

WEST  
AFRICAMonitoring borders with a gender  
lens

The West African region has been plagued by bloody conflicts and constitutes an exemplary case of how instability in one country affects neighbouring countries. Conciliation Resources (CR), an international organisation working on human rights, conflict and peace in divided societies, has been working on issues concerning sub-regional stability around the Mano River Union (MRU) countries of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea since 2002. The MRU countries are closely linked not only by their common borders and ethnic groups but also by their history and conflicts. As such, efforts to consolidate sustainable peace in the region must take these sub-regional dimensions into consideration. The MRU countries' borders have played a key role in starting conflicts and recruiting fighters: in Sierra Leone, for example, the war advanced from the Liberian border and was supported by Liberian fighters.<sup>1</sup> Experience also suggests that due to a predominant national focus of post-conflict and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration interventions, the local dynamics of violence and the cross-border dimensions of West African wars are often neglected, despite the fact that border communities remain among the most socially and economically marginalised.<sup>2</sup>

The volatility of MRU border regions is illustrated by the tensions in Yenga, a village in the Kailahun District of Sierra Leone and a sub-regionally strategic point bordering both Guinea and Liberia.<sup>3</sup> Yenga is situated on the bank of the Makona River on a fertile tract of farmland also believed to be rich in diamonds. Guinean troops first entered Yenga in the mid 1990s to help fight the Revolutionary United Front rebels during the civil war and block their exit routes into Guinea. After the war ended in 2002, Guinea retained its military presence in Yenga. The matter was resolved diplomatically when President Lansana Conteh of Guinea publicly acknowledged that Yenga was Sierra Leonean territory. This led to a signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in September 2004 which stated that the village of Yenga belonged to Sierra Leone. The agreement also stipulated that the Makona River belonged to Guinea. However, the issue was far from being resolved and border communities at Yenga are still extremely vulnerable to conflict. In fact, many Guinean military personnel remain in Yenga, and also continue to guard Yenga from a base just across the river.<sup>4</sup> While the governments understood the problem merely as a border issue, for the communities concerned it was more about access to and control over their resources. Guinean soldiers based in Yenga are farming on people's land without permission and hindering the community from using the land. For a community that relies predominantly on farming for both its income and subsistence, this is a serious concern.

CR started working in Sierra Leone in 1995 to support civil society organisations in reducing the negative impacts of conflict on communities through promoting reconciliation and peacebuilding. CR's work has evolved under the thematic areas of community peacebuilding, sub-regional security and stability and social exclusion and marginalization, with a specific focus on women and youth.<sup>5</sup> CR's current work in the region builds on its *Strengthening Citizens' Security* project, which was implemented between 2007 and 2008 with the aim of building better linkages between civil society and security forces. That project culminated in a sub-regional conference in April 2008 that brought together security sector and civil society representatives from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. This conference resulted in the recognition of the need for a joint approach towards improving information dissemination as a tool to help address border security challenges.

1 FOI, Swedish Defence Research Agency, *The Mano River Basin Area: formal and informal security providers in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone*, 2007, <http://www.foi.se/upload/projects/Africa/FOI-R-2418.pdf> (accessed November 4, 2009).

2 Conciliation Resources, *Improving Community Security in Border Areas of the Mano River Union*, March 2009 (unpublished).

3 Mariama Conteh, "Vulnerability of border communities: are we protecting them enough?", *Occasional Papers*, Conciliation Resources, 2005, <http://www.c-r.org/resources/occasional-papers/vulnerability-of-border-communities.php> (accessed October 7, 2009).

4 Sulakshana Gupta, 'Save Yenga Save Salone', New Internationalist blog, July 8, 2009: <http://blog.newint.org/majority/2009/07/08/save-yenga/> (accessed December 21, 2009).

5 Rosalind Hanson-Alp, "Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007. Civil Society's Role in Sierra Leone's Security Sector Reform Process Experiences from Conciliation Resources' West Africa Programme", *Working Paper No. 12*, GFN-SSR Network, October 2008. <http://www.ssrnetwork.net/documents/Publications/SierraLeoneWPs/working%20paper%2012.pdf> (accessed October 15, 2009).

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### Monitoring borders with a gender lens

In 2009, CR implemented a project on *Improving Community Security in Border Areas of the Mano River Union*, which aimed to build capacities for civilian oversight and monitoring and increase the accountability of security forces. CR's work on cross border security pays particular attention to the gender dimension of the problem; in particular, it takes into account the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girl traders. Between January and May 2009, CR carried out a series of needs assessments to gather information about the key security challenges faced by border communities, border security forces and high level security decision/policy-makers. It conducted focus groups and individual interviews with over 300 people at the border crossings between Sierra Leone and Liberia in Pujehun District/Grand Cape Mount County, between Sierra Leone and Guinea in Kambia District/Fourcariah Prefecture and at the tri-border crossing in the Kailahun District in Sierra Leone. In March 2009, CR hosted a high level meeting in Monrovia, Liberia, which for the first time brought together officials and policymakers from the MRU countries and the MRU Secretariat to discuss, identify and prioritise the main security challenges faced by the sub-region with a particular focus on security in border areas.

CR's needs assessments identified the following impediments to good border management in the MRU, which confirmed issues that had been identified in the high-level meeting:<sup>6</sup>

- Illegal trafficking of small arms, drugs and other goods
- Human trafficking, especially of women and children
- Civilians' ignorance of their rights
- Widespread corruption
- Lack of uniform customs tariffs among the three countries
- Lack of adequate knowledge on the part of border security personnel of the relevant national laws, protocols and human rights declarations
- Poor cooperation in the sharing of intelligence and information and allowing free movement of people and goods
- Arbitrary and unprofessional conduct by security officials vis-à-vis border communities, including episodes of sexual harassment of women
- Poor involvement of civilians and civil society organisations in early warning mechanisms established by the security sector reform process which started soon after the civil conflicts had ended in Sierra Leone and Liberia

CR's needs assessments identified and confirmed the priority border security challenges that needed to be addressed and helped to establish legitimate baseline indicators which can be used to monitor the impact of future work. The next phases of the project will include the production of a short film illustrating to the public all the issues that were raised during the assessment process that will be followed by a guided discussion to raise public awareness and encourage behavioural change among stakeholders; the organisation of an advocacy campaign and training workshops; and the setting up of civil society monitoring mechanisms.

- The importance of integrating gender in border management is discussed in section 3 of the *Border Management and Gender Tool*.
- Collaboration with civil society organisations is discussed in section 4.1 of the *Border Management and Gender Tool*.
- The challenges of integrating gender into border management in post-conflict countries are discussed in section 5.1 of the *Border Management and Gender Tool*.

<sup>6</sup> Conciliation Resources, *Improving Community Security in Border Areas of the Mano River Union*, March 2009 (unpublished).