

## **MPs, MAYORS, COUNCILLORS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS DIALOGUE IN PUJEHUN, SOUTH SIERRA LEONE 14 – 16 NOVEMBER, 2008**

### ***“HEALING WOUNDS, BUILDING TRUST, MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER”***

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in partnership with Hope-Sierra Leone, a non governmental organisation affiliated to Initiatives of Change (IofC) International, has successfully completed the sixth in a series of eight nationwide parliamentary dialogues in Pujehun. This area experienced violence prior to the elections in August 2007, during which many homes were destroyed.



*Photo (left): Local Unit Commander, Supt. J.I. Gbonah & Hon. Paramount Chief Gbondo at the dialogue.*

The dialogue aimed to promote political tolerance, reconciliation and forgiveness, and to build national cohesion for sustainable peace and development in the country. Facilitators from Hope-Sierra Leone’s Moral Foundations for Democracy (MFD) programme kept the dialogue interactive throughout. They were drawn

from the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and Civil Society movement. The MFD programme was developed in response to the pervasive tensions and lack of co-operation that existed between the Police and the Military, and the fear of all security personnel experienced by members of civil society. During the last four years, MFD courses and dialogues have contributed significantly towards reducing suspicion and mistrust between all three parties.

During the Opening Session, Hon. Eric Jumu, MP, (Opposition Party, SLPP) said: “The dialogue is a strong pillar of peace, political tolerance and attitudinal change.” He further craved the indulgence of participants to disseminate the messages of forgiveness, tolerance, peace and reconciliation to their people.

Hon. Mohamed Kanu, MP, (Government Party, APC) described the dialogue as “significant.” “It will promote the vision and aspiration of the government in enhancing an enabling environment for peace, democracy and good governance for the citizenry of the country.” He re-echoed the President’s call for attitudinal and behavioural change. Hon. Kanu disclosed that he was delighted to be in Pujehun for the first time, adding that he would advocate that the government does more to help develop Pujehun, recognised as being one of the least developed districts in the country.

Hon. Paramount Chief, Mohamed Dhaffie Benya, traced the history of chieftaincy in post-colonial Sierra Leone in terms of governance, adding that chiefs had the constitutional mandate to exercise

absolute control over their subjects. He appealed to participants to have respect for their chiefs and be tolerant towards each other irrespective of their political differences.

Hon. Malcolm Bannister, MP, (Opposition Party, PMDC) intimated that during the past presidential and parliamentary elections, paramount chiefs were deeply involved in politics. He admonished the chiefs to have little to do with politics and to avoid intimidating their subjects against a particular candidate or party. He said the chiefs should take the role of parents and show respect and give equal treatment to all.

During the first session both facilitators and participants introduced themselves, and a lighted candle was placed in the centre of the hall. The participants were invited to collect small stones outside the hall and these were placed in a basket. This action symbolised putting aside personal burdens and starting the dialogue with an open mind. The candle represented love, peace and a brighter future. The Lead Facilitator, Insp. Sulaiman Sesay, gave a run-down of topics that were to be covered during the dialogue: identity, corruption, searching for values, conflict, change and teamwork.



Each morning from 8.15-9.00am the dialogue started with a session called “Reflection and Decision” (R&D). The facilitator first told a story that would be the basis for an honest reflection. The participants then sat in groups of six to reflect on personal issues, and share their experiences. Many testimonies came out; some personal, others interpersonal.

*Left: Participants listen attentively to a facilitator during an ‘R & D’ session.*

One of the councillors in Pujehun, Patrick Alpha, expressed his bitterness over the attitude of some groups of people from the ruling party who had painted the town hall in red (APC’s colour) under the instruction of the regional APC Chairman South, Sheik Sillah. According to the councillor, the painting of the town hall was wrong as the hall belonged to the people of Pujehun and not to a particular party. He maintained that this issue needed to be addressed immediately otherwise it would lead to chaos.

A prominent civil activist shared her long-standing grievance against her niece who had dated her husband. This situation had threatened to end their marriage. She was particularly moved by the testimony of a woman councillor who had experienced torture and molestation at the hands of a civil militia group, the Kamajors, but had courageously extended an olive branch and sincerely forgiven them. But God made it possible for the aunt, at last, to forgive her niece after she had got in touch with her. This spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation characterised the entire dialogue.

Insp. Sulaiman Sesay whet the appetites of participants by skilfully presenting a short skit on “Identity” a topic that was later presented by Annette Bongay. The topic aimed at exposing the challenges or problems associated with identity and how one’s identity can be vulnerable to threat.

Most often people identify each other by name, occupation, nationality, tribe and religion. There were tangible instances mentioned when one's identity could be threatened.

The subject of "Conflict" was presented by Lt. Sallieu Sankoh. During this session participants examined the meaning of conflict, both intra- and inter-personal. Conflict was also considered to have both negative and positive effects. When a conflict led to changes in people's attitudes it could become positive; on the contrary, a conflict that was characterised by destruction was negative.

"Corruption" was a topic that attracted the attention of all participants. It was presented by Mahmoud Kargbo who defined corruption as "the use of public office for private benefit." Over the years corruption has eaten into the fabric of society and has, to a great extent, aborted development in the country. The topic aimed at exposing corrupt practices and searching for an honest way out of the cancer of corruption.

Poverty, selfishness, greed and low salaries were identified as causes of corruption. Most government workers are underpaid and so embark on corrupt practices to enrich themselves. In essence, for corruption to be minimized, participants agreed that government should increase the salaries of the civil service and further empower the Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) to investigate and prosecute corrupt people in society. The ACC should not be seen as a barking dog; it should bite all those found wanting without fear or favour.

"Search for values" was presented by Rashid Fodie. During this session participants deliberated on the four core moral values of love, honesty, purity and unselfishness. At the end of this session a 'house of values', reflecting the four core moral values, was drawn by all the participants. They promised to replicate these values in their homes and work places.

**Photo (right): Teamwork exercise**

The last two topics, "Change" and "Team work and trust building," were presented by Mahamoud Kargbo. During the plenary session, participants looked at change as an initiative of one person, and the need for change to start with oneself. You cannot talk about change honestly when you are not practising it. The facilitator encouraged the MPs to be agents of change in their respective constituencies. "Team work and trust building" inspired the participants to develop confidence in one another and, above all, to work as a team. A blind-folding exercise went a long way to strengthen the spirit of trust in each other.



"Team work and trust building" inspired the participants to develop confidence in one another and, above all, to work as a team. A blind-folding exercise went a long way to strengthen the spirit of trust in each other.

During the closing ceremony a pot of flowers was displayed on the table for all to see. The facilitator, Lt. Sankoh, explained that hidden amongst the beautiful flowers were small stones, blades of dead grass, pieces of glass and a dirty rag. The stones could signify a strong will or unforgiving heart and the dirty rag could symbolise ill feelings about others. This, and other details of the scenario, left

many to ponder over the beauty of the flowers but yet they contained elements of evil and wrongdoing.

Participants were able to relate the flowers to themselves in terms of their attitudes and relationships to others in real life situations. Sam Macarthy shared that he had nurtured a lot of hatred for the fellow MPs who had betrayed him on a special project that he had invited them to implement. He had summoned up the courage to forgive them for the wrong done to him. Others shared their decisions to forgive and reconcile in the interests of sustainable peace in the country.

The Founder of Hope-Sierra Leone, John Bangura, reminded the MPs about their roles and responsibilities to the masses. He made reference to a popular Nigerian musical album entitled “E bi like say” by 2-face Idiba, which was then played. It is a satire about politicians who abandon their people after winning an election and only come to them when they need their votes. The songs further expose politicians who present marathon manifestos that deliberately try to deceive the electorate. He told them that God will judge them if they fail to deliver their promises.

Mr Bangura also mentioned another song by the same musician with the title “As you see me so” which preaches peace and good relationships with neighbours. He advised everyone to put the interests of the country first. He said that Sierra Leoneans should not ask the question “What has the country done for me?” But rather they should ask themselves “What have I done for Mother Sierra Leone?” He commended the MPs and paramount chiefs for displaying a high level of political tolerance whilst in Pujehun, adding that the same spirit should continue in parliament and at constituency levels.

All the parliamentarians promised to work in the interests of the country irrespective of their political differences. They further appealed to Hope-Sierra Leone and UNDP to replicate the dialogues at chiefdom level in all parts of the country.

*Report by Patrick Jakema*

*Photos: John Bangura*