

Trade Unions and Conflict Resolution in Sierra Leone

Well known for its protracted and brutal civil war in the mid-1990s, child soldiers and blood diamonds, Sierra Leone has taken steps towards becoming a strong and peaceful democratic state. Trade Unions are playing a key role in this.

Historically, Sierra Leone was a one party state, where unions were not banned but operated within a corrupt and oppressive environment. Dissatisfaction with Momoh's Government and a desire to control the diamond trade sparked an 11 year civil war that caused hundreds of thousands of casualties and the notorious amputations of people's limbs and devastated life for all Sierra Leonians.

Salimatu B Kabba, is a Shop Steward, teacher and member of the Sierra Leone Teachers Union. Alieu Deen-Conteh works as a Senior Assistant Secretary, Projects Department of Sierra Leone Teachers Union. They both study Labour Relations and Law under the Chevening Scholarship Programme on Labour Studies at Ruskin College and are sponsored by the NUT Union and visited the TUC on their first trip to London.

Salimatu and Alieu point out that the fall out from the war changed the mind of leaders - they became more tolerant - and realised it was in their interests to listen to trade unions who could help with post conflict resolution and trade unions began to operate in a more liberal environment post war.

Trade unions in Sierra Leone played a vital part in the momentous changes in their country by acting as agents for conflict resolution. Salimatu and Alieu spoke avidly about the 1996 elections, and in particular the debate at the time; does the trade union movement support Peace before Elections or Elections before Peace? The unions mobilised for Elections before Peace, believing it was the best way for people's voices to be heard. The elections saw a democratically elected government brought to power.

The union movement resisted a coup the following year through a 9 month civil disobedience campaign. Their campaign mobilised support for no work, no school, gained international support and helped bring the exiled and democratically elected government back.

And trade union activity didn't stop there; as Salimatu and Alieu explained, trade unions helped with setting up public bodies to do with rehabilitation, reconstruction, peace building and justice.

Specifically, teachers organised Extended Education Programmes in maths, english, sciences, social studies (core areas of the education curriculum), to help deal with the disruption to children's education during the war.

Trade unions helped with establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2000 working with the new government, UN structures, and the inter-religious council to investigate the causes of the war, and to provide healing and justice to the victims of war.

Alieu comments that one of the biggest successes for trade unionists was the establishment of the Commission in the first place! The work with the Commission continues. The SLTU are now championing the recommendations of the commission:- housing facilities for victims and education for children of victims. The barbaric practice of limb mutilation led to many people who couldn't afford to educate their children because of resulting disability.

A Special Court was set up to try those involved in the war. Again the trade union movement worked with the new government and UN structures, judiciary.

The Disarmament Demobilisation Reintegration Programme helped reintegrate ex combatants into society and incorporated a strategy of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration for ex-combatants. The teachers' union recruited teachers to offer support and training to ex combatants; under the 'Disarm their Minds' slogan.

Salimatu and Alieu were proud to let me know how successful this programme is, with over 2,000 union members involved.

Not everything is plain sailing though; criticisms have been levelled at the cost of the DDR programme, and the fact that this money could have been spent on the victims rather than perpetrators of war. The work of the Special Court has come under criticism for being expensive and achieving little.

The trade union movement still faces many challenges. It is campaigning for a vocational training centre to teach sewing to women. Unions are also pressing for a legislative review; there has been no new legislation passed since 1971 and the SLLC is campaigning for employment laws to be reviewed.

Other challenges are remarkably similar to what other teaching unions face world wide: the challenges of the ongoing process of building people's confidence in trade unions, membership apathy and lack of bargaining power. But Sierra Leone Trade

Unions have come a long way in their mission to represent the voice of the people,
and as an agent for conflict resolution in their country.

This extract is drawn from the following source:

<http://www.tuc.org.uk/international/tuc-14299-f0.cfm>