

Elections Special

- SIERRA LEONE -

Search for Common Ground

On August 11, 2007, Sierra Leoneans turned out en masse to cast their votes for the country's next parliament and President, with a record turnout of 75.8%. The national elections marked a critical benchmark in Sierra Leone's transition out of its brutal decade-long conflict, and symbolize the consolidation of its peace, stability, and development. There were a few limited incidents of violence reported, particularly in the capital, however overall the elections were hailed as free and fair and a positive example to the region of how to conduct peaceful and transparent elections in the poorest of countries. In the parliamentary elections the opposition APC won 59 of a possible 112 seats, leaving the former ruling SLPP with 43 seats. None of the 7 presidential candidates secured the 55% of the vote necessary to win the election outright. Therefore a run off was scheduled on September 8 between the two main candidates from the APC and the SLPP. The highly charged second round resulted in a victory for former opposition leader, the Hon. Bai Koroma, defeating the SLPP Vice President Solomon Berewa, 55% to 45% in a contest that saw 477 polling stations invalidated because of turnout over 100%. Highlighting a process which is being hailed as an example to all of Africa, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) wrote: "There is no longer a place for fraud and malpractice in the Sierra Leone electoral system. The people of Sierra Leone deserve to exercise their rights in an atmosphere of freedom, fairness and transparency."

In Sierra Leone, Search for Common Ground's (SFCG) strategy focuses on building capacity and establishing local structures that support a credible and free outcome in elections. In addition to supporting an extensive national voter education campaign, including first time uses of television and live constituency debates with parliamentary candidates in strategic locations and on the radio, SFCG focused its efforts on leading the development of the Independent Radio Network (IRN) and National Election Watch (NEW), a coalition of civil society organizations dedicated to elections observation.

On Election Day SFCG's actions were shared between two distinct and complementary activities: deploying 420 election reporters in partnership with IRN and supporting NEW's 6,000 domestic observers. This special report gives an overview of SFCG's activities over the elections period.

Rumour Management and the Role of IRN

The power of IRN was never clearer than on election day, when its machinery was in full swing. Since its inception at the last presidential elections in 2002, the IRN has grown rapidly both in terms of membership and in its ambitions (see text box to the right). For the 2007 poll, SFCG and IRN strategically placed 420 roving election reporters into areas with high tension between rival parties, areas difficult to access, or places with no broadcast coverage. The reporters, who came from IRN stations and SFCG staff, were mandated to report to their own stations and live to national audiences through IRN on the conditions they found, and to monitor and investigate allegations of electoral fraud. Throughout



Voters queue at a Church in Freetown on Election Day

What is IRN?

Established in 2002 specifically to support that year's national elections the Independent Radio Network (IRN) has grown into a national network of 20 community and private radio stations, with an office and production studio in Freetown. Each member station from the 14 districts in the country feeds local news to a central hub where news programming is packaged for simultaneous broadcast back across the network. In addition, member stations carry SFCG programming to inform and entertain their listeners on key social and political issues in their country. The IRN was developed by SFCG in partnership with the Media Foundation for Peace and Development and with technical support from the BBC World Service Trust, and the US NGO Developing Radio Partners, with the long term aim of creating West Africa's first self supporting national public radio service.

election day, reports were pouring in from the field to IRN headquarters in Freetown, giving producers a clear view of how the elections were progressing nationally and feeding into a live rolling news service from early morning until mid afternoon, and again in the evening. With so many areas covered for the first time, and with the reporters able to report both through IRN and to their local radio station, ordinary people were in effect reporting to each other, providing authentic reports on the district activities that supported significant national trends and success stories; bolstering confidence in the process and the peacefulness of the outcome. Meanwhile behind the scenes, IRN producers in Freetown were making key decisions on the stories that should go on the air, balancing reporting news that people deserved to hear about their own country and making sure passions were not inflamed by news reports unreflective of the general trend around the country. Among the programming being aired by the IRN on Election Day were public service announcements reminding voters of electoral procedures and the need to bring their voter identification cards. While there were still an unacceptably high number of invalid votes from voters mistakenly spoiling their papers, officials at the booths turned back very few people for not having the correct documents, unlike at previous elections, enhancing the excited public mood around their opportunity to participate.

By late morning on August 11, an inflammatory story broke that had potentially serious implications for the peaceful outcome of the election in Freetown, and its handling shows the

cooperative power of SFCG and IRN in preventing real conflict in the country. From a police station in the capital, reports began to surface of a ballot box found stuffed with papers and election materials. IRN rapidly dispatched a reporter to the scene who found youths already surrounding the station, and allegations flying that the government-controlled police were intervening to alter the result in the opposition stronghold of Freetown. IRN sent a second reporter to record the contents of the box on video, which turned out to be full of old training materials and not electoral ballots. IRN's Executive Producer made the decision to put the reporters live on the air to explain the situation and the contents of the box to the nation. With voters around the capital glued to their radio sets, IRN proved its capacity to calm fears and set the tone on credible media reporting, which proved to be truly important in allowing for a peaceful and fair election.



After a power failure IRN volunteers gather reports by candle light .

As voting moved to a close at the end of Election Day, SFCG and IRN shifted to their second role: leading the independent media shadow count of electoral votes. With a team of database entry personnel backed by a group of volunteers manning phones at the Freetown hub, the 420 election reporters stationed across the country called in the unofficial voting results as they were announced and posted at each poll centre. Working at a pace of around 1% of total votes per hour, and despite suffering electricity blackouts that forced the phone operators to continue by candlelight, the result tallies were gathered and broadcast to listeners around the nation. As the counting process progressed and NEC began issuing consolidated results, SFCG and IRN adjusted their strategy and focused on managing expectations around the developing numbers. Overall, the variety of analyses provided by IRN on the results contributed to the people's understanding of NEC percentages and the patience they exhibited while waiting for the final result by NEC. The approach of gradually releasing information in the period between polls closing and NEC's initial results five days later—three days in the run off—was a key element in reducing tension. It also sensitised supporters in areas heavily in favour of one party that the result would not go automatically their way, and prepared voters early on for the possibility of a run off. At the same time, it gave the public confidence that there was an independent watchdog monitoring the

Other SFCG activities supporting the election preparations included:

- Constituency debates with Parliamentary candidates in all 14 districts carried live on air, where candidates explained their manifestos.
- A ten part weekly TV soap opera on civic and voter education, focusing on women's participation.
- Regular editions of the ever popular radio soap *Atunda Ayenda* dealing with elections issues, as well as special editions of the other SFCG radio programmes and,
- Trainings with the BBC World Service Trust to build capacity in partner radio stations.

For more information see this month's West Africa Update, available at www.sfcg.org

process in case the official results differed significantly from the individual counts. The IRN elections broadcasts were a real test of local media's ability to maturely and constructively contribute to the political process, without resorting to inflammatory propaganda. Their success provided further evidence that access to credible information helps prevent violent conflict.

The IRN Impact.

Throughout the election period IRN reacted rapidly to the constantly changing news environment without compromising its core principles of supporting a peaceful and credible elections process. In so doing it won respect and plaudits from independent media monitors as well as providing a crucial resource to the people of Sierra Leone. This was most evident in the period between the first round and the run off. With the first round results slowly being tabulated by NEC, it became apparent early on that a run off was highly likely. Recognizing the volatility of the situation, IRN broadcast two hour-long programmes live each day, inviting leading political analysts and electoral experts on air to share their knowledge with the public, and ensuring that credible information and a clear voice was injected into the highly charged public debate. At the same time IRN

continued to monitor the NEC tally in case it differed from their own. After the first round results were officially announced IRN acted to investigate concerns raised by the political parties, by cross checking allegations of irregularities with their reporters and independent observers such as the European Union Elections Observer Mission, and the ECOWAS Observer Group. Hassan Arouni, of the BBC World Service Trust and an IRN producer, noted that accolades which IRN received from NEC, political parties, observer groups and the public, were not just for its role in making the elections transparent, "but also for providing a level playing field for the actors in the presidential run-off, and to equally give the people an opportunity to know the conduct of the elections." More praise came from the Independent Media Monitoring and Refereeing Panel (I-MORP), which commended "the admirable roles being played by media institutions such as ...Independent Radio Network (IRN), the BBC Trust, and



IRN volunteers take calls from Reporters in polling centres around the country reporting on the situation in their area.

Talking Drum Studio," in "charting the way forward for the media to be actively engaged at all levels of political processes in the country." In contrast, other media outlets were censured for "inciting violence, promoting hate, malice, tribalism and political intolerance."

SFCG and National Election Watch (NEW)

As Sierra Leone moves forward with its development process, SFCG is shifting its approach to facilitation; supporting and strengthening local capacity and building sustainable local institutions to enhance participation in governance. This approach is central to SFCG's engagement with the NEW, and symbolised by the cooperation and partnership exhibited on Election Day. Working with energetic, dedicated leaders and members from more than 375 civil society organizations, SFCG provided technical assistance and coordination to one of the most extensive election monitoring efforts undertaken in Africa. The commitment and determination of NEW's members contributed to the success of the initiative through their hard work and long hours, always in difficult conditions as they deployed to every polling centre around the country. Under the leadership of its Chairperson and SFCG Africa Director, Frances Fortune NEW's decentralised decision making structure and innovative approach led it to effectively achieve all three of its strategic goals over the elections period, none of which had been done before in Sierra Leone.

What is NEW?

National Election Watch is a coalition of over 375 local and international Civil Society Organisations including members as diverse as SFCG, Oxfam, the Sierra Leone Teacher's Union, and religious groups. From its engagement in the 2002 and 2004 elections, NEW developed a strategy to guide its engagement in the 2007 process, focusing on transforming its organizational structure and capacity in order to rise to the challenge of the following three goals:

1. Deploying a trained observer in every poll station,
2. Implementing a rapid reporting mechanism to get a clear snapshot of the country,
3. Conduct a parallel vote count.

In line with its first goal, NEW placed trained civil society observers in 97% of the polling stations around the country. With a checklist to monitor the process and to record incidents, combined with the effect of their sheer presence in reassuring voters and reminding officials alike, NEW harnessed the knowledge and networks of its member organizations to mobilize observers in every small town and village. This ensured NEW played a key role in reinforcing democratic values on polling day in areas where traditional authorities can sometimes impede individual rights. "In the polling centres in rural areas, many of

the people look at the centre manager as the boss," noted NEW member Andrew Sellu. "The presence of NEW changed that. Our observers in their black t-shirts made people aware that they can vote their own mind. The NEC officials said it was good that NEW was there." Members of the two person EU delegation in the remote frontier

Kailahun district would later remark on the encouraging sight of black tshirted NEW observers in every post they visited, some of the 350 observers mobilized in that area alone. Integrated into this network were incident report coordinators to solve problems at the local level and to pass on serious incidents to the NEW database. By filtering for those problems likely to impede or affect a fair vote from other more manageable problems, the incident coordinators were able to act as conflict managers and improve the speed at which genuine concerns could be raised with the appropriate authorities. In the second round 21 incidents of multiple voting captured through the database were reported to NEW headquarters, which assisted NEC in their subsequent investigations of voter fraud in several hundred stations.

NEW also succeeded in its second goal of creating and operating a rapid reporting system for electoral observers. With technical support from the National Democratic Institute, a randomly selected representative sample referred to as 'priority polling stations' were identified. From this sample the trained observers were to send an SMS to NEW's database reporting on selected questions on the checklist and a parallel vote count. Over one

 SFCG Africa Director and NEW Chair Frances Fortune (wearing the black NEW t-shirt) in discussions with SFCG Country Director Ambrose James (wearing the white IRN shirt) on Election Day.

third of these stations were not in mobile phone coverage areas, meaning some observers had to walk for hours to participate in the exercise, while others crossed rivers and flooded areas in boats, nevertheless within 36 hours of polls closing in the first round, NEW received 72% of priority centre information, this figure rising to 93% during the second round. This gave the NEW leadership an almost instant snapshot of the situation across the country, and based on this data they were able to deliver a credible and timely preliminary report to the media, declaring the first round 'free, fair and credible' and the run off, 'calm and credible'.

The third objective achieved was in mounting a successful parallel vote count. Over both rounds and using the data submitted by the priority observers within the first few hours, NEW was able to confirm the final result announced by NEC which on each occasion precisely matched NEW's snapshot. This fact lent credence to the integrity of NEC's data, and also demonstrated the high degree of accuracy in NEW's rapid reporting system. By achieving these three goals during the elections, NEW came of age as a national civil society movement, a fact recognised by nearly all the international observer mission reports, including those from ECOWAS, the EU and NDI, which praised NEW and civil society in their reports for their formidable contributions to the transparency of the elections.

"The safety of the country lies in the hands of its citizens, with NEW support and help the people have been able to achieve a peaceful and transparent election." Berema A Mousa, NEW observer.

"The role of SFCG in NEW has elevated SFCG as an organisation in the minds of people in Sierra Leone. It is now very prestigious. NEW and SFCG have come through, and their work has built strong civil society networks for future work."

Ken Ganna-Conte, Vice Chair of NEW, and SFCG Partnership Coordinator.



The Constituency 8 supervisor in Kailahun district, pays one of his last observers in the remote frontier region of South East Sierra Leone.

Building Sustainable Institutions: The Elections Legacy

One of SFCG's objectives in Sierra Leone is to build sustainable local institutions to increase public participation in governance. In line with this it has supported NEW in three key ways. First, it provided the leadership to the organization and was key in leading its development into an autonomous, domestic-led coalition. Second, while logically many coalition members supported NEW with personnel and vehicles, SFCG shared its implementation capacity to support the civil society effort in this vast coalition, through its infrastructure on the ground and contacts in the donor community. The third role

"The centre was overcrowded, but it was calm. People were eager to do their voting. I joined up with NEW because as a Sierra Leonean, I need to exercise my civic rights...the elections were free and fair. I am hopeful about the future."
Were you intimidated? "Not at all." Alfred E Abdullah, 30. People's Educational Association (PEASL)



Sierra Leone Country Director Ambrose James has his voting card checked by NEC officials at the entrance to the polling centre in Freetown.

financial assistance from Oxfam on gender issues, and additional core funding from VSO, all of which together indicates that NEW will continue to play a positive role in the development of Sierra Leone.

Beyond this development in NEW and the peaceful outcome of the elections, the long term legacy of the 2007 poll will be the confidence and energy created from bringing a citizen army of civil society poll watchers together. As in other areas of society, civil society has tended to be dominated by an unchanging elite, unrepresentative of the wider voices in Sierra Leone. Instead, this election has brought forward a whole new generation of civil society workers at a different level, who are energised, and ready to participate in the development of their country. By fostering new partnerships among these groups and individuals at the local, regional and national level, the real impact of SFCG's and NEW's work will be seen over the next few years, as new projects, synergies and ideas emerge from the crucible of the 2007 elections. In the words of the NEW's National Coordinator *"The outreach capacity of NEW is now immense. In a very challenging environment we have broken new ground in bringing both credible election news to the citizens, but also in developing interpersonal contacts among our civil society members, which will have its own impact on the country's development. We want to build on this for 2008."*

SFCG fulfilled was in working with the Secretariat to develop a strong support function without taking decision making power away from the district and local level. Through SFCG's leadership, the broad coalition has gained a powerful cohesiveness which will sustain it into the future, regardless of SFCG's role in the body. NEW is now registered as a limited company, and has evolved into an independent organisation with its own constitution, capable of attracting its own funding and of operating without outside management. With support from the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, NEW has in place a strong communications strategy which uses IRN radio broadcasts to assist in decentralising the recruitment process. Support from DfID has funded each observation effort, with each massive deployment of observers to the polling centres generating institutional knowledge and capacity for future operations. NEW has a multiple-funder base, benefiting from technical and



Results posted on the wall of the meeting house in a village on the Guinean border in Kailahun district.

At the time of publication planning for the inauguration of the new president of Sierra Leone was getting underway. IRN has decided to continue broadcasting for one hour per day over the next month, while NEW is compiling its data from the 5930 stations for analysis and a final report. Overall, this election has presented Sierra Leone with the opportunity to make a paradigm shift in how the media, civil society and the public participate in the governance of their nation. SFCG will continue to work at the heart of this process until this goal is achieved.

SFCG in Sierra Leone is especially grateful for the support of these donors and partners:

