

Community at Odds in Liberia: An Introduction to Conflict Mapping

Experiential Learning Activity (ELA)
Student Materials

The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project

Student Materials - Group 1

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. ■

"Calm Returns to Voinjama...4 Killed, 18 Wounded"

A Newspaper Account by Patrick K. Wrokpoh from *The Inquirer*

Calm has returned to the northern Liberian city of Voinjama, Lofa County after violent clashes broke out in the area last Friday following the discovery of the body of a young woman identified as Korpu Kamara in Konia, Zorzor District, Lofa County. The Superintendent of the county Galakpai Kortimai told *The Inquirer* yesterday that shops and stores have once again opened their doors to customers and commercial activities were again returning to normality after the violent clashes, which he says resulted in the death of four persons and 18 wounded others.

Superintendent Kortimai further refuted claims that the violence began as a result of Muslim and Christian clashes and described what happened in the country as a dispute that erupted between some people from the Loma and Mandingo ethnic groups. Of the casualties sustained thus far, the chief local official of the country said four deaths have been recorded, three of whom were Lomas and one is from the Mandingo ethnic group, while 18 persons were injured, three of whom, he said are in critical condition.

The body of Korpu Kamara was discovered in Konia, Zorzor District, where she had gone to spend some time with some relatives in the area. Reports from the county said following the discovery of the body, some people believed to be from the Loma ethnic group alleged that the deceased must have been murdered by some elements of the Mandingo ethnic group. The report said these Loma people claimed that the Mandingo were in the habit of masterminding such mysterious killings, simply to make human sacrifices, especially when they complete the construction of a new mosque. The report said the allegation came just at a time when the Mandingo, most of whom are Muslims, had just completed the construction of a new mosque in Konia. Further reports gathered from the area said in the wake of their allegations, the Loma people immediately went to the Mandingo mosque and surrounded it, although another version of the report said they set it ablaze, something which this paper later discovered was false. The Mandingo Chief Imam of the Mosque in Konia was also reported to have been held by the Loma people. Reports said when the news reached other Mandingo in Voinjama, the capital city of Lofa, they immediately gathered at the central Mosque in the area. Then they moved to the main Loma Catholic Church and set it ablaze, thus escalating the last Friday's violence. According to the report, Christians in Voinjama reacted to the burning of the Loma Catholic Church by attacking other Mandingo Mosques in the city. The situation became tense, prompting the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the Emergency Response Unit of the Liberian police to move to the county swiftly to bring the situation under control. Over the weekend, when this paper contacted the Chief Medical Director of the main public hospital in Lofa County Dr. Aaron Y. Kollie, he said lots of patients were being admitted to the hospital as the violence was escalating. He also confirmed the four deaths. "I cannot talk to you further because I am very busy admitting patients," he said. ■

An Interview with High School Official in Voinjama

We have put a lot of work into repairing this school. We have computers and our students wear uniforms. We have more than a thousand children, both girls and boys, enrolled here from all over Lofa County. We have several dormitories available for some of the students. The others rent places in town or stay with relatives.

That day in February, when violence broke out in town, no students left the campus early, before the school day was over to join the conflict. Once the school day concluded, the children were dismissed for the day and a number of the children did join the conflict.

Why did the conflict break out? I can see it here among the students. There is a lack of trust among the students at the school who are from different ethnic groups. Mandingo and Loma are friends, they play together and so forth but in their hearts they do not trust each other.

The biggest problem here is the land issues both within and between the ethnic groups. There are people who believe they own the land, but they don't have papers to prove it. There are also traditional forms of ownership so often it is difficult to figure out who owns what. Also, government authorities have not been impartial when dealing with land issues. ■

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 Representative of the Mandingo Tribe from Voinjama

The Mandingo have been in Lofa County for centuries. The early Mandingo were warriors, slave masters, land owners, and commerce leaders. We are proud of our history. The Mandingo held the first Paramount Chieftaincy of Lofa County. And it was the Mandingo who made Lofa County part of Liberia.

The relations with the Loma have often not been good. Land is a key element of conflict between Loma and Mandingo. There are many cases where land was given by Loma to Mandingo men who marry Loma women. They worked these lands and were successful. Mandingo were also successful in commerce and trade. The Loma eventually became jealous because the Mandingo were doing so well. So the Loma decided to take back the land, renege on the deals that were made. They took the land away from the Mandingo despite the fact that they had worked these lands for years. They are always trying to force the Mandingo off the land. This is still happening today.

The Loma often blame Mandingo for bad things that happen. This is what happened in February. When the Loma girl was killed in Konia, the Loma immediately accused the Mandingo of the murder. But this was not true. The Mandingo had to defend themselves. ■

An Interview with a Representative of the Loma Tribe from Voinjama

What happened on February 26th was this. The UNMIL took action against the Loma people. The Pakistani and Jordanian troops supported the Mandingo against the Loma. The UNMIL troops only attacked the Loma and shot Loma civilians. They only protected the Mandingo mosques and let the Loma churches burn.

The Loma were the victims here, they were attacked by the Mandingo. But we don't know what we did to cause the Mandingo to attack us.

The Mandingo are a new people in Liberia. They only came here in the 1960s. Before that there were Mandingo traders who came here but they never stayed. When they finally came we offered them land and our Paramount Chief welcomed them. But the Mandingo were not satisfied. They kept asking for more. We gave them more land when they asked and then again we gave them more land when they asked. And now they want part of our houses too. They don't know when to stop asking. It is becoming too much. As a result, the Mandingo have outlived their welcome. And now, they are asking the Loma to apologize for the February incident but why should we apologize? We were the ones attacked.

We, the Loma, are the most patient people. But the Mandingo do not believe in unity and progress, they have hidden agendas. They are not true Liberians. ■

An Interview with a Pastor from Voinjama

I am frustrated with how things are going in this community and in the country. There is lack of jobs, inadequate educational services, lack of roads, and lack of transportation. These are major problems. How much rice can you take to the market on your motorbike?

What happened in February? I am new to town. I come from a different part of Liberia and I am still trying to understand this place myself. But this is what I know: A young girl was killed in Konia. There was a lot of talk that she was killed by the Muslims because she was a Christian. People in Voinjama got angry. But I keep asking myself, how could it be that if the killing took place in Konia why would anyone want to do violence in Voinjama? At first I thought this might be a Christian-Muslim conflict just like a lot of people said at first. But I don't think this anymore. This was between Loma and Mandingo. There is a long history of animosity between these two groups. Most of the issues between these two groups have to do with land ownership and land use. There are a lot of conflicts about who can farm the land. And almost everyone here depends on farming so land matters a lot. ■

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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