



**A road less travelled:
Parliamentary approaches to conflict prevention,
reconciliation, and peace building**



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Sierra Leone: Reconciliation through inclusive and accountable leadership

Background to conflict: The conflict in Sierra Leone started in 1991, when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded from neighboring Liberia. Initially driven by the desire to control the diamond mines, the conflict became political after the May 1997 coup d'état when the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) joined hands with the RUF in spreading terror and violence.

The 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement raised hopes for an end to the war after the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sent a Monitoring Group, which successfully restored the government of President Kabbah. However, attacks by RUF forces continued and peace was established only once the leader of the RUF was arrested and a cease fire agreement was signed in May 2002. By the end of the civil war, the country was faced with the task of reconciling after 120,000 people were killed. Much of the population was traumatized through atrocities that included widespread maiming, the destruction of entire villages, and the exploitation of child soldiers.

Achievements: Sierra Leone has made great strides toward reconciliation and peace building since the end of the decade-long civil war in 2002. In May 2012, all ten registered political parties signed a declaration setting the ground rules for the November 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections, which were acknowledged to have been free and fair.

Two transitional justice mechanisms were established to aid reconciliation: the Special Court in The Hague, which was meant to adjudicate the cases of those accused of bearing greatest responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was mandated to create an impartial, historical record of the conflict, address impunity, and promote reconciliation to prevent a recurrence of violations. Both mechanisms are close to being completed now that the former Liberian president Charles Taylor has been sentenced to 50 years in jail by the Special Court. However, many of the TRC's recommendations are still to be implemented, and some of them have been incorporated into the parliamentary national action plan that was adopted in 2009.

Sierra Leone's government, in conjunction with UNIPSIL and the United Nations Peace Building Commission (PBC), has taken several steps to address some of the root causes of conflict. Among them are the setting up of a National Youth Commission to help address the challenges of youth unemployment, and the creation of a technical center—The Obasanjo Centre—which will be used for training youths to help them find jobs. Some of the more important measures that have been taken so far include streamlining the ministerial system, putting civil service reform back on the political agenda, and requiring ministers to abide by a set of job performance targets. Furthermore, in line with the recommendations of the TRC, the role of women in peace building and national politics will

be strengthened through policies that establish a 30 per cent quota for women in elective and other governance position. The recent elections gave the Koroma government a mandate to forge ahead with its “Agenda for Prosperity,” which outlines the long-term priorities for the country: building international economic competitiveness, improving employment prospects, and strengthening social protection mechanisms.

Parliamentary involvement in reconciliation: The Parliament in Sierra Leone lacks the necessary human and financial resources to tackle fully and effectively contribute to reconciliation efforts. MPs are unable to hold meetings in their constituencies that would allow them to hear citizens’ concerns and explain the work of parliament in the area of reconciliation. An IPU programme in Sierra Leone found poor communication between citizens and their elected representatives, little understanding among the population of the roles and responsibilities of parliamentarians and of parliamentary action as a whole, especially in the area of legislation, and little consultation with the wider public on legislative proposals.

The IPU has provided assistance to the Parliament to help it respond to these challenges. Apart from capacity building assistance to strengthen the functioning of the parliament and its secretariat, the IPU has worked with the parliament to deliver on reconciliation and peace-building expectations. In April 2009, the parliament adopted a roadmap following a seminar organized by the IPU. The roadmap provided for efforts to strengthen working relationships within the parliament, between parliament and civil society engaging and empowering the youth, fighting corruption and building a culture of ethics and service, promoting human rights, including civil and political rights, and fostering the social and economic agenda.

The parliament has been relatively successful in implementing some of the above objectives. It established the National Youth Commission through an Act of Parliament in 2009, which is charged with implementing policies, programmes, and projects to develop the youth’s potential and with assisting in the creation of job opportunities. Furthermore, the parliamentary human rights committee has visited prisons, schools, and hospitals in order to verify and report on human rights practices. The parliament has also engaged in consultations with civil society to address sensitive issues, such as how to respond to human rights abuses and ensure the transparent management of natural resources. Leaders of the ruling and opposition parties increasingly involve each other in the decision-making process. With support from the IPU, the parliament has organized several cross-party visits to various constituencies in the country to explain parliament’s work, garner the people’s views on issues before parliament, and to foster a culture of peace and tolerance in politics. The IPU has also helped the parliament design a code of ethics for parliamentarians and public officials. Lastly, given the fight over natural resources that fuelled the civil war, the IPU has recently engaged the parliament in a bid to institute more responsible, accountable, and equitable management and distribution of revenue from the extractive industries.

Challenges to reconciliation: Among the main challenges facing the Sierra Leonean authorities is widespread poverty coupled with large-scale unemployment especially among the youth. In the meantime, the political environment remains fragile. The President exacerbated regional political rivalries by dismissing a number of functionaries appointed by the previous administration and replacing them with supporters of the APC. Sporadic clashes continue to be rife with political rallies frequently disrupted by opposing camps. After election results were announced, the opposition claimed election irregularities.

Questions:

- How can parliament strengthen communication and cooperation with constituents and civil society? What more can the international community do to enhance the relations between parliament and the people?
- How can women be empowered to play a more robust role in the peace-building agenda?
- How can political parties be made to cooperate more effectively? What incentives can be given to political parties to create stronger policy platforms that are not based on ethnic or cultural identities?
- What challenges will Sierra Leone's reconciliation efforts be facing if the flow of international aid decreases?