

Community at Odds in Liberia: An Introduction to Conflict Mapping

Experiential Learning Activity (ELA)
Student Materials

The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project

Student Materials - Group 3

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. ■

"Clashes in Voinjama and Confusion in Lofa County"

A Newspaper Account from The Daily Profile

Last week troubling events unfolded in Lofa County. There have been many conflicting reports about what actually happened and there is a lot of concern as well as confusion in the area. Piecing together what has happened has therefore been difficult but this is what we know.

The Clashes

On Friday a young woman was found dead in Konia, a small town in Lofa County. The young woman, who was a Christian and a Loma, was murdered by unknown assailants. Her murder sparked rumors, which spread like wildfire across the County and eventually led to revenge attacks and killings between the Mandingo and the Loma - two main ethnic groups in Lofa County. The attackers targeted people, including local political elite, mosques, and churches. The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) peacekeeping troops as well as special units of the Liberian police eventually managed to restore order. Four people were killed and many more wounded as a result of the clashes, mostly in Voinjama, Lofa County's administrative center. At the same time, taking advantage of the tension, close to 60 people escaped from the Voinjama prison.

The Confusion

There were a lot of rumors spreading across Lofa County about what exactly happened in Konia, who the girl was and why she was killed and by whom. These points of confusion are not insignificant. But more important is whether or not the fighting should be characterized as religious or ethnic. Things seem to be more complicated than they at first appeared. There is a long history of land disputes between Loma and Mandingo in Lofa County ever since the war ended. Some say that Mandingo laid claim to land Loma had fled from during the war. When the war ended, and Loma returned, land disputes arose. Others say that it is Loma who have been taking land from the Mandingo and it is the Loma who hold the levers of political power in Lofa County. And it is true that they hold most of the important positions in the county government. Sometimes these disputes have become violent. Mandingo tend to be Muslim, and Loma tend to be Christian. Does this make the conflict religious? Calling the revenge attacks religious, as Voice of America (VOA) first did seems akin to a guy who happens to work at a supermarket mugging a guy who happens to be a banker. It is the same here. This is not about religion or ethnicity. This conflict is about who has access to land and who has access to economic resources. And about who makes political decisions in the County. This misrepresentation cannot just be attributed to VOA not understanding the historical context. There was also a wire report co-written by two journalists, including one Liberian that also characterized the clashes as religious. The issue seems to be more about journalists trying to frame the story in a way that fits into people's ideas about fighting in Africa than with the realities on the ground. ■

An Interview with a Town Official in Voinjama

There has been a lot of insecurity in Lofa County. There is little justice and people are fearful and frustrated.

What happened on February 26th had nothing to do with religion or tribal issues. When conflicts occur they often seem like they are between the Loma and the Mandingo or the Christians and the Muslims but conflicts here are not about religion or tribe.

People were protesting because of the continued lack of justice. People have little faith in how justice is being administered and don't trust the police. The lack of justice creates a sense that groups must create their own justice, that they must protect themselves. People don't trust the government. They don't think the government is distributing economic resources equally to everyone. They don't think the government cares about the people's interests and so many feel very frustrated. There is a lot of mistrust between the people and the government. And because people don't trust the government there is also more mistrust among different groups in society. Everyone suspects that others have better access to the government and can bribe government officials and so are getting a better deal than they do. That creates a lot of tension in the community. ■

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 Several Young Men in Voinjama

We all want to be educated and to have good jobs. But it is hard to achieve our goals. There is little justice here. The police and the courts are corrupt. To have access to jobs, education or justice you need to have political connections or financial resources so that you can pay people off. If you want to get a job in the county government, an NGO or even UNMIL, you need to have connections, you need to know people. And so it is those who have friends in the county administration who are able to secure the best jobs. And it is those who have money that get their way when they take their case to court. The court system doesn't work for people who don't pay.

So what you have here is a vicious cycle. In order to gain a better education and improve one's chances of getting a better job, you need money to pay for schools and universities. But we can't afford to go to Monrovia to study and there is no university here in Lofa County. Only those who already have money can go to study and then they are able to make even more money. Young people here are very frustrated. They see what's going on. They see that those who have political positions get rich and the rest of us are left behind. So people are angry. Of course young people went out on the streets in February. They don't have jobs, they don't have justice, they see the corruption and the nepotism. They are angry. ■

An Interview with a Mandingo Man in Voinjama

The main issue in Lofa County in general is that although Mandingo make up about 30 percent of the population of Lofa County they only have one representative in the county government. Mandingo elect their own traditional chiefs but traditional chiefs do not have any real influence over government leaders. As a result Mandingo feel politically marginalized.

Because Mandingo are politically marginalized, they suffer economically. The county government doesn't provide the same amount of benefits and financial assistance to the Mandingo community. They also pay higher taxes than others in Lofa County.

There is also widespread feeling of injustice among the Mandingo. There have been many cases of violence committed against the Mandingo and the county government, the police and the courts do not do anything about it. This is because they are politically marginalized.

Mandingo youth engaged in clashes in February because they were increasingly frustrated with the situation. They are dissatisfied. They have no political voice, no economic opportunities. ■

An Interview with a Loma Man in Voinjama

We are worse off today than we were five years ago. The war had damaged Lofa County's infrastructure and nothing has been done. Things just keep getting worse every year.

We, the Loma, have been badly hurt by the war. And we don't see our lives improving. The government is not being responsive and doesn't seem to care about our problems. We go to the local government, we send messages to our representatives in Monrovia but no one is listening to us. There are many people in government who claim they are Liberian but they are really not. And this is also part of the problem. These people, because they aren't real Liberians favor their own, they channel resources to their friends and families. If you don't have connections you will not get financial assistance, you will not get justice. No one will listen to you.

Here in Lofa County, the Mandingo are not real Liberians. The Mandingo only want to take our land and to dominate us politically and economically. And many in the county government just make concessions to them. And so we are being pushed aside. But if this continues, how will we put food on our tables? How will we take care of our families? How will we afford to send our kids to schools? ■

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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