also led on the capacity development of NCSCL through training, while CJPS led on setting up dialogue groups in Bong and Nimba, and NARDA supported dialogue groups in Lofa through its constituent member LofaNet.
The project’s implicit theory of change was that:

- IF communities in three conflict-affected counties are provided with accessible information on the government’s national reconciliation agenda, AND are supported to discuss the issues highlighted by this agenda, THEN reconciliation and conflict resolution will take place within these communities, AND the views and opinions of community members regarding national reconciliation can be shared with national-level government;

- IF the NCSCL functions effectively as a national representative of civil society organisations with the government, AND is aware of the views and opinions of communities regarding national reconciliation, THEN the NCSCL will undertake effective advocacy with the government informed by these views and opinions; and

- IF government policy-makers are lobbied effectively by the NCSCL using the views and opinions of conflict-affected communities, THEN the national reconciliation agenda will be more meaningful, AND will contribute to social cohesion, thus contributing to lasting peace.

**METHODOLOGY**

The objectives of the internal evaluation of the SCSV project was “to measure the quality of the activities and approaches used, establish the results achieved, and guide [Alert’s West Africa programme] in developing the next phase of programming in Liberia”. The internal evaluator, from outside the Africa programme for impartiality and objectivity, conducted desk-based and field research. Field research was undertaken in Liberia between 22 April and 1 May 2015. The tools used were interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). In addition to nine interviews with key informants, an FGD was held with dialogue group members in a town in each of the target counties. Participants in the FGDs came from at least three different communities within each county and numbered approximately 15 in each instance, including one or more of the facilitators. In addition, smaller discussion group sessions were held with men and women from target communities in each county who had not taken part in the dialogues.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

**Project impact**

The Overall Objective was partially achieved. The project has successfully contributed to ‘social cohesion’ in Liberia by putting into practice a key element of the official reconciliation agenda, in the absence of government action, and demonstrated what local-level truth telling, healing and forgiveness could look like as part of a nationally coordinated programme, and what impact it might have at the community level. The outputs of these activities will be invaluable resources for the agencies tasked with implementing the local-level components of national reconciliation processes.

This is only a partial success because a different, more direct, contribution to furthering the national reconciliation agenda was planned. The aim was for civil society to make this contribution, by feeding the experiences and learning from community-level reconciliation in the three counties into government-led activities through ongoing national-level engagement by the NCSCL. Yet national-level engagement informed by community-level reconciliation did not happen.

As this contribution was a key part of the Specific Objective, this was consequently also only partially achieved, with the greatest success being an increase in the NCSCL’s capacity and effectiveness as a representative body. This increase in the NCSCL’s capacity was thus the main impact under ER1. Under ER2, the greatest success was the community dialogues, 422 of which took place in total in 18 communities. These dialogues drew on simplified information about the national reconciliation agenda and led to meaningful discussion on forgiveness for crimes committed during the civil war, understanding past violence, remembering the dead, and solving current community disputes. This
last topic led dialogue groups in Bong and Nimba to take on a conflict resolution role in their communities, tackling minor disputes over land ownership, marital relationships and inter-generational rifts.

**Project relevance**

When the project was designed it was very well aligned with the EU’s then strategy of supporting implementation of the national reconciliation agenda. The government’s wavering commitment to this agenda makes the project seem like a remnant of an earlier era, yet the loss of momentum behind national reconciliation only serves to highlight the continuing importance of the project’s objectives and the value of its successes at the local level. The relevancy of the project was seriously challenged by the Ebola crisis, but Alert’s response was logical and appropriate in the circumstances. Activities were suspended in August 2014 and civic education materials disseminated to communities once the project restarted in November included messages about Ebola, to contribute to the wider response.

**Project efficiency**

Because the project’s specific objective and expected results were only partially met, its value for money was not as strong in practice as intended in the design. A mitigating factor is that Liberia is an expensive place to implement, making value for money inherently difficult to achieve. The project design was also ambitious and may have been unrealistic about what could be achieved by working with national-level civil society within the project’s resource constraints.

The successes of the project are the product of Alert’s project management and the skills and knowledge of the two local partner organisations. However, there have been a number of challenges during project implementation that have created barriers to efficiency in management. These include changes to the context, a change in Alert’s project management staff, inadequate coordination between Alert and its partners at times, strained relations between Alert and NARDA, and insufficient budgeting for certain activities, including monitoring community activities.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The evaluation findings lead to several recommendations to the West Africa programme:

1. **Capitalise on the success of community dialogues**

   The success of the community dialogue groups in putting reconciliation into practice should be used to try to reinvigorate the stalled national reconciliation process. The case studies of dialogue participants and the project’s final report are powerful tools for lobbying the government of Liberia to put the Roadmap into action. Alert and its partners, including the NCSCL, are in a privileged position to share experience of reconciliation in action in rural communities. Lobbying should focus on project outputs feeding into, and potentially being replicated by, the palava hut programme to be implemented by the INCHR.

2. **Strengthen the local reconciliation model for future replication**

   The therapeutic and conflict resolution elements of the community dialogues would be strengthened and garner greater impact if inputs were more technical. In future, replication of the project’s model should consider including more formal technical capacity-building for mobilisers (as master trainers) or facilitators, in talking therapy techniques and mediation skills.

3. **Twin training with ongoing accompaniment activities in future projects**

   Without training delivery being complemented by ongoing external support of some kind, whether more formalised coaching or mentoring, or simply regular reviewing of progress, there is a danger that immediate gains in knowledge and skills do not translate into longer-term changes in practice, and the impact of the training is minimal.
4. Build more time and resources for partner capacity-building into future projects

The capacity of local partners is a key variable in determining the success of a project, therefore the project design process should include an assessment of partners’ strengths and weaknesses, and the planned activities include sufficient capacity-building to fully address the gaps identified, even if this becomes a large component of the project. An explicit justification of the resources required should be made to donors, who are increasingly expecting local CSOs to play bigger roles in implementing development and peacebuilding projects, but may not always recognise capacity gaps among local NGOs.

5. Continue to work with the NCSCL

It remains important for Liberia’s unfinished journey towards peace and stability that the country has a strong and capable civil society that can represent the views of marginalised and under-represented groups with the government and other powerful actors. For this reason, future projects in Liberia should aim to continue the work started under this one (wherever relevant) and further build the capacity and reputation of the NCSCL. Lessons can be learned from this project to calibrate expectations of change and the nature of support Alert can and should provide.

6. Ensure that future projects are more readily evaluated

Project evaluations require access to as much evidence as possible to be useful exercises that stimulate learning and reflection. Preparation for the desk review should be of equal priority to facilitating the field research, even though the latter often requires more organisation. As the time available to conduct an evaluation is always short, the evaluator should be handed all the available documentary evidence needed to assess the project in one go, as early as possible in the process.