

Sierra Leone – Barefoot Soldiers for Social Justice, Food Security and Peace

As Sierra Leone continues its post-war reconstruction, LSE's Simone Datzberger looks at the role of the Organisation for Peace, Reconciliation and Development-Sierra Leone (OPARD-SL) in bringing peace to the West African country.

It took me two attempts to reach Yoni Chiefdom also known as Mile 91, which is a two and a half hour drive away from Freetown. Rainy season was just about to start in early July 2011 and my poor knowledge of local travel connections taught me the unforgettable lesson that it is certainly cheaper, but not advisable, to travel outside Freetown by motorbike – despite the ongoing road construction.

When I at last reach Mile 91, a well-spoken, middle-aged man receives me, Mr Ahmed Muckson Sessay, Director of **OPARD-SL** (Organisation for Peace, Reconciliation and Development – Sierra Leone). Even though I have rescheduled our interview three times, it does not prevent him from welcoming me warmly.



The town of Masiaka suffered several rebel attacks during the civil war

OPARD-SL started off as a voluntary organisation in 1999 initiated by local farmers to help promote peace during the decade-long vicious civil war in Sierra Leone. The need to do so was very pressing indeed: between 1994 and 2000 the rebels attacked Mile 91 19 times and soon the region (in particular the nearby town Masiaka) became a strategic junction which (in BBC's correspondent **Mark Doyle's words**) "...changed hands between the various armed factions countless times".

Given that a few community members knew some of the rebels, OPARD-SL was able to initiate early talks with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Later, the organisation would also serve as a mediator amongst all warring parties. "We were barefoot soldiers trying to negotiate peace," Mr Muckson Sessay tells me.

While talking about the current work of his organisation, he gives me a copy of a letter dating back to 10 January 2001, written by **UNAMSIL's** (United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone) then Commanding Officer Colonel Khushal Thakur. Although an official document, Colonel Thakur

addresses Mr. Muckson Sessay amicably and in handwritten script as *My dear Bro Muckson* – a subtle indication of the unique interpersonal ties that are only developed in situations of the highest distress and emergency.

In his letter, Colonel Thakur then expresses his sincere gratitude for Mr. Muckson Sessay's "... active mediation and indulgence [which] reinvigorated and revitalised the sagging relationship between the RUF and UNAMSIL. This subsequently facilitated in strengthening the ties and retrieval of UN equipment captured by RUF in May 2000."

The colonel's letter is an example of probably the darkest hours in the history of UNAMSIL when the RUF broke the Lomé deal and, among other incidents, took around 500 UN peacekeepers hostage. The events could not have been more embarrassing – instead of the UN disarming the rebels, the rebels disarmed the UN.

This was eventually resolved through a massive international intervention (most notably British backing and reinforcing of UNAMSIL troops). But, this often leaves one major aspect overlooked: bringing peace to Sierra Leone was preceded and constantly influenced by a series of civil society initiatives. Mile 91, is just one of many examples where ordinary Sierra Leoneans proved their courage and their restless convictions for peace.

According to Muckson Sessay, OPARD-SL's efforts during and after the conflict were never really acknowledged in official peace ceremonies. What remains of OPARD-SL's endeavours are however remembered through UNAMSIL's letter in Muckson Sessay's office and a peace monument an hour and a half motorbike ride away from the village.

What has happened to Mile 91 and thus OPARD-SL ten years after the conflict?

For Muckson Sessay, peace-building and development processes are intertwined and cannot be separated from each other. In the past few years, OPARD-SL's focus shifted (in a nutshell) to food security, environmental protection, organic farming, economic empowerment of women and youth, education for the underprivileged, water sanitation and health care.

In the long road from destruction to reconstruction OPARD-SL received *inter alia* funds from the US, Canada or the **UNPBF** (United Nations Peacebuilding Fund). Yet ten years on, the organisation is unsure how to further sustain itself. He wishes that his community had the facilities to create better incentives to keep the youth in the town and increase their interest in farming.

The core challenge for small towns and villages is certainly the rural-urban migration flow. The UN-HABITAT report '**The State of African Cities 2010**' indicates that 38.40 percent of all Sierra Leoneans live in urban areas (most notably Freetown). UN-HABITAT further estimates that by 2050 this figure will change to 62.44 percent.

Muckson Sessay is not alone when stressing that this trend undermines not only food security in rural areas but also leaves the ageing population without any care. The Sierra Leonean journalist **Madieu Jalloh** further holds "... to say that agriculture is vital to Sierra Leone's economic growth is an understatement".

Ten years after the conflict and despite widespread support from the international community, Sierra Leone remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Looking at **UNICEF**'s statistics, every fourth child under the age of 5 is underweight, in other words, 40% of all deaths among children in Sierra Leone are caused by malnutrition.

After my long conversation with Mr Muckson Sessay, I am rushing to my next interview with a local civil society organisation called 'Women's Partnership for Justice and Peace' (WPJP, based in Bo). Without mentioning my Mile 91 impressions, a WPJP staff member immediately refers to the

problem of food shortage in rural areas and concludes: 'Peace is food, you cannot have peace when you are hungry.'

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