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**UNOWA Workshop on Reporting for Peace**

Strengthening Media and Civil Society Awareness of Conflict  
Prevention and Peace-building Cross-Border Issues in West Africa

4 May 2005, Dakar, Senegal

## **Workshop on Strengthening Media and Civil Society Awareness of Conflict**

### **Prevention and Peace Building Cross-Border Issues in West Africa**

UNOWA, UNESCO, May 04 2005

Introductory papers were presented on three specific topics in relation to UNOWA experience in terms of conflict prevention and peace keeping. They had to do with cross-border issues, DDR operations, and the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission approach to border dispute.

The sub-regional experience shows that the Media can help exacerbate a conflict as well as create the conditions for its resolution in situations where conflicts seem to be unavoidable. This may be a rationale for the Media of this region to develop an integrated communication and information strategy for the larger public which is based on the protection of the “right to accurate information” and the “right to free information”.

The topics resulted in the definition of the major challenges the Media have to meet and their responsibilities in terms of people’s security, conflict prevention and management, and stability of Governments.

#### **1. First goal of the workshop: Capacity building on cross-border issues related to peace and security in West Africa for the Media, peace keeping missions, and civil society organizations.**

1.1 The West African area, including the Sahel, presents a cultural and economic continuum which is extremely rich in promises for the populations of those countries towards free movement of persons and goods. However, due to porous borders and the lack of control by public authorities, free movement tends to facilitate the cross-border spread of all scourges of economic and humanitarian criminality and infectious diseases. These situations undermine the safety and living conditions of the populations and the opportunities of investments.

1.2 The specificity of current conflicts is the fact that they occur at first within countries and spill over the borders into other countries. The current dynamic of human, social, and economical relationships in the West African area underlies the phenomenon sustained by flaws in national territories which are more and more unable to contain and control them. The human dynamics which have much to do with trade, migration and conflicts, may acquire a cross-border dimension. In these conditions, national territories are no longer able to contain the conflicts which affect them, and no country is spared once a neighbour country is affected.

1.3 This assessment led to the adoption in January 2005 by ECOWAS of the concept of « border country » (pays-frontiere) originally developed by Mali, which is defined as: « *a geographical space astride the borderline between two or several neighbouring countries inhabited by people with socioeconomic and cultural relationships* ».

1.4 The United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) and the Regional Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), with the participation of the United Nations Country Teams and peace keeping missions, ECOWAS, development partners, and the civil society of the sub region launched in October 2004 a joint initiative called *Integrated Strategies for Sensitive Border Areas in West Africa*. The initiative, which is mentioned in the March 2004 Report of the Secretary General to the Security Council on cross-border problems, is derived from the recommendation of the mission of the Security Council conducted in West Africa in June 2004 calling on “*the United Nations to work on integrated strategies of cooperation with the governments involved so as to deal with a wide range of issues affecting those areas, in order to try and prevent the expansion of conflicts*”. Projects of integrated strategies for four (4) particular cluster countries were developed in that respect: i) Guinea/Cote d’Ivoire/Liberia/Sierra Leone (Guinee Forestiere); ii) Mali/Burkina Faso/Cote d’Ivoire/Ghana; iii) Mauritania/Mali/Niger; iv) Senegal/The Gambia/Bissau Guinea.

1.5 Following a first assessment of the situations in the four (4) cluster countries made in October 2004, a workshop was convened on April 19-20 in Timbuktu on the issue. It resulted in the emphasis laid, apart from the need for opening up for various support initiatives to develop stakeholders groups, on the need for an effective communication mechanism to inform populations and protect them against the risks of spread and dissemination of criminality and insecurity.

1.6 The participants noted that the border areas share the same forms of criminality (drug, arm, money trafficking), and, perhaps as a result of that, they shelter all sorts of corruption: fake roadblocks, preferential treatments, unjustified withholding or refusal of passage right, undeclared goods, bribery of civil servants bribery, arbitrary seizures, various concealments and collusions.

1.7 The importance of community radios was stressed by most of the participants who referred to their own experience. On the border between Cote d’Ivoire and Liberia, a network of radios was built in partnership with IRIN which used the UNAMSIL equipment to design commercials in national language for the disarmament of the populations. However, although community based radios can be very useful in conflict prevention, several issues arise such as: What is to be broadcasted? Who is going to do it and under whose supervision? Where is it to be done? The risk of community based radios being used to inflame ethnic tension was also stressed.

1.8 In Sierra Leone, the experience of broadcasting on the border with Guinea and Liberia is based on the realities lived by the communities. This experience is strengthened by the existence of a common language: Kissi, and the periodical meetings of the Kissi speaking community in the three countries. A broadcasting programme, in the form of light soap operas called «the Boat of Unity», is produced and broadcasted for those countries and deals with the topics of peace building.

1.9 Borders can also be a source of conflict (i.e. the Senegal-Mauritania conflict). PANOS Institute is developing in those areas a linguistic approach to produce information in a national language (Fulani) in order to promote peace, exchange, and cultural consistency across the borders.

1.10 As far as the Nigerian experience is concerned, and recognizing the usefulness of community based radios, there appears the need for a regulatory framework for more effectiveness of these bodies. With regards to the ICJ ruling on the border dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria, participants said that, from the onset, the Media strongly responded against the ICJ decision which resulted in Nigeria's reluctance to comply with and implement it. The Media played a negative role in the settlement process of this border dispute, and in informing the public. That is why the Nigerian government cannot risk going against its now poorly informed public opinion.

1.11 IRIN and the three Peacekeeping Operations in the sub-region have also launched their own community based type radio broadcast programmes. They all stressed the difficulty of working in border areas or even with bordering countries to address cross-border issues.

1.12. On the DDR programmes, the Media can help harmonize those issues, particularly the implementation mechanisms in the countries concerned, by publishing the provisions of the agreements and generating more confidence in the operations to be conducted. Well prepared, the Media could be the appropriate channel for DDR programmes to have an impact beyond the initial objective, and help bring about the social reintegration of former fighters through the enhancement of a sense of citizenship and the mitigation of psychological traumas among children and women soldiers. In so doing and to avoid cross-border problems being spread, the DDR action or at least that of the Media should cover even neighbouring conflict-free countries, as a prevention measure. Most of the time, the concerned populations find refuge in those countries where there are found by the disarmed or non disarmed fighters.

1.13 The Media on the borders are in a well placed position to convey peace messages to travelling fighters and populations on the move. They can also provide early warning signs of humanitarian risks in landlocked and isolated areas.

## **2. Second Goal: Capacity building of the Media and the civil society for a more effective use and dissemination of information for the sake of conflict prevention and peace building in the sub region.**

2.1 If, as a result of high illiteracy rates affecting the populations of the sub region, where younger generations are used to wars, the discussions primarily dealt with the broadcasting organs, the situation regarding the conditions of work, infrastructure, and equipment are common to all Media.

2.2 The conditions of work of the Media depend on the situation of the country where they are based. To understand the way they work, the internal situation of the country, its economic profile, the status of human rights and individual freedoms, and the influence of the civil society should be taken into account. However, according to participants, most often than not, the Media are run by more or less skilled stakeholders who can only afford to satisfy their material needs by favouring the highest bidder or are militants and activists lurking in the Media and fuelling tensions depending on their interests.

2.3. It is relevant, according to the participants' understanding, to be specific on the meaning of « Capacity Building ». If it is simply about developing the capacities of the Media and encouraging the extension of their resource and their diversity without negatively impacting the staff quality and competency, it may be counterproductive. The aim of capacity building should help turn the Media into a communication channel for the sake of informing and educating the majority of the populations. The legal instruments on the Media, the content of messages, the quality of stakeholders as well as the resources of the Media should be considered within the framework of the improvement of actions and strengthening of the Media.

2.4 Despite the context of political and media pluralism in West African countries, it is worth mentioning that the Media are often seen as instruments of propaganda in the hands of the ruling authorities. As a result, they rarely play an active role in electoral campaigns and access to the Media remains unfair and often biased in times of elections. The Media are often funded from foreign aid, so they are regarded as « projects » and government property. It is an issue which needs to be reviewed for it reduces the impact of community based radios and freedom of the press.

2.5 One of the basic principles for the empowerment of the Media is the freedom of expression and thought and free flow of information. UNESCO has a specialized division and a large experience on these issues and draws on the freedom of the press to develop a policy of conflict prevention. The experience sharing process which took place in Stockholm in 2002 and which gathered NGOs and United Nations agencies aimed at searching for a coordination of actions for an integrated and consistent approach of the Media in pre, during, and post conflict situations. A seminar report on Communication and Conflicts was developed, and a platform on conflict management was put in place, in which UNESCO is called upon to promote and to implement in partnership with governments in question. This process will help start a dialogue with governments and review regulations, if necessary, to adapt the legislation to the new environment of communication and to meet the needs of the general public. The laws on the press are often ill adapted and may result in conflict, a reason why it is necessary to work closely with governments in order to modify

them. In this respect, UNESCO has started since 2003 a need assessment for Liberia in partnership with the active participation of other partners making up the Partnership for Media and Conflict Prevention in West Africa. The partnership is a strategic network of UN agencies (UNESCO, OCHA and UNDP), international, regional and national/local media NGOs and professional organizations as well as relevant government ministries, such as the Ministry of Information in Liberia. UNESCO also supports the continued efforts to coordinate assessments and implementation of activities and programs in line with the above mentioned strategy for Liberia as well as initiate the model approach in other countries in order to ensure a more holistic and broad based approach to media assistance. This programme includes a Media training programme to cover elections in partnership with the Media Foundation for West Africa.

2.6 In many countries the Media are perceived as being controlled by political authorities. In a politicized environment where everyone belongs to a political party, the Media are hardly independent. Building on the concept of Disarmament UNOCI has developed partnership with the Media organizations in order to “disarm the pens and the microphones” and get the media to become part of the peace process rather than the opposite. Nowadays, ONUCI-FM is one of the most effective radios in terms of reliable information.

2.7 UNMIL emphasizes the importance of promoting community Media, particularly in an environment like that of Liberia where there are several national languages and where English is not spoken by groups targeted by peace operations. In this case, UNMIL wants to expand its range outside Monrovia, for there are no other high range radios. It is also planning to reach the Liberia refugees and Diaspora.

2.8 Radio UNAMSIL has been very successful in giving a voice to the people and creating an interregional link by providing relevant accurate and timely information. It has helped maintain calm in difficult region, for example in the South which was a CDF stronghold. It also broadcast messages to instil a sense of pride and generate more interest in the local elections.

2.9 Still in Sierra Leone, Search for Common Ground works with existing Media to help strengthening the capacities and resources and producing information on issues related to conflict prevention and management. It is also supported by a network of independent radios including community based as well as commercial radios.

2.10 Altogether, the participants stressed the fact that independent radios (community as well as commercial ones) while they are more appropriate for the dissemination of the culture of peace, since they are closer to the populations and use local languages, have less access to external funding. Journalists are often ill informed and do not have the influence to approach political and social stakeholders and do not have access to quality information. Although the situation of the Media can vary from one country to another, the aim of a communication strategy would be to prevent the Media from being trouble and conflict mongers and to help them becoming part of the peace process instead.

### **3. Third Goal: Contribution to the development of a communication strategy on the cross border issues related to peace and security in the sub region.**

3.1 Based on the assessments made by the participants, a communication strategy should be based on the responsibility of the Media and the security of the journalists which can be summarized by *the duty to provide accurate information, and the right to free information*. The strategy would also take into account the experiences presented by the participants in the workshop.

3.2 To approach governments for *legislation review* and involve them into taking into account and protecting the roles and responsibilities of the Media in preventing conflicts, a consultative action implemented by UN offices and agencies (such as UNOWA and UNESCO) can be considered in that respect.

3.3 International NGOs which are active in post conflict countries, United Nations agencies and the Media should *establish an information and best-practices sharing framework through an integrated approach* to be defined among themselves.

3.4 The United Nations missions, agencies and offices would help *prevent the Media from conveying hate messages and would organize a counteroffensive* against their influence within the populations.

3.4 *Successful and charismatic stars can be used as Ambassadors of peace, like Alpha Blondy\* and Salif Keita in Cote d'Ivoire and George Weah in Liberia\*.*

\* (following the workshop, Alpha Blondy has been appointed by UNOCI as Messenger of Peace for Cote d'Ivoire. George Weah has become candidate to the presidential elections in Liberia)

3.5 Community based radios are very successful among the populations. *A bottom-up approach should be encouraged* to have that type of Media where the communities are motivated and have the capacities to achieve sustainability.

3.6 For the Media to be more professional they should develop *a project approach for their activities to become sustainable and stop the endless dependence* on external funding and support which are often unpredictable and short term in scope. That is the price to be paid to gain independence and freedom of expression.

3.7 Institutions of the international community and agencies of the United Nations have a responsibility towards the populations in terms of protection of their rights and conflict prevention. *Journalists and Media which help understand the situations in the countries should also receive an appropriate training and enjoy protection from these institutions.*

#### 4. Conclusions - Recommendations:

4.1 The Media, and the community based radios in particular, are powerful means of conflict prevention. They can help, if the resources are available and the will reaffirmed, directly reach the most vulnerable populations and minimize the risks of local cross border conflicts.

4.2 The Internet and the new information and communication technologies play a critical role in information dissemination to and sharing with the most remote groups, when the Media are often muzzled.

4.3 But, to achieve the objectives of effective, sustainable, and free information, the Media and its stakeholders should have the necessary resource and protection so as not to be used to spread conflict.

4.4 At the practical level, and given the assessments made by the participants, some minimal conditions should be put to place. As a matter of fact, the participants in their intervention have developed, based on their own experience, *an indicative framework in order to operationalize the contribution of the Media to peace:*

- Firstly, have a control and coordination framework for the Media consistent with the goals of peace and conflict prevention. Then, encourage Media networking which may result, according to some participants, in Media Houses or similar structures.
- Ensure that the journalists are more professional, assuming that their vulnerability derives from their poor conditions of living which expose them to the dictates of their material needs (“policy of the stomach”);
- Protect journalists, for most of the time, professionals are persecuted and forced to leave their countries;
- Develop approaches based on the partnership with the United Nations agencies and NGOs, and a strong partnership with the northern Media to ensure security for the journalists in their countries and their independence of local stakeholders;
- Networking of journalists such as the experience of PANOS and community based radios, particularly in border areas, as effective means to disseminate the information;
- Capacity building of journalists to produce information and use local culture channels for a mass information : joint-productions in local languages, popular theatre, light operas, oral testimonies, commercials, sketches, etc. and involve target groups in productions ;
- Take into account the critical influence of local leaders on populations for the production of their topics and on their approach of public sensitization ;
- Understand the situations in the country to anticipate and prevent through a target group approach, particularly the youths and women and develop topics related to love for and confidence in the home country ;
- Strengthen the Media in sensitive areas with high range infrastructures like in Liberia.

4.5 A constant monitoring in collaboration with the Media will help the United Nations to be well informed in a timely manner so as to implement preventive measures instead of

being merely reactive when a conflict breaks out or when sometimes it is too late to contain it.

4.6 For community based radios: Their coordination along the borders within the framework of ECOWAS and the African Union. Their strengthening wherever the conditions are suitable, like what IRIN is doing.

Involve this type of radio in election campaigns and in order to create the conditions of a fair access of candidates to the Media.

4.7 Finally, involve all the Media in DDR programmes the success of which determines any hope for the resumption of sustainable peace in West Africa.

The workshop being the first step towards the development of a strategy of capacity building for the Media and conflict prevention, UNOWA in partnership with the other United Nations agencies and ECOWAS, will sustain the process in order to improve the profile of the West African Media and turn them into real instruments in the partnership for peacebuilding.