

UNITED SIERRA LEONE FESTIVAL

PEACE MUSIC NATIONAL TOUR

“Contributing to National Cohesion and Reconciliation Efforts in Sierra Leone”



Port Loko 23th June 2018; Kambia 24th June 2018

Kailahun 29th June 2018; Bo 30th June 2018

with the support of the European Union, ECOWAS, Africa Union, Government of Sierra Leone, Messeh Leone Trust, AMNet, AYV Media, Independent Radio Network, Leone Entertainment

1. BACKGROUND

For decades, political parties have used their influence and ethnic affiliations to incite tensions and violence among supporters. The Sierra Leone election in 2018 was no different. Sierra Leone continues to experience tribal and political tensions and divisions. However, Sierra Leoneans live side by side in peace most of the time despite real underlying grievances, which are triggered during elections and times of political tension.

The new President Julius Maada Bio has committed to bring the country together and build a United and better Sierra Leone. The United Sierra Leone Post-Elections Project using music to promote reconciliation and national cohesion was the first of its kind and credit must be given to those who advocated so strongly for such a project where communities were for the first time given the opportunity to discuss on and engage stakeholders in their communities.

2. INTRODUCTION

Music was used as a tool to promote national cohesion and reconciliation by taking musicians and music to different regions to introduce them on new platform in an effort to create a better understanding of peace and tolerance in the communities in the aftermath of the elections.

The United Sierra Leone Festival was held in communities affected by the post-elections violence and tensions, especially in Port Loko, Kambia, Bo and Kailahun. The Festival was held under the theme “***We Are Better Together***”, which was also the main theme for the consultative meetings with community leaders.



Artists on stage in Kambia, delivering the message of reconciliation and national cohesion: Kao Denaro, LAJ, Steady Bongo, Fantacee, Star Zee, Edie 441

Although the artists and community stockholders did not choose the theme, they were able to reflect upon it with particular reference to promoting reconciliation and national cohesion after the elections, and by looking at the underlying and basic causes of political violence and divisions. It also built on the work of previous peace building initiatives, and related community engagement.

During the music festival and community engagement, the artists produced a theme song and album featuring all the leading artists in the country and shared the album with the communities during the tours. The album was first launched at Bintumani Hotel in Freetown by the First Lady of the Republic of Sierra Leone Mrs Fatima Bio.

The United Sierra Leone Project Team has written this report, based on engagement with artists and the communities: Specifically, the United Sierra Leone music project was intended to:

- Position musicians as critical players in healing divisions and promoting reconciliation and national cohesion in communities.
- Unite artists and various actors involved in music from big artists to local artists and the communities within and outside Freetown.
- To provide feedback to the organisers and sponsors of the United Sierra Leone Post-Elections Project, and provide recommendations to guide the preparation and implementation of similar project in the future.



Cross section of United Sierra Leone Project Team in Kambia

3. STRATEGY

The United Sierra Leone Peace Festival was designed to create a space for artists to work with communities on issues of community interest in support of the national cohesion and reconciliation process. Part of the strategy is to use music as a tool to disseminate peace messages and bring together diverse interest groups to identify a common goal and action plan.

This collaboration of community stakeholders and artists and different political groupings is significant because establishing cooperative relationships is key to peaceful coexistence. The festivals in Port Loko, Kambia, Bo and Kailahun were a platform on which the various supporters of political parties and people in the communities, who are most times in competition or adversarial, have a unique opportunity to work successfully together, interact and dance together to the same music in the same room for the first time after the elections.

Political groups in these communities compete for resources and rival for political power. Bringing these supporters together to participate in the festival and work for a common goal is part of the strategies employed by the United Sierra Leone Project. Discussing ideas and developing the entire plan of the festivals, working in different committees with varying tasks and reporting to the United Sierra Leone Project team empowers the communities by creating opportunities for display of initiative, taking up responsibility and changing the dynamics of tribal tensions and divisions by allowing members to work together.

The United Sierra Leone Peace Festival created opportunities for supporters from various parties to work cooperatively and engage in a productive and constructive atmosphere. Using music to highlight the importance of national cohesion and reconciliation process are part of the strategy employed by the United Sierra Leone Project to appropriately foster dialogue and community cohesion.

4. PLANNING

The planning of the event began with identifying interested stakeholders including youth leaders in the communities. The target group for collaboration was youths as they are central to a successful reconciliation and consolidation of peace in Sierra Leone. Consultative meetings were held in Bo, Kailahun, Port Loko, Kambia to discuss and agree on the plan for the Festivals.

With Support from AMNet, a small group of representatives from the communities were identified through an existing United Sierra Leone Project

coordinating committee to organise the Festivals. The United Sierra Leone Project Team in consultation with AMNet and representatives from ECOWAS identified the messages and dates for the festival and shared the plans with the communities.

United Sierra Leone Project Team travelled to Bo, Kailahun, Kambia and Port Loko to work with the community including youths and music promoters to organise the events. The United Sierra Leone Project team members divided into five committees (Media, artists, security, logistics and venue arrangement) who were charged with various responsibilities to push the process forward. Each town (Bo, Kambia, Kailahun and Port Loko) had a representative on each of the committees who then helped in the organisation of the Festivals.



Youth Planning Team in Kambia

40 members of the organising team in total formed the entire working group for the four locations. Each committee met separately to decide on how to proceed and designed work plan of activities for the festivals. Regular meetings were held for various committees to report to the wider group.

The United Sierra Leone Project Team worked closely with Steady Bongo, the most popular musician in the country with a platform of promoting positive peace messages using music. In all the four locations, Steady Bongo worked with the United Sierra Leone Project Team and local organising committees to plan the event and also helped identify musicians to participate in the Festivals.

Steady Bongo also helped identify local musicians based in these locations so that they could perform with the big artists from Freetown to exhibit their talents. Selection criteria based on type of music, how the content of music tied in with the festivals' themes, and quality of stage performance were developed by the United Sierra Leone Project Team with Steady Bongo.



KAILAHUN: Planning Team member on the streets with a vehicle and musical set promoting the festival



Community Leaders with Steady Bongo Speaking at the Festival in Kailahun

The organising committees invited key stakeholders in the communities to speak at the Festivals based on their roles in the communities and influence. The speakers reflected the diversity of the area and included traditional leaders, business leaders, women leaders, representatives from government, security agencies, media and local organisations. The United Sierra Leone Project team worked with the speakers to help them focus on the thematic issues of the events.

The United Sierra Leone Steering Committee was led by the global peace activist Mr Messeh Leone, a Sierra Leonean based in the United Kingdom, who is supported by the veteran Sierra Leonean music producer, Joseph Richard Abdulia (Soundboy Richie). Soundboy Richie has been blind since childhood.

5. MEDIA & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Media and community engagement was key. Before the festivals, the United Sierra Leone Project team conducted radio discussion programs to prepare the minds of the community about the themes and what was expected from. Local DJs moderated the programs. Jingles and TV adverts were also developed and disseminated. Members of AMNet were also on radio engaging the community and promoting the message of national cohesion and reconciliation.

The local media in Bo, Kailahun, Kambia and Port Loko provided massive coverage of the proceedings for a wide audience. The media team provided a platform for voices of artists and community members sharing their opinions about issues integral to a successful national cohesion and reconciliation, is a critical component of the strategy. In this way a localised event created a much larger impact as community members not participating on the ground are able to take part through the radio discussion.



Panning Team at a community Radio in Port Loko



Steady Bongo and Kao Denero on community radio in Kambia

6. IMPACT

The musical tour made it to various identified violence hotspots after the elections and main regional towns of Bo, Kailahun, Port Loko, Kambia, with festivals taking place in open public grounds and community centers. The tour is distinguished as being the first ever national tour of leading artists in the country where presentations of peace messages through varied music reaching out to diverse audiences across the country in building bridges and respect between culturally distinct communities, as well as developing broad local interest in traditionally rooted modern music.



Musician Star Zee: Festival in Kambia



LAJ performing



Fantacee performing



Steady Bongo performing



Kao Denero performing

The artists played an active role in resolving post-election violence and promoting reconciliation and national cohesion. This was the result of the presence of leading musicians including strong female artists, as well as their previous experiences in promoting peace messages—not only in the capital city Freetown, but also around the country. These precedents prepared the ground for artists' interventions in the process to resolve conflicts that erupted after contested presidential elections in 2018.



AMNet Team looks on: Hawa Samai and Yerie Kamara



Thousands participated the in Festival

The role of music in the process was characterised by early action and the production of a music album to promote a United Sierra Leone. The Album featured all the top artists in the country as well as upcoming artists including Steady Bongo, Jimmy B, Emmerson, Star Zee, LAJ, Kao Denero, Innocent, Sorie Kondi, SQB, Succulent, M2, Naser Ayoub, Fantacee. The artists recorded a theme song together with a chorus sang by members of the Children's Forum Network and Blind School. The theme song contained verses in key tribal languages - including Limba, Mende, and Temene.



United Sierra Album with songs on reconciliation and national cohesion

The Festival showcased role of music in post conflict community dialogues; in social and economic empowerment of communities including women and youth; in national cohesion and reconciliation. Music has played a crucial role in the process of peacebuilding and reconciliation.

The Festival revealed that music greatly assisted in establishing community dialogues and urged community leaders to engage in mechanisms that promote peace after the elections. Further, political tolerance of members of parties, especially of women and youth, was boosted and it brought people together by encouraging them to reconcile.

An unexpected reconciliation between two longstanding rival hip hop musical leaders Kao Denero and LAJ provided an opportunity for reconciliation. The surprise handshake and hugs between Kao Denero, leader of Black Leo, and

LAJ, the leader of Red Flag Movement (RFM), was a welcome development for many Sierra Leoneans who have grown accustomed to a bitter cycle of violence between the two. It is important to note that LAJ declared his support for the APC while Kao declared support for the NGC and later SLPP which won the elections. So it was inspiring to see both musicians who had supported rival parties coming together to promote reconciliation



Hip Hop rivals Kao Dennero and LAJ on stage in Kambai alongside Messeh Leone of United Sierra Leone Project, delivering a message of peace.

It was also very impressive to see members of different political parties dancing and singing together on the same stage. It demonstrated the power of music to unite divided people and communities after very difficult election.

It came as a surprise to many when it was reported in the media that two musical leaders who supported the main parties in the elections would put the past behind them and participate in the United Sierra Leone Festival to promote reconciliation across the country.

United Sierra Leone Project Team facilitates peace festivals as a means to supporting national cohesion and reconciliation process for the consolidation

of peace in Sierra Leone. In this context the following key outcomes were realised:

a) Community participation and collaboration

- Members of the community formed part of the organising team -created a sense of community ownership and role in reconciliation in the community.
- Members of political parties in the community who felt targeted and intimidated were able to participate and interact with others indicates their value and role in the community and is important for reconciliation and national cohesion.
- Members of the community participating in a community event to move the national cohesion and reconciliation agenda forward.
- Cooperation of community leaders and members of the wider community by supporting a community event.
- Thousands participated in the festivals and all the venues were jam-packed, even sometimes under the rains.



Local artists group and community members in Kambai

b) Building social networks

- Members of the communities working cooperatively; identifying a common objective and action planning together -- in different committees irrespective of their political groups or organizations.
- Security agencies (police and military) joining members of the community to maintain security for a community event. This collaboration helped to end potential clashes between these groups.
- Identifying new and strengthening existing networks of members of community through music.
- Building social relationships among groups who traditionally have adversarial interests and helping them to work towards promoting reconciliation and community interest was key especially for the security of the events.
- The support from community stakeholders was overwhelming and building these networks between groups helped to build reconciliation process between adversarial interest groups.



Community - leaders, youth women in Port Loko Festival

c) Building Trust

- Community members from various groups participated in the organisation of the festivals, every member had a voice in the process.
- The United Sierra Leone Project succeeded in organising a community event that ended peacefully following a very divisive election.

- Artists contributing to reconciliation and national cohesion with a musical album containing peace messages to bring the community together. Artists make a collaborative contribution to their community.
- Massive turnout and cooperation from community people, successfully holding of festivities with no violence.



Representatives of ECOWAS, AMNet and United Sierra Leone Project team engaging artists, with a focus on building trust with the communities and promoting theme of the Festival.

7. LESSONS LEARNED /RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) The United Sierra Leone Music Project really aided in promoting reconciliation and national cohesion, however the full attainment of the peace is dependent on other factors such as long term support and other community engagements. It was realised that such initiatives need support from government and the international community for sustainability and consistence.
- b) Some people understandably view this as a political stunt or a short-term measure - previous efforts at reconciliation have not led to lasting change - but others see it as a promising first step. The report thus observes that music has played a crucial role in the process of national cohesion and reconciliation in the consolidation of peace in Sierra Leone.

- c) Tribal politics need to be addressed to build a foundation for sustainable cohesion and reconciliation. Sierra Leoneans want an end to persistent electoral violence and are tired of politicians exploiting tribal politics as a tool to divide Sierra Leoneans for their own gain. While it is good to see a willingness to reconcile and work together at the grassroots level using music, the momentum must continue at all levels - national, country and community - for there to be a basis for real long-term and sustainable national reconciliation and cohesion.
- d) Over the years, the United Sierra Leone project has convened and facilitated activities where national stakeholders and representatives of communities meet, discuss tribalism, peace and security concerns and develop joint solutions to address them. We have learnt how important these processes are in building trust, strengthening relations, and developing joint agendas and action plans to address community needs. Trust is not built in one day or one month. These are long term processes that cannot be superficial and need to address root causes of grievances, tribal divisions, insecurity and conflict.
- e) There are a number of issues that will need to be addressed such as police reform, corruption, tribalism, unresolved historical injustices, and the development of an inclusive reconciliation framework. A national conversation that goes beyond the elite will be crucial for developing a common vision to address these and other challenges. Government, civil society and non-governmental organisations will have a central role in bringing people together from across ethnic and socio-political divides to develop a common agenda for change.
- f) While there has been an important declaration of unity by community leaders and members as demonstrated in the United Sierra Leone Festival, it is essential that any reconciliation process addresses historical injustices and grievances of the communities. The process should be inclusive, allowing community voices to be heard -including defining what reconciliation and national cohesion means for them - and outlining what needs to change. Only then will the United Sierra Leone project help drive long-term change and sustainable reconciliation.
- g) Based on the success of these festivals, the communities and artists are keen for these festivals to be replicated across all districts and organised annually with different stakeholders in the community in order for them to work together in making a contribution towards national cohesion and reconciliation.



Kailahun: a girl child delivering a message of reconciliation with recommendations to the community.