

Community at Odds in Liberia: An Introduction to Conflict Mapping

Experiential Learning Activity (ELA)
Student Materials

The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project

Student Materials - Group 4

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. ■

"Four Deaths in Religious Clashes in Liberia"

A Newspaper Account from AFP Reprinted in *People to People*

Clashes between Muslims and Christians in northern Liberia have left at least four people dead and 23 seriously wounded, a local government official said Saturday. "I personally counted four bodies, but this is not necessarily the final toll," said George Tengbeh in the town of Voinjama, 450 kilometers (280 miles) north of the capital Monrovia. Twenty-three people were taken to the town hospital for serious injuries after Friday's unrest. Several people suffered gunshot wounds and others were struck down with machetes, or clubbed. Tengbeh said a Catholic mission and two churches in Voinjama were "entirely burnt." United Nations peacekeepers had been dispatched to a northern Liberia village on Friday to probe the outbreak of the violence, which witnesses said was a clash between Muslims and Christians. UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) spokeswoman Yasmina Bouziane said injuries and deaths occurred during "an exchange of violence between two sets of people." Witnesses said the death of a Christian student in the village of Konia near Voinjama - the capital city of Lofa County - sparked the clashes. "National police brought the situation under control; there is no more violence," Tengbeh said on Saturday, adding that a delegation of Muslims and Christians had been sent to the region to mediate. Voinjama was vandalized. Two mosques, one in Konia where the incident started, and one near the central market in Voinjama, were destroyed. The Catholic compound, including the school and the residence of the Catholic priest were also burned in Voinjama. Witnesses said hundreds of people fled the violence crossing the border to Guinea. A Christian Voinjama resident, 57-year old Jerry Tamba, returned to the town on Saturday after fleeing to safety with his family, only to find that his daughter had been shot. "I was looking for my daughter and I found her at the hospital. She was injured by AK-47 (Kalashnikov) shots and said that she saw Mandingo with automatic weapons," Tamba said referring to a member of the region's ethnic group. Tamba put the death toll at least five and said about 100 people were wounded. ■

An Interview with a Muslim Religious Leader in Voinjama

There have been attacks on mosques in Lofa County since Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the President of Liberia. We have complained many times to the local authorities about this but nothing has been done. There has been no justice.

The February 26 clashes, that was the very first time that a Christian church was burned. And all of a sudden the local government is paying attention, doing investigations.

Before the war, there was peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians. As adherents of the Muslim religion we know that it is wrong to attack a place of worship of any other religion. But these days, people of the same religion tend to associate with those who share their religion. ■

An Interview with a Christian Pastor in Voinjama

There used to be a lot of healing workshops with community leaders, religious leaders, Muslims and Christians. Everyone in Voinjama participated and things were going well in terms of consolidating peace in the city and in the county. There were no problems between Muslims and Christians here. That is until the February 26 events. Then everything changed. If you were not a Muslim, you were attacked.

I am angry at the Pakistani and Jordanian peacekeepers. They were stationed in town but did nothing. They did not arrest anyone. What they did do was go to the mosque to protect it and they did this while a Catholic church was set on fire. As a result, people are feeling unsafe. Perpetrators of the violence should be arrested but nothing is being done. And this will only embolden the Mandingo Muslims. They will feel they can get away with anything because the Muslim peacekeeping troops are there to back them up. ■

An Interview with a Group of Mandingo Muslim Men in Voinjama

We always have conflicts with the Christian Loma. They control everything that is going on in this town. When we have conflicts with the Christian Loma, and we have conflicts especially over land, the county superintendent, the mayor, the district commissioner, none of them will come to help us even when we are in the right. But they are all Christian Loma and only look after their own. They are all against Muslims. ■

An Interview with a Man at the Catholic School in Voinjama

The office was burned down and all the books that were there that were going to be used in the high school we had hoped would open soon have been burned. There is nothing left. We have tried to clean up the church but visible signs of the fire remain. Most of the parishioners have come back but the priest run away. We have been holding our services outside.

When the church started burning the Pakistani UN troops drove by. They didn't stop. They didn't do anything. But I am not surprised really. They are Muslims and they protected the Muslims. We are Christian. The Pakistanis and the Jordanians need to go and be replaced with other troops - Ghanaian, Nigerians, etc. Most people in town now have no trust in these troops. They don't see them as people they can turn to for help. They are not neutral. ■

An Interview with Several Women in the Market in Voinjama

The day of 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. ■

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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