

Community at Odds in Liberia: An Introduction to Conflict Mapping

Experiential Learning Activity (ELA)
Student Materials

The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project

Student Materials - Group 2

Violence in Voinjama, Liberia

In February 2010, in a small town of Konia, Lofa County, a 20-year old young woman named Korpo Kamara went missing and was later found dead. There were many different stories that people began telling about how and why the young woman died. These stories turned into rumors that spread across Lofa County like wild fire.

That winter, the only radio station that normally operates in Lofa County was off the air due to technical problems. Because the radio was down, there was no effective way to prevent or dispel the rumors. These continued to spread rapidly through the County due to widespread ownership of mobile phones. The rumors circulating about the young woman's death heightened communal tensions in Lofa County. On February 26, 2010 violent clashes erupted in Voinjama, the capital of Lofa County. Four people died during the clashes, many were wounded, and there was significant property damage.

Using information provided in this packet, work with your group to develop a conflict map that represents your understanding of the conflict. Draw the map on the flip chart. When developing the map you should consider the following questions:

- Who are the parties to the conflict?
- What are the parties' interests?
- What are the parties' grievances?
- What are the trigger events?
- What are the root causes of the conflict?



Women at the market in Voinjama, Liberia.

Photo Credit: Agnieszka Paczynska

Once your group has completed the exercise, choose a spokesperson or coordinate together to present your conflict map to the class. ■

"Youths Burn Voinjama"

A Newspaper Account from *The Dawn*

It has now been established that more than 2,000 armed young men with shotguns, machetes, knives and other missiles, partook in the last Friday violent clashes that left the Provincial City of Voinjama, Lofa County, in flames with 4 dead and several injured.

"There is no exact figure but the information I have points to well above 2,000 running around in small alleys," UNMIL boss Ellen Margaret Loj told local journalists at the Mission's regular briefing Wednesday.

Of the 2,000, only 29 have been arrested so far with 10 shotguns (single barrel), 27 rounds of ammunition and 10 cutlasses. It has also been revealed that the 4 dead had bullet wounds on their bodies.

"The youths were dispersed. You had smaller groups moving across the town in a sneaky manner," UNMIL Police Chief Gautam Sawang added.

He said with the over 2,000 youths moving in such splinter fashion using shotguns and throwing stones at different locations it was just difficult for the security forces to be everywhere. He said the 23 houses burnt were not in one location, but that they were done in selected locations on a pick and choose basis. "Had it been in one location the security forces on the ground would have responded and probably tried to restrain that," he said.

He said some of the youths had shotguns pointing at the security forces, but they exercised maximum restraints. He said they could not arrest them with the shotguns because they are legal.

"I think first and foremost, it was a very, very unfortunate incident that took place in Lofa County and in particular in Voinjama during the course of Friday morning. And we also say that those events were based on unfounded and I will like to say underline the word unfounded rumor about the things that had happened in Konia a day before," Ms. Loj said.

"We need the collaboration of all Liberian actors; from the top leadership to the simple man and woman down the streets to build that confidence among the various segment of the Liberian society because it is up to you Liberians to want the country in peace."

Ms. Loj said without the application of a conflict resolution method "I am afraid we will see more incidents like the one we saw in Lofa, nobody is benefiting from that. We must work hard to ensure that this must not happen again."

On whether the recent violent clashes in Voinjama, was a lesson for UNMIL to scale down its draw down in troops looking at the upcoming elections, Mrs. Loj said "If the Liberians do not want peaceful elections and if the Liberians want to fight each other neither 8,000 UN troops or 15,000 UN troops as we were in 2003 can prevent it because we will never be able to have a police officer next to each and every Liberian all over the city." ■

An Interview with a UN Police Officer in Voinjama

I am from Fiji. We have done an investigation and we now have a suspect in the Voinjama incident. This guy was the instigator of the whole thing, the whole violent clash. I think the whole episode had nothing to do with religion or tribes. It was about looting. Someone encouraged these tensions, yes, but it was really an opportunity for people to steal stuff. This is how things are here. There are just a lot of young men in this part of the country who have nothing to do and are looking for a fight. ■

An Interview with Several Women in the Market in Voinjama

The day of the troubles in February, we quickly left the area. We were frightened. Our products were looted.

We are not sure why the violence happened. Everyone got along before. Why did it happen? Some people just hate. Also there are too many men who don't have jobs and that is a problem. So the women have to work a lot. But there are few jobs. There are some jobs in agriculture but otherwise there isn't much.

We women here in the market, regardless of whether we are Loma or Mandingo or another ethnic group, we all get along. We have to get along. If the market doesn't function, there is no money. So we have to work, we have to be here, we have to get along.

UNMIL didn't do much when the crisis came. They sent gas down the street but they did not provide for safety. It was only after the ERU (Emergency Response Unit, specialized police force) came that the conflict ended and people finally felt safe. But here in the community, no one intervened to stop the conflict from escalating. ■

An Interview with a Police Officer in Voinjama

It was young people who were involved in the incident on February 26th. Former ex-combatants are still loyal to their "generals," to the men who led them during the war. It was the "generals" who instigated the incident in February. The youth is unemployed, they just hang around, they drink a lot and often get into fights. Many feel victimized and disenfranchised. There is little justice and things happen, people go missing or are found murdered for example, and these cases are never resolved. And so the anger and frustration just builds up among the young. And then an opportunity presents itself and they take their anger out on the community. ■

An Interview with a Social Worker in Voinjama

There are a lot of problems in this town. There are a lot of young men who are ex-combatants. They have no jobs, they have no education. They just hang around and drink too much. Many of the ex-combatants got \$300 to give up their arms when the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program went into effect. And many of them see this as a reward for fighting. And for many it just reinforced the sense that if you fight, you will be rewarded. And so they see fighting as a way to make a living. Many still do even all these years since the civil war ended. The problem is that many of them are still hanging out together with their former fighting units and with their commanders. And so when there is a call from the commander to get into a fight of some sort, they go and get into a fight. That's exactly what happened during the February 26th events. ■

An Interview with a County Official in Voinjama

The problem in the country is that there is bad infrastructure, especially the roads are bad; need more schools; need more clinics; need more employment opportunities. People lead difficult lives here.

Why was there violence on February 26th? The problem is that the youth no longer knows the traditional ways of doing things, of resolving disputes. They no longer respect their elders. A lot of the social bonds, the traditions were broken as a result of the war. And so young people do not listen to their elders anymore, they no longer have respect for others. Add to that the high levels of unemployment among the young and it just gives them too much time to think about the war and how it affected them. And really, peace was not restored in Lofa County. The DDR program and financial support only went to some people, only the ex-combatants. But many more people, young people, were affected by the war. But they got nothing. They didn't get any assistance. And so young people are frustrated and have too much time on their hands.

As for February 26th, the youth in Voinjama took to the streets because of an incident that happened in another town. There were rumors flying around about that incident and the youth didn't check if the rumors were true or not. They just went on the street. The youth just took advantage of the rumors to steal and so there was fighting and people died unfortunately. There was not enough security personnel to quickly respond so things turned violent. ■

About the Project

This Experiential Learning Activity (ELA) has been developed as part of the Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project (UELP), U.S. Department of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE)-funded initiative that aims to enhance Conflict Analysis and Resolution (CAR) pedagogy in order to improve undergraduate learning.

The CAR field is uniquely positioned to deliver educational experiences that help students make the crucial link between abstract theories and practical application through learning activities such as: conflict mapping, intervention design, role plays, and simulations. The ELAs developed as part of the UELP advance specific learning outcomes, including critical thinking, problem solving, and perspective taking.

Each ELA produced through the UELP has been designed either to augment existing course curricula or to be used as a stand-alone activity. Instructors are encouraged to adapt activities to meet the needs of their specific learning environments, including class size and course objectives.

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As your partners in advancing undergraduate education, we are committed to improving the quality of the learning experience and encourage all feedback and recommendations to support that commitment. Additionally, we welcome stories that highlight moments of student insight that arise from participation in these activities. If you are interested in supporting the collection of data for ongoing research, please contact us through our webpage. ■



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