

**Local Business, Local Peace:  
the Peacebuilding Potential of the  
Domestic Private Sector**

**Case study  
Sierra Leone\***

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Sierra Leone

## Telecoms and peacebuilding: the search for shared communication

**Rebecca Besant**

In 2003 the peacebuilding NGO, Search for Common Ground, and the Sierra Leonean branch of Celtel cooperated to launch the first mobile phone network in the northern towns of Makeni, Mile 91 and the diamond-mining community of Kono. The project was an innovative example of a business-NGO partnership to promote peace. It built bridges between the former rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) strongholds in the north, the diamond district and the rest of Sierra Leone, and widened the country's information network. It built on each organisation's core strengths and held clear advantages for both.

### Background

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has been working since 1982 to help societies affected by violent conflict address their conflict issues through peaceful means. Its primary focus is to work with communication media, such as radio, TV, film, print and internet, to facilitate transforming conflict into cooperative action. The aim is to show that contentious problems can be examined in ways that inform and entertain – while promoting the search for solutions.

Since 2000, SFCG has worked in Sierra Leone to strengthen the capacity of communities to participate in building a tolerant, inclusive society for sustainable peace. Its flagship project, Talking Drum Radio, airs programmes of various formats for different audiences promoting reconciliation. A recent survey in Sierra Leone found that 89% of the population know the radio studio and have listened to its broadcasts.

Established in 1998 in the Netherlands by Sudanese diaspora investor, Dr. Mohammad Ibrahim, the mobile telecommunications company Celtel specialises in

phone networks for the African continent, the fastest growing market in the world. From an initial investment in Uganda, it has expanded and currently operates in 13 countries. Celtel has worked in Sierra Leone since 2000, investing \$30 million in its networks.

Celtel has an organisational commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR), setting high standards of ethics for its employees. As a result, it was awarded the International Finance Corporation's 'Client Leadership Award' in 2004: "Its social contributions include refurbishing schools and health centres, providing scholarships and sponsoring the Africa Education Journalism Award."<sup>1</sup> In Sierra Leone, Celtel has engaged in various social activities, including the digging of wells for safe water. Its donations include 15 phones to Sierra Leone's Acting Chief of Defence Staff to establish a hotline for civilians making complaints about corruption in the army.

### Context

Makeni and Mile 91 are northern towns populated predominantly by a minority ethnic group, the Temne, who are sensitive to what they perceive as the favouritism enjoyed by the majority Mende people. The government is Mende-dominated and services, including mobile phones, have been slower to reach the Temne north.

The RUF captured Makeni during the 10-year civil war and made it a headquarters. The town is home to a large population of former fighters, who chose not to return to their own districts after the war. This created substantial tension between ex-combatants and the indigenous Temne communities. Tension also exists between the ex-combatants and the government as the two sides struggle to reconcile after years of fighting. Makeni is the power base of the opposition All People's Congress (APC), which governed Sierra Leone for 26 years.

The third project location, Kono, is the most diamondiferous district in Sierra Leone and was one of the worst hit during the war. Diamonds were a major source of funding for the conflict and Kono is still recovering. The town of Koidu is the district headquarters, and hosts the many businesspeople and youth who depend on diamonds for their living. Celtel's mobile network was launched in Kono two weeks after launches in Makeni and Mile 91. SFCG partnered with Celtel to celebrate the network's northern debut.

### Launching mobile networks and promoting peace

SFCG approached Celtel with a proposal to use the launch of its network as a platform to highlight the importance of national reconciliation and the impact the new phone links could have on the northern region and Sierra Leone as a whole. To achieve

this, SFCG partnered with Radio Gbafth in Mile 91 and state-owned Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service stations in Makeni and Kono to broadcast live coverage of the event, and to generate dialogue about the importance of access to information.

SFCG's promotion of the launch took two forms. In a first stage, SFCG arranged with a number of key local figures to be available for telephone calls that were then broadcast through the two radio stations. In these calls local celebrities, including the vice president, the head of the opposition, leading parliamentarians from both of the main parties, ministers and other prominent people talked about the importance of connecting Makeni, Mile 91 and Kono to the rest of the country. SFCG used this mechanism to signify to the population that the government was indeed concerned with the region. It also asked residents of the two towns to call in, asking them to reflect on the impact the arrival of the mobile phones might have.

To facilitate the calls, radio station employees were equipped with phones and deployed along the main roads entering the towns. As they encountered people, they urged them to call in with their comments, expectations and fears. Callers were encouraged to speak in local languages. "Today our village has been recognised on the map," said one caller. "This is a miracle," said another. "I never thought I would speak on a phone from my village with only three houses." The opposition party leader said: "This gets us closer to our people and can cost us less even though the roads are bad." This phase of the day also provided listeners with information about the usefulness of mobile phones for security and other basic needs.

The second phase of the project was specific to Makeni and Mile 91, and revolved around the airing of SFCG's first, local-language cultural programme. In response to an evaluation of the programme conducted in January 2002, SFCG had concentrated on creating programming that local people could understand. A Mende cultural programme, entitled *Mu Gundi Hindaesia* ('Our Traditional Practices'), began airing in the south in August 2002. On the same day, SFCG introduced similar programmes in the Temne and Limba languages that will be regularly broadcast in northern areas, including Mile 91, Makeni and Kono. After the broadcast, phone lines at the radio stations were opened and the audience encouraged to call in. The response was overwhelmingly positive, with listeners genuinely excited about programming in their own languages.

Thus the partnership generated several outputs:

- 24 hours of airtime dedicated to the launch of radio programmes in Kono, Mile 91 and Makeni
- Three sets of phone-in equipment installed in radio stations by SFCG
- Three mobile phones donated to stations by Celtel
- \$750 worth of top-up cards donated by Celtel for the event

### Mutual benefits

This was the first time that SFCG had partnered with a private company and the activities during the one-off event were fully funded by Celtel. The use of mobile phone connectivity is a new way of working for the organisation, reaching new audiences in different ways. While this was a one-off project, it had a high impact, according to SFCG's own evaluation, and engaged local people in a wide dialogue about the need for linking the north with the rest of Sierra Leone.

While Celtel already had plans to extend to the north, the partnership with SFCG provided it with ample publicity, from high-level politicians to local residents. There was, therefore, a powerful business case for partnering with a well-known peacebuilding NGO with an established audience. While it meant providing additional funds and donations for the event, Celtel's contributions to the partnership lay well within the sphere of its core business activity: the provision of mobile telephony.

*Further information is available at [www.sfcg.org/](http://www.sfcg.org/)*

### Endnotes

- 1 [www.sameer-group.com](http://www.sameer-group.com)

## Sierra Leone: the role of market women in economic transformation

Christiana Solomon

Because of a lack of scholarship, the work of African women in peacebuilding, Sierra Leonean women in this instance, suffers at many levels. There is insufficient documentation on African women peacebuilders as role models, and women are under-represented as negotiators in conflicts. In addition, women have generally been portrayed as hapless victims. The reality is that some women profited – and profiteered – from conflict. Although this side of their role is known anecdotally, research is limited. One reason for this invisibility is, among other things, that grassroots groups seldom document their experiences, and when they do, the circulation of their work does not reach mainstream circles. This case study illustrates the multiple roles that women traders played in the Sierra Leone conflict and their contributions towards both conflict sustenance and peacebuilding.

### Market women in Sierra Leone

Women in Sierra Leone have the double burden of being both female and poor. Lack of accessibility to land and other assets are major constraints, along with an absence of credit availability. Among the majority of rural and low-income urban dwelling women, market women describe themselves as the ‘poorest of the poor’. They deal mostly in perishable foodstuffs at small local daily markets.<sup>1</sup> This has been accentuated further by the conflict, which destroyed the socio-economic fabric of Sierra Leone.

Most market women have little education and are unable to speak or write English. They are often bound in polygamous marriages and are subordinate in all domestic matters. Additionally, the tax system practised in Sierra Leone is disempowering. While fixed rates are levied on male stallholders at an average rate of around 1 percent of their income, market women pay dues every day that they sell, amounting to about 5 percent of their earnings. Refusing to pay a dues collector could lead to their space in the market being confiscated. Nevertheless, women reign supreme in the bustling marketplace.<sup>2</sup> These women have evolved their own power structure to settle disputes over price and quality, and to select their leadership. Though female traders dominate the markets’ institutions, their access to capital comes from relatives, parents or husbands, because banks will not offer them loans. Women in Sierra Leone require their husbands to stand as guarantors for loans from banking institutions.

Disputes between members of the same market are normally handled internally, but if the dispute involves women from two different markets, the relevant chairwomen will intervene. If they prove unsuccessful, the case can then be brought before the national president of the Market Women Association. Each market chooses its chairwoman by consensus. Through sustained interaction in the market place, a leader emerges by proving to be trustworthy and experienced. An election is held for the national executive.

### Civil war and profiteering

The war had a direct impact on the livelihoods of market women, exacerbated by the UN sanctions imposed on 8 October 1997 that prevented the sale or supply of petroleum, petroleum products, arms and related material.<sup>3</sup> For Sierra Leoneans who had not fled to Guinea, the sanctions trebled the price of rice, the staple food, overnight, and the same happened with other goods. Prices for petrol went up fivefold; commercial vehicles charged passengers exorbitant fares; while those who could not afford to pay were forced to trek long distances.

Some market women took advantage of the vacuum to engage in cross-border smuggling from Guinea of rice, onions, tomatoes and petroleum.<sup>4</sup> They travelled by road or sea to Guinea where they bought whatever goods were needed.<sup>5</sup> These were shipped by boat to Big Wharf, Freetown, a jetty well hidden beneath tarpaulins. The women collaborated with the border police and customs officials in both countries to pursue their business. According to the interviews conducted, security officers at the customs checkpoint at Big Wharf were bribed, and the goods offloaded and transferred to designated stores.

Foodstuffs intended for Freetown markets were retailed among other market women. Rice, for instance, was distributed in small quantities (five sacks each) and the rest kept hidden. The retailers sold the rice by the cup (one cup was sold for Le500), yielding more profit. A 20 kg sack of rice at that time cost Le50,000 or Le60,000 (around \$22.50-27). Smuggling was a low-cost enterprise because the infrastructure to apprehend smugglers was weak, unreliable or non-existent, but the risks were steep.

Market women also engaged in a thriving trade with the rebels. Foodstuffs and petrol were smuggled on trailers or trucks from 'safe' stores in Freetown to rebel-held areas in the provinces and sold to rebel commanders. They paid either in cash (leones or US dollars) or kind, including jewellery, gold or diamonds. Back in Freetown, market women either sold their diamonds to Lebanese dealers or smuggled them across the border to Guinea where they fetched higher prices, enabling them to buy more foodstuffs.

Trading with rebels was a risky enterprise. Some women died in road accidents on their way to the provinces, while others were ambushed on the way back by the same rebels with whom they had just traded. Often a rebel commander would send soldiers after the market women to retrieve the money or valuables provided as payment.

### Sierra Leone Market Women's Association

The Sierra Leone Market Women's Association (SLMWA) was established in 1996. Its members originally belonged to the Petty Traders Association, the largest organisation representing traders and market sellers in Sierra Leone, but, frustrated by the discriminatory way they were treated, a group of women left to form their own organisation. They complained that though they were all fee-paying members and contributed equally to the import of goods from Guinea, they did not benefit equally from the distribution of goods.

Launched on a voluntary basis with no full-time staff or external resources, the SLMWA has grown into a registered, nationwide NGO of around 6,500 women with five staff and a national executive that is fully supported through membership fees.

### Transformation with micro-credit

After the war, the livelihoods of most market women were in ruins. With the support of Campaign for Good Governance, a national NGO that had previously provided them with financial and technical assistance, a recovery plan was devised that entailed a micro-credit, revolving loan scheme to enable market women to restart their trading and productive activities.

Micro-credit schemes have become fashionable with the World Bank, governments and development practitioners who see them as effective, poverty-alleviation mechanisms for poor women. Such claims have been advanced because micro-credit not only generates financially sustainable lending institutions, it also facilitates the institutional relations needed for furthering women's empowerment. Though this has not always been the case in other contexts, micro-credit played a significant role in rebuilding the lives of market women in Sierra Leone.

Taking advantage of a \$50,000 grant from the UK Department for International Development, the SLMWA introduced micro-credit schemes in 2000 to increase the livelihoods of its membership. The project was launched by the UK's then development minister, Clare Short, in one of Freetown's central markets.

The SLMWA enjoyed a unique advantage from the micro-credit scheme because it was a grassroots organisation closely connected to women and their households. The scheme ran successfully from 2002-03 as evidenced by the wide access of market women to credit support. Some 90 percent of the credit fund was used to help the women, 70 percent of micro-credit recipients benefited from the support and nearly 80 percent of the loans were recovered.

The SLMWA's policy was to offer loans of about Le100,000 (around \$45) to each woman trader organised in groups of 20-30 borrowers across all Freetown's 26 markets. The local chairwoman oversaw compliance with the rules. The maximum loan of Le300,000 was only paid out to 'big' traders, such as dealers in rice, palm oil and fish. The loans were repayable on a daily basis at a rate of Le100 (about \$0.02). The SLMWA's initial interest rate was 5 percent, which is considered realistic in commercial terms. This was later increased to 10 percent to cover office and administration costs, and was deducted in advance.

A professional accountant was employed to manage the financial aspects of the programme, supported by a cashier and three collectors.<sup>6</sup> CGG's Gender Department provided further administrative support. Group pressure and hard work ensured repayment of the initial loans, which were then followed by others. The system proved highly successful with some women repaying loans before they fell due. Moreover, a savings scheme was introduced for borrowers who were encouraged to put aside an additional Le100 a day. This money, and the interest accruing, was used to buy yearly Treasury Bearer Bonds.

Based on the Freetown experience, micro-credit was later extended to market women in Bonthe, Bo, Kono, Makeni Kabala and Kambia districts.

### Peacebuilding properties

The SLMWA's objectives include providing opportunities for members through the provision of loans, which increased the employment of borrowers in activities such as second-hand clothing and gara tie dying. This in turn provided employment to members of the borrowers' immediate families. Thus, the credit programme had a multiplier effect that contributed to the national development goals of creating economic self-sufficiency and improving standards of living.

The micro-credit scheme also transformed the perceptions of the women about themselves and contributed to improved understanding of self-development. The scheme generated training opportunities for the SLMWA to increase its members' knowledge and skills, and to strengthen their perceptions of the dynamics of market competition. Apart from these gains, micro-credit benefited women by increasing

their participation in local political organisations, awakening a sense of involvement in the economic reconstruction of their communities.

Though the experience with market women demonstrated that micro-credit could help them become more economically independent, there has been little change in other areas of their lives. Two of these are the division of labour between women and men for the provision of household income, and the distribution of household tasks. Market women continue to do all the domestic work although they are successful entrepreneurs in their own right.

The above account demonstrates that self-reliant women's organisations can be built with popular support and can empower women if planned properly. It also shows that government support is not essential to this process. Indeed, the major problem today is the government's large-scale entry into micro-lending programmes. Micro-credit schemes in Sierra Leone were an innovation by the voluntary and NGO sector but the political elites have since hijacked them to serve their own interests. Through the Micro-Finance Programme and Social Action for Poverty Alleviation, the government paid out billions of leones in micro-credit loans to paramount chiefs and other traditional leaders. This would not normally have been questioned, but for the fact that it coincided with the electoral period, raising doubts about the government's motives.<sup>7</sup> The interest rate on the loans was 15 percent and, though not formally disclosed, government officials claim an 89 percent recovery rate.<sup>8</sup>

When government agencies offer credit, whatever the articulation in policy papers, the concern at the grassroots is how to prevent micro-credit from evolving into a platform to ensure regime survival.

## Conclusions

The nature and extent of corruption in pre-conflict Sierra Leone was a crucial determinant of the economic activities, such as smuggling, that unfolded during the war, and these were by no means gender-neutral. Market women's engagement in this grey area was both a cause and a consequence of the extenuating circumstances at that time. The desire to re-engage in legitimate economic activities after the conflict was greatly helped by the micro-credit scheme.

Women are important economic actors during and immediately after conflicts. They not only make a major contribution to the economic recovery of their families, they also play a role in revitalising the economic sphere, a key peacebuilding dimension.

In this context, the Sierra Leone scheme led to women's economic empowerment,

social reintegration and participation in local political processes, all of which are crucial if peacebuilding is to take root in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

## Endnotes

- 1 There are two types of markets in Sierra Leone: small, local, daily markets and large regional markets that meet on specified days of the week. The first deal mostly in perishable foodstuffs while the latter offer a wider range of goods, including imported textiles, leatherwork, metal implements, etc. Many families have such low incomes that they do not have the means to stock more than they actually need from day to day. But shopping in small quantities is even common among better-off families.
- 2 The market is essentially a female space. Men have distinctive roles such as butchers, and the meat trade has traditionally been in the hands of Foulah men from the north.
- 3 UN Security Council Resolution 1132 (1997) also imposed travel restrictions on members of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) junta and adult members of their families. Military equipment earmarked for the exclusive use of the Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and humanitarian assistance items were exempted.
- 4 Market women interviewed during the research trip in 2005 were concerned that dissemination of this case study would tarnish their reputations as upstanding citizens. They requested that the author point out that not all market women were involved in cross-border smuggling and that only a minimal number were involved in illicit trading with the rebels. It is difficult to know exactly how many market women were involved in the war economy since research has not been conducted in the area.
- 5 Sea was the preferred mode of transportation as boats could carry more goods.
- 6 It was the responsibility of the three collectors, working in the east, west and central areas of Freetown respectively, to 'collect' the daily payments from borrowers.
- 7 The government was criticised for wasting much-needed resources on election campaigning, which afforded the ruling party an unfair advantage over other parties.
- 8 Some recipients refused to repay the loan, arguing that it was 'government money'. This had a knock-on effect on the SLMWA scheme as some borrowers argued that, if government was not actively seeking repayment, the SLMWA should extend the same largesse to them.