

Technical Report on the 2023 Peer Learning for BftW- CPS National Coordinators



Venue: Conference Room of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone

Date: 22nd – 24th August, 2023



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1. Background

Every year, the Bread for the World (BftW) supported Civil Peace Service (CPS) National Coordinators of member countries in Africa including Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo (D. R. C) come together in a peer learning engagement that is hosted in an agreed location. The purpose is to reflect on their work and its impact in the peace of the member countries. They also examined the challenges, and how they could possibly use the lessons learned to improve performance in fostering their peace building efforts in their respective countries.

The peer learning for 2023 was held at the Conference Room of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL) in Freetown from 22nd to 24th August, 2023. The theme for this year was focused on elections since the host country had just conducted their national elections. The visiting team was meant to learn from the processes and procedures, including challenges and how they could be surmounted to ensure the conduct of peaceful and credible elections in their countries.

2. Introduction

On behalf of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL), the President of CCSL, Rev. Henry A. Samuels welcomed all participants to what he described as much awaited CPS Peer Learning engagement for National Coordinators. He referenced the drama skit performed by Fritong Players International as a good welcome to Freetown. He added that, if explored, they would see lots of very interesting things and people around the capital city.



Rev. Samuels asserted that, the countries represented the engagement by the respective National Coordinators have the responsibility of shaping the destiny of nations within the framework of peace building. Of course, he added, dialogue is always one of the best approaches

to fostering peace in whatever situation. He noted that, even in Sierra Leone, every one was aware of the recent history of the country, but parties had to dialogue to make progress. “My friends, the journey towards sustainable peace is one that demands our dedication and shared experiences, and on a win-win commitment to creating positive change. Indeed, all the countries present here have their current challenges, history, etc.; so as we dialogue and share our experiences, it will enhance peace in the various nations we represent. This important gathering does not only extend friendship to all, but also unity across borders; our collective vision for world-free of conflicts unit us; transforming differences and driving us towards a common purpose...”, Rev. Samuels encouraged the assembly. He emphasised the need for a peaceful and progressive environment where their children and grandchildren will live and thrive in. He noted that, as participants would be exchanging ideas and experiences in the two-day engagement, they should remember that the seeds they sow therein would have the potential to blossom into a more harmonious and just world. He acknowledged that, the challenges Sierra Leone currently faces might be vast, but the power of their collective will is even greater. “Together, we can do it! Sierra Leone’s resilience

stands as a testimony to the transformative power of peace and reconciliation even in the present difficulties, we know that we are going to overcome. Together, we can amplify our impacts and inspire change, not only to our own nations but also throughout the entire region. With open heart and minds, let us forge new connections and leave this gathering with renewed purpose”, he preached and formerly declared the session open.

The BftW-CPS National Coordinator 1, Dr Sheku Kamara also welcomed his colleague National Coordinators from Liberia, Cameroon and D. R. Congo. He said, as a CPS network programme in the Mano River Union, Sierra Leone and Liberia come together once every year to reflect on their work and its impact in the peace of the two countries. He noted that, looking at the theme for this year, it was very topical as both countries were having elections on the same year. He said he very exited for the topic, and looked forward to the deliberations that would



come forth. Elections are very crucial for countries to move things forward, but because of the social circumstances, they also become a kind of war waiting to explode. So, people become very anxious to see them come and go, Dr. Kamara emphasised. He added that, it was there their responsibility to hang heads, share experiences and put strategies in place to ensure the conduct of peaceful elections in their countries.

Dr. Kamara threw light on how climate change issues are also now related to peace. He said, the whole world was now confronting the effects of climate; it is no longer a matter of science where one would have to show data to prove that climate change is a reality; there are wild fires, extreme weather conditions, flooding where there were previously none at all. He urged all to note that all of the climate change indicators were clear, and sending a message for all to do something to save the environment. He encouraged all to mainstream environmental issues into their peace work.

Further to the peer learning, Dr. Kamara said, it was the first time they were bringing in partners to the peer learning to accord them the opportunity to also share their actions and contributions to the thematic topic with the visiting National Coordinators, at least on the first day. He added that, the partners in the peer learning started in other countries, and they also decided to replicate it in Sierra Leone. The second day would be exclusively meant for National Coordinators to share experiences, including achievements, challenges, and lessons to improve performance, he noted.

In the first day’s session, which dealt mainly on the elections in Sierra Leone, Dr. Kamara said they decided to reduce the number of elections management bodies they invited. This was because, he said, the context was more sensitive and therefore, different comparatively with the elections held in 2018. He said, they only invited civil society organisations including the Council of Churches in Sierras Leone (CCSL) and National Elections Watch (NEW) – a consortium of civil society organisations, both of which observed the elections. He opined that, it was done to allow a safe space for everyone in the room to share and discuss properly and objectively about the elections without having apprehension of where that discussion might be reported.

“We will take a quick look at the CPS partner organisations in Sierra Leone; the activities they have been undertaking and how such meet to the challenges we have – not just for the elections, but also the environmental challenges that threaten the peace of the country”, Dr. Kamara indicated.

The first day’s session progressed with the visiting teams as well as the hosts underscoring the relevance of such annual engagement where they all had the opportunity to learn from each other to foster peace and social cohesion in their respective countries, while also strengthening bilateral and multilateral partnerships within the network.

Madam Adenike Cole, CPS National Coordinator² gave a brief overview of the operations of the organisations that form the BftW-CPS network partnership in Sierra Leone. As she took time to describe the main thematic focus of the respective partners, Adenike said, every organization in the network is professionally unique by virtue of their operational niche.

Over the years, they have been jointly working with young people in Sierra Leone and Liberia, Adenike updated the assembly and added that, COVID presented lots of restrictions that limited them to concentrate such engagements in country.

3. Challenges in Sierra Leone

Madam Adenike outlined numerous challenges that Sierra Leone currently faces as a country that threaten its peace. As a network, she noted, they try to tackle fundamental issues that brew and have the tendency to implode or explode and plunge the country into serious uncontrollable situations such as the rebel war in the past. There are, however, some gaps that they (Coordinators) are now contemplating to work with Berlin for the recruitment of additional partners into the network. There are issues relating to food security, climate change and youth empowerment, among others. So, there is need to step up advocacy at higher level for which the network requires an advocacy group that should lead on justice, and also an institution that would exclusively lead on the gender component, Adenike continued.

Madam Adenike furthered that, the work of the network was not only focused on elections, but on a variety of other issues because everything is intertwined. That is why even though each institution has its mission, vision and specialisation, peace work and environmental issues are integrated into what they do. Each one of them is working on some form of environmental education and climate change, she maintained.

Adenike also disclosed another challenge relating to the results of the national voter registration that brought about huge national disagreement especially between the All People’s Congress (APC) and Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP), the two largest political parties in Sierra Leone.

4. General Discussions

Edward Conteh, Head of Programmes of MADAM said, more than 50% of the population of Sierra Leone are young people, which supposed to be an opportunity for the development of the country. But this is not the case because the enabling environment to transform these young people to develop agents is almost absent. He drew the attention of all to the fact that since the civil war ended a bit over 20 years

ago, there has been a new crop of young people who are not ware of their past, including the atrocities caused by the war. Because of this knowledge gap, they think it is not their business, and thus, behaving in accordance with the current context that they find themselves. Because of this situation, issues of drug abuse and increased crime rate are becoming a serious threat to the peace of the country. Most of the violent confrontations during the elections were led by young people.

Ben Sei, Executive Director of SLOIC said the CPS network membership could be doing advocacy work at individual organizational level. But what is required as a network for advocacy is to have a strong unit that could challenge issues when they present themselves, not as individuals. He noted that the strengths are not the same within the network, thus the need to have a formidable advocacy unit to take up issues, while also protecting the interests of individual institutions therein.

Joseph Howard from Liberia talked about the issue of a nationally recognised mandate for the network to undertake advocacy on national issues. He said, much as most of the member organisations in the CPS network might have the skills to undertake advocacy, it is important to identify a specific institution with the legal mandate to lead of specific advocacy issues on behalf of the network at the national level.

Dr. Kamara responded that, Howard's point was well taken and, the network was already thinking along that direction. He continued that, apart from jointly celebrating the International Day of Peace, the network also usually comes together to do a lot of other work and take along lessons learnt. He noted that, most of the time, when the network takes up critical and contentious issues with the government, that is when they start to raise questions about legal mandate to operate as a network in Sierra Leone.

5. Presentation by the National Elections Watch Representative – Sahr Kendema



Sahr Kendema, Ag National Coordinator of Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) and National Elections Watch (NEW) started off his experience sharing session by wishing Liberia and Cameroon good luck as they would be having their elections in the coming months. He gave a brief history of some of the very important elections that were held in the past in Sierra Leone. He said, the country had the first multi-party elections in 1996 after a long period of one-party rule. Since then to date, there have been 6

national elections conducted in Sierra Leone, with the Simple Plurality (First Past the Post) and Proportional Representation (PR) electoral systems being used so far, he added. As civil society organisations, they have three key roles to play, including complementing the work of government, serving as intermediaries between the citizens and government, and playing the role as a watchdog for the citizens to get things rightly done by the government, Kendema noted. He furthered that, when it comes to playing the first two roles, there is usually no comments or issues between the CSOs and government. However,

playing the third role effectively and efficiently usually plunges CSOs and government into serious feud because it involves accountability issues, he asserted.

The NEW representative emphasised that elections being free, fair, transparent and credible are the key components in sustaining a country's democracy. Anything short of these, is tantamount to playing with the peace of the people of that nation, he warned. He added that, participation is also another important element when it comes to democratic elections, which is why a good number of people work to ensure that the process is inclusive. "NEW work on elections because this determines the leaders that govern a country. So if the process is not transparent, accountable and inclusive, it becomes a problem. NEW is a coalition of 450 like-minded CSOs who constituted themselves to monitor national elections across the 16 districts in Sierra Leone. NEW has membership and Coordinators in all the districts, at the regional level and the secretariat at the national level", Kendema explained.

Sahr Kendema continued that, monitoring the electoral process requires communicating to the general public, which is why NEW has three press statements that are released to communicate the outcomes of findings and recommendations to the government at every step of the process. He outlined the processes as follows:

- Elections always start with **registrations** which NEW monitors and in the process, NEW provide real time updates on the process highlighting key successes, challenges and proffer recommendations for the attention of the appropriate authorities to take prompt actions. Monitors are deployed in about 80% – 90% of all the registration centers with scientific tools to collect accurate real time data on the process that is reflective nationally. It is worth noting that, some of the information reported are not pleasant for the government, which sometimes sets the coalition at logger heads with government.
- The exhibition exercise follows after registration; this process is also monitored by NEW.
- Importation of ballot papers is another critical element of elections; this is also monitored by deploying observers at the Freetown International Airport; recording of the seal numbers on the ballot papers to cross-check during the voting period for any mismatch; detailing the total number of ballot papers brought in and the amount of ballot papers distributed to the various districts, are all part of the indicators considered.
- The findings and/or discrepancies are reported to the authorities in Freetown. NEW does all of these to ensure transparency and accountability of the electoral process. Any doubts in the process results in losing public trust.

He further explained that, before the elections, NEW establishes what he referred to as a **Situation Room** to have real time information on reports from the tally center, with heavy dependence on the field observers. The Situation Room comprises legal practitioners to guide the process; data analysts and incident reports. Observers are given new android tablets to collect and transmit information from the various pooling stations across the country. These are captured on the screen at the Situation Room. Realizing that sometimes mobile communication network is challenging for certain areas in the country, NEW resorts to getting mobile phone sim cards from a nearby country with a strong network to help the field observes transmit the data in good time.

i. NEW's System

Kendema described NEW's system as one that is set up to enable reporting periodically; after every 1 hour. He said, questionnaires are coded to capture every issue from the morning, afternoon and closing sessions. The system captures the specific pooling centres that close at 5 p.m. which is the required time by Law, he continued. When counting starts, reports on results are captured and verified by the system such that, before ECSL announces the final results, NEW already has them verified in their system to ensure that they are authentic and unquestionable, he asserted. Considering the sensitivity of the situation, NEW's system is highly protected from any external forces including hackers, fire, etc., Kendema assured the assembly.

ii. Mandate to Announce Elections Results

NEW's representative declared to all that, the mandate to announce elections results is given solely to the ECSL and not any other body in Sierra Leone, and that, whatever NEW gives out is only a projection of their findings, which was also done in 2018. And the law does not prohibit any institution from issuing out projections of their findings, he noted.

iii. Major Challenges

Sahr Kendema reported that, when NEW gave their projection based on their findings in the first ballot in 2018, no objections were raised by any political party. But when the same method was applied in 2023, the political party that jubilated in 2018 now raised objections to the system, he added. "This tells you that, these are some of the issues that you might face as observers in your elections", he cautioned the visiting team. He called on them to be prepared for such situations. He said, that was exactly what NEW was going through at the moment. As part of the experience sharing, he said that is the first challenge they would face during their elections. The second one, he noted, would be, living in a country of huge division where there are CSOs who align themselves with government to be in their good books, and would be saying all sorts of things about the other set of CSOs who strive to do things credibly. Being ready for violence is the other challenge, he continued; they will subject you to all sorts of violence including emotional, physical and spiritual violence. Finally, the elephant in the room is that, if the political party that objected to the projections provided ended up winning the elections, you will never be in their good books, which will affect your finances to continue operations. And if one is not careful, some of the donors will also come after your institution for want of accountability, all in the name of trying to please the ruling government. The pro-government media will also come after you to try to humiliate, and bring you down with various media channels, just for doing your job effectively and efficiently, Kendema concluded on the challenges.

iv. Mitigation Strategies and Recommendations

Sahr Kendema outlined the following as key mitigation strategies or recommendations to keep CSOs on track while delivering on their election monitoring and observation mandate:

1. **Have a thick skin:** No matter what they say or do, they can never intimidate, frustrate or stop you from doing the right thing.
2. **Be guided by the expression: "what shall it profit a man to gain government's favour and lose your trust in the public and even your conscience"**. He urged all to write it down so it would serve as a guide when discharging their duties.

3. **Be robust with your media.** You should be robust to the point of setting the records straight on social media because that is where you have most of the young people.
4. **Be vigilant.** This is because, you might have betrayers even among your employees to the point of sending wrong data. So, you should be vigilant to verify your data.
5. **Protect your social media page** from hackers.

He concluded that, the end always justifies the means such that, the “puppet” CSOs and media institutions would end up in failure because, the government would end up questioning their credibility and then dump them even before they realise it.

On the issue of the government casting doubts on their strategy, Kendema said, even when they tried to question NEW’s strategy of not being everywhere, he said they always tell them that NEW does not have to be everywhere to know what happened and also have credible results. He gave an analogy that, a doctor does not have to remove all the patient’s blood to test for malaria.

For NEW, he said, they would continue to enjoy the confidence and trust of the people and even from the consciences of some of the government officials for its steadfastness. Finally, he concluded, mediators will use your results if they are credible.

6. General Discussions

Dr. Kamara thanked him for having shared his experiences with the assembly. He furthered that, each time the CPS had representatives from the elections management bodies, they always prove that they merit what they do. He was able to take everyone through the process systematically. So in all fairness, due to the absence of government from the engagement, participants should also be mindful of the questions they pose to the NEW representative, as he was not there to explain about who was wrong or right, Dr. Kamara reminded his colleagues. He also urged them to learn from NEW’s angle, and not make judgment on the whole process, especially at this point in time when the CPS was trying to make peace and move on.

Dr Kamara inquired about the appropriate authority Kendema was referring to. Kendema responded that, depending on the issues that are flagged up; if they relate to security, the security sector which is part of the elections management body will take up responsibility to address them, etc.

Kankolongo Bibiche Ritha Therese from DR Congo asked how the NEW normally funds their operations. Kendema responded that funding is not always the problem for NEW. He said the coalition has a membership of 450 across the country, which in itself is a huge resource if quantified in monetary terms. He said, they sometimes tap into the internal resources of the membership, and would only require funds for training, equipment, protection of the system and administrative purposes of the operations. Since money is not always enough, he recommended for all to utilize the available resources within the membership.

Florentine from Cameroon thanked Kendema for the presentation, noting that it was really impressed and it was her second time of hearing about the operations of NEW. She asked about the strategy that NEW employed to have 450 members in the coalition. She continued that, in her country, there is the adage that says, “divide to better reign”. So, they were still not able to bring together all the CSOs to form that

coalition. Responding to Florentine, Sahr Kendema said, the leadership is key; and the leader needs to be transparent and accountable to the membership. Whatever decision that is taken at the management level should be cascaded down to the regional and district levels. Also, making sure the coalition has systems and processes is also another important element. Ownership and inclusivity are also very key in building a coalition; ensuring that everyone feels belong and is consulted before decisions are taken is very important consideration. Every member must sign to the code of conduct to show commitment to the dictates and operations of the coalition. He advised that they should develop a registration form accompanied by a code of conduct for all members to fill. So, the membership should be like-minded. NEW is currently being headed by Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), who was currently not in the country. But because of her good and resilient leadership, NEW continues to run very well in her absence. He however warned that, they should be strong and resilient, as it will not be easy in the first five years of the life of the coalition. There could be issues relating to self-centeredness, political interference, divisions, etc.

Kankolongo Bibiche said, during their last elections, the Catholic Church played the same role as that of NEW. It was very interesting as she also observed the election in her own province. However, the candidate that was proclaimed to have won the election, did not actually win. But for the sake of peace, and securing the safety of the population, they had to discuss it. Kendema alluded to her point that, the issue of candidates not being voted for in particular areas but that candidate ended up having votes in those areas is not new. He added that, those are some the irregularities that usually creep in during elections. He also said he understood the position of the Catholic Church, trying to ensure that peace prevails, and would not want to be seen to ignite conflict. Unlike Sierra Leone, he noted, where NEW made sure they provide updates through out the process using online and offline measures to avoid any form of intimidation from any quarters. Even when they attempted to intimidate us, NEW thankfully received huge support from international CSOs from Ghana and Nigeria which is where the solidarity comes in.

Kankolongo Bibiche continued that, the biggest concern currently in DRC is that, they are losing very strong civil society members to politics. They realised that there is so much money in politics; even women are encouraged to the extent of them not paying anything to enter into politics. She disclosed that, she has been approached a thousand times but rejected on the note that, if all the strong people should go into politics, then who will continue the work at the civil society level.

Sahr Kendema responded that, the work they do in the civil society world is mostly voluntary, and not commensurate to the salary received; it requires passion. Even in Sierra Leone, there are people who have resigned from the civil society and are now politicians. If you want to go, let it be known that this is what you now want to do, that is what decency requires. It is true that, you have to be in to bring the change that you want. However, once people are in, they behave differently, like for example, prosecutors becoming defenders.

Ntui-oben Obi-agbor from Cameroon inquired to know whether NEW sometimes receive pressure from the international community regarding the observations and projections they provide. Kendema retorted that they are always guided by the adage, "what shall it profit a man gain international and political recognition and lose the people's trust". But noted that, pressure comes everywhere; and not because the international community really want to interfere, but they are only being worried about your security and safety. But NEW is not bothered about who pressurizes them, rather doing the right thing has always been the focus.

Rebeca from Liberia asked whether any member of NEW was held in custody for the work they do. Kendema responded that, even though there has been lots of intimidation and psychological torture being meted out to the membership, especially the leadership, but no member has ever been arrested at any given time. He added that, the threats are too much.

Joseph Howard from Liberia said, for them in Liberia where the elections would be conducted in October, sometimes political party followers would attack the civil society in order to force them to do their bidding. He said, the early warning that he wanted to share was that, ballot papers and boxes were already being distributed across the country without the knowledge of the civil society and some other political parties. That would breed lack of confidence in the process, would be a recipe for denial of final elections results.

Kendema disclosed that the civil society would be friends with political parties when they are in opposition. He therefore advised all to do what is right and serve the people very well.

Dr Kamara thanked Sahr Kendema very much for the experience and pieces of advice he provided. He asked that the CCSL be given the floor to make their own presentation. He said, the role of Council is slightly different because they were more in the area of providing advice and mediation to avoid conflict.

The CCSL Consultant for its election project, Canon Rogers-Wright said, CCSL is a founding member of NEW, of which he happened to be its first Chairman. He revealed that, the 2023 elections would have been better conducted than the previous elections in 2018 if the ECSL had taken into consideration all the recommendations proffered by the EU, CCSL and other bodies. Elections are rigged well before the pooling day, he asserted and further explained the causes that led to the use of the initial PR system in 1996 was quite in place at the time considering the then prevailing situation – the civil war. He however disclosed that, the reasons forwarded by government and ECSL for the use of the same system in the 2023 election were never consistent with the current socio-political situation in the country. He also talked about the mid-term census and the delay in publishing the final voter register. He continued that, CCSL approached ECSL and requested for some answers for the delay in publishing the final voter. He asserted that, Council realised that something was not right when the ECSL failed to comment on issues related to their sister institution, Statistics – Sierra Leone, regarding the authenticity of the mid-term census results.

Elections are a process within an electoral cycle of 5 years, he noted. He also said the credibility of an election depends on the acceptability of the populace. The process might be transparent and fair, but if at the end, something went wrong as was in the case of the 2023 elections, he emphasised, people would doubt the outcome of the elections. Before pooling day, Canon Rogers-Wright said, there was tension and violence in several parts of the country. But the atmosphere was generally peaceful on pooling day, in spite of the delays in starting the voting process due to untimely delivery of voting materials at pooling centers, he reported. He also reported that the presence of the security forces was too large, which threatened the voting population in most areas. The ECSL started problems with the tabulation of results – the space provided for all observers was not enough. Also, tallying, which was supposed to be done at district level, was not done there. These views were shared by the local and international observers, with clear recommendations to resolve the situation, but were not heeded to, he continued. The ECSL Chairman announced what he described as 60% of the elections results. He said they received reports from their observers that at the time of the announcement of the aforementioned results, some polling centers had not yet completed counting of ballot papers.

In view of all of the foregoing, the opposition declined taking part in any of the functions and operations of governance in the country, and unfortunately, the government does not seem to care about all of that, Canon Rogers-Wright noted. At first, the opposition party refused to entertain discussions about dialogue. But it seemed that, after the publication of the second report of CCSL, they opened the doors for dialogue. He opined that, rather than blaming the APC for their action, it is only the ECSL that holds the handle to peace in Sierra Leone. So, CCSL thought they should intensify their efforts with other stakeholders to work towards attaining peace in the country.

They also thought they should make their relationship meaningful with the ECSL by encouraging them to do the needful which is the publication of the disaggregated results. If the commission insists to not publish the disaggregated results, they would urge the APC to proceed to court and demand for the release of those results. The main motto of CCSL is to ensure peace and justice for all, and the Council would not rest until that is achieved.

The President of CCSL, Rev. Henry A. Samuels added to his colleague's presentation that, like the experience of their counterparts in DR Congo, the Council was also facing a similar situation in Sierra Leone, where some other denominations were opposed to the Council's report on the outcome of the election being made public for the peace of the country. They were of the thinking that the Church should only observe and then pray to allow peace to reign. But because of Council's long-standing involvement in the electoral process in Sierra Leone, and because of the confidence that the population has on CCSL as a religious body, they were not afraid to publicize what they observed during the election, and also proffer recommendations that would ensure peace and justice in the country. He also updated that, Council also engaged with ECSL regarding the release of the disaggregated election results. He said, they urged ECSL to release those results without further delay, if that was the reason why the election was being regarded as not credible, to save the face of the Commission. Rev. Samuels maintained that, after the release of Council's second report on the outcome of the elections that the opposition realised that, it is not all institutions that can be compromised; they opened the doors for dialogue, and approached CCSL to say they were ready for discussions with Council. He asserted that, CCSL has been steadfast in its role, and would continue in that direction.

7. General Discussions

Dr. Kamara thanked both speakers for having shared their experiences. He noted that, the presentations spoke to their souls and consciences about the challenges the people face as a nation. He said that was why they said earlier that what they shared with their colleagues in 2019 was quite different from the experiences this year because there was evolution, and movements in their trajectory as a nation; and for every election, there is a different context and the one this time is different, and it should be discussed from that point of view.

Ben Sei from SLOIC said, it would have been better to also have the other player (ECSL) to listen to their own story. He noted that, for the opposition to fail to court for fear of not being served justice was not a reason, but a mere excuse, he added that, they could have gone to court to demand ECSL to produce the results, rather than putting other people's lives to threat. He suggested for the National Coordinators to invite the ECSL such that partners would have the opportunity to ask them several questions for the sake of learning.

Dr. Kamara responded that, the lack of confidence in national institutions is a fundamental issue. It stems from the manner in which such institutions are constituted. He continued that, whatever political party that assumes power, by virtue of the constitution, the President has the right to change the entire set up. State institutions are supposed to be independent. But if the President has to appoint, for example, the head of the judiciary, how does he not have to side the president, he asked rhetorically. The other question anyone would also ask is that, why is the same system working in other countries but not for us, he queried and pointed to issues relating to integrity.

David Mackieu of MAGE shared that, when they were hired by NDI to train aspirants for political positions in Sierra Leone, they prepared the mind set of the people to enable them understand that even if a political party loses the presidency but wins parliamentary and council seats, the party did not actually lose. He said, this is because once the party wins seats at all levels, the communities have representatives to advocate on their behalf.

8. Presentation by the Sierra Leone Network on the Right to Food (SiLNoRF)

The Deputy National Coordinator of SiLNoRF, Abass John Kamara took participants through some key experiences gained during the implementation of activities to promote non-violence in elections. Abass said, his organisation limited their interventions in Tonkolili and Bombali districts, north of Sierra Leone. He said, they brought together all elections management body representatives in Bombali district, where the Makeni Artiste Union was also in attendance to provide musical performances with a special peace song that was produced courtesy of SiLNoRF. Abass continued that, prior to the stakeholder engagement, several preliminary discussions were held with youth leaders, Makeni Artiste Union and other musical artistes based in Freetown regarding the financial allocations for their role in the project. However, trouble started brewing when the discussion got to the announcement about the total figure of the allocated funds, he noted. The bottom-line of it all was that, some did not favour the public disclosure of the funds, he revealed. But SiLNoRF quickly intervened and made them realise that, accountability and transparency should be the watch words, in the company of key others, if sustainable peace is to be maintained in the country. And as a result of the organisation's intervention, the election went through quietly and peacefully with worries of violence among youth in that part of the country, Abass concluded.

9. Presentation by Culture Radio on Hate Speech



The Station Manager of Culture Radio, Aminata Finda Massaquoi, presented on behalf of her institution some experience gathered while campaigning against hate speech before, during and after the general elections. She noted that, as a media institution, their work during the election was very tedious especially in handling the social media. Indeed, a greater number of the population still depend on the main stream media. This is evident when most return to the traditional media to confirm certain information received from the social media. The Radio worked with many other radio networks including the IRN, Sierra Leone Association of Journalists' factcheckers before broadcasting certain information to the public. The Radio, at some point, had to move

away from its normal radio programs, to engage the young people, social media bloggers and journalists to help them understand the ramifications of broadcasting hate speech or fake news through workshops. “As a Manager, I had to instruct my team to not broadcast any news without my vetting, which helped us a great deal in controlling the news that went out without contravening the Independent Media Commission code of conduct”, she disclosed to the assembly. There are diasporas and locals as well who are out there fanning the flames of chaos, and wishing for the worst to happen in the country, Aminata lamented and added that, their radio stood strong to ensure peace continue to prevail through the production and airing of songs and jingles with peace messages to sensitise the general populace. She continued that they also engaged the Sierra Leone Police and other law enforcement bodies to chat the way forward to ensuring peace and stability in communities. The Police, as a means of fulfilling their commitment registered at the engagement with Culture Radio, convened a stakeholder engagement meeting at Grafton community, involving all the leading political parties. This was at a time when the political tension was very high already with party opposing party supporters mounting PA systems and each claiming election victory even before the declaration of final results. The police finally handled the situation amicably due to that engagement, Aminata noted. She also reported that, Culture Radio had to stop all phone-in programs until after the elections as a way of deterring people from raining invectives on political opponents through the radio. She ended on the note that, they would continue to do the needful to try to defuse tensions and preach peace on the radio and in face to face community outreach debates, as hate speech was still rife even after the elections.

10. General Discussions

Ben Sei from SLOIC stressed that, much of the violence is being masterminded by adults, not young people because the importers and distributors of drugs are adults; the pioneers and sponsors of violence are key stakeholders in communities. He added that, they perpetrate all of that to eliminate young people from meaningful societal responsibilities. Ben continued that, SLOIC had several townhall meetings in Bo, south of Sierra Leone where they made community stakeholders know that, if they continue perpetrating violence, the young people would bear the brunt of the repercussion; and on the other hand, they planned well for their communities, the young people would be the beneficiaries of the results of such plans. Through the CPS network, SLOIC has established peace clubs in communities, with youth ambassadors in various institutions to help conscience their folks into becoming better substance in society, Ben reported to the assembly.

Christian Kamara of YMCA asserted that, young people by themselves are not violent; something always triggers their violence. He furthered that the saying that young people are the future leaders of tomorrow is not right because that future will never come. So, if anyone wants a productive future, they should invest in young people today. He cited an example of some young people they engaged at a particular time after receiving some intelligence about an impending attack on some opponent political group. He updated the assembly about how he asked the young people to bring forth their political lord’s children to lead on the assault which made them have a complete rethink of their intended action. He therefore, encouraged all to make deliberate effort to invest in young people, as they have it all to change the future.

Regarding hate speech, Christian noted that, everyone who forwards a message bearing elements of hate speech on WhatsApp groups is guilty of spreading hate speech. He added that, people should make conscious efforts to not forward such messages to others.

Ntui-oben from Cameroon thanked and congratulated Culture Radio for what he described as a tremendous work that they do in Sierra Leone. He noted that, he was also a radio presenter before and emphasised the role that the radio plays in building or destroying the peace of any nation. He encouraged the management of Culture Radio to continue with the good work.

Concluding on the first day's engagement session, Dr. Kamara gave closing remarks by first thanking all for their participation. He described their contributions as immense to the peer learning and also emphasised that, the issue of elections everywhere is a very critical one. He cited a quote that says, "Those who vote decide nothing. But those who count the votes decide everything", and emphasised the need to uphold the credibility of the main election management body, which is the ECSL. Dr. Kamara stated that, the issue of the ECSL Chairman saying that he has the sole powers to announce the final result of an election does not also give him the right to announce any result, but the one that reflects the will of the people. He noted that they all value the peace of the country which is why the country was in the current state. He wished partners in Sierra Leone safe travels as they journeyed back to their respective locations across the country. He noted that the following day's session would exclusively be meant for the CPS National Coordinators to deliberate deeply on their achievements, challenges and prospects for future engagements. He said they would be looking forward to participating in the next peer learning meeting, where ever the next location would be for next year.

11. Exclusive Session for the National Coordinators



This session was held at the Board Room of CCSL on 23rd August, 2023, and was co-chaired by Dr. Sheku Kamara and Madam Adenike Cole.

Madam Cole started off by saying that, having an exclusive session for them as National Coordinators was the high point of the peer learning where they would talk about the context in which they work, their specific work and also how they could learn from and support each other. She noted that, other colleagues present would leave immediately after lunch was served for them to remain alone as Coordinators.

12. Reflection of the 1st Day's Session

Rebecca from Liberia said, she was very impressed with the NEW representative. She said Sahr Kendema was really excellent in the manner in which he took participants through their role and experiences in the electioneering process in the Sierra Leone. Rebecca noted that, it was just so timely that some had someone like to explain all of that because her country, Liberia would also be going through elections in October. All the things that Kendema highlighted and recommended for all to institute, would be put in place when they return to Liberia to ensure their safety.

Joseph Howard from Liberia said, the selection of key people to speak on their experiences in elections in Sierra Leone was a great approach for him. He referred to the CCSL Consultant as an experienced old man that people should find time to sit with to learn from.

Ntui-oben from Cameroon thanked his colleague National Coordinators for putting everything together. He said, he was particularly impressed by the Kendema from NEW whom he said took time to explain things bit by bit for all to understand the processes. He said the level of openness exhibited by NEW, coupled with their strategy left him thinking about what they should do as a CPS network when he returned to Cameroon. He also noted his impression about Fritong Players; how people use theatre to send strong messages to the public on social issues. He continued that the presentation of CCSL left a reminder in his mind about the role of religious institutions in the electioneering process. Ntui however noted that the only challenge was the limited time for interactions with partners because people needed to return to the provinces.

Florentine from Cameroon said the previous day's session was a good start of her day. The last time they were in Sierra Leone, NEW and CCSL were also with them, sharing their respective experiences with them. But it was a different one altogether for the 2023 session as NEW had to focus on the things that they (visiting Coordinators wanted to know) including the challenges, lessons learned, and what they could do better, she reiterated. Florentine also mentioned that it was also good that the partners who were not initially part of the plan were made to say something. She added that it was good that some of the partners had had some experience working in Cameroon; and they also shared their experiences personally with them.

Kankolongo Bibiche Ritha Therese from DR Congo said, it was very good to see young people using their talent through drama to express themselves and promoting peace. She asserted that it is a good tool that they should consider to use when they returned to DR Congo.

Kankolongo Bibiche said, she found the presentations of CCSL and NEW very impressive, and would try to implement some the key things recommended by NEW in her country.

Adenike Cole remarked that, even though it was elections also in their last visit in 2019, the current context, including the system of elections, and even the outcomes, is different which made the learning really very important for all. She reminded all to note that, they were not merely emphasising things to create an impression, but the situation was really tense and difficult. She continued that, in spite of all the challenges Sierra Leoneans were going through, they always found something to smile for and let go the difficult times.

Dr. Sheku Kamara said, the contents of the presentations from NEW and CCSL were also a good learning for them as local partners because they never knew that the events that evolved from the Mid-term Census results through the final election results generated such numerous feedbacks from CCSL and NEW that were never heeded to by the elections management bodies. He recounted that, in previous elections, when complaints were made by institutions like CCSL, NEW or political parties, the Elections Commissioner would make efforts to address the situation, which he said was completely different case in the current situation. That was severely dividing the country, he emphasised. Dr. Kamara said there was need to have an introspection within the CPS network itself, as some partners could still be seen taking political sides when they should not as peace advocates. He mentioned that, if it was not for the effects of the war experienced in the country, the outcome of the 2023 elections would have sent Sierra Leone into war at the current moment. But because peace is very paramount, Sierra Leoneans are ready to accept it at any cost; even at the cost compromising justice, he lamented. He advised that his colleague Coordinators try to adapt the lessons shared by the presenters to their respective contexts.

13. The Political Situation in Relation to Good Governance

a. Presentations:

b. Presentation from Sierra Leone



Dr. Kamara said, their discussions would focus on the current political situation relative to good governance. He related good governance to public elections and how they are done. He said, that is why his organisation, the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL), is a membership organisation which allows the membership to elect the Board. As a BirdLife partner, its good governance is assessed from the processes involved in electing the Board, he continued. He said, for them, elections are a fundamental of good governance. He recounted the submission of the Director of

MAGE, David Tamba Mackieu when he said, "... losing the presidency does not mean losing everything...". Dr. Kamara rebuffed that with a remark from some young people who responded to David saying, "... when the presidency is captured, the rest does not matter because, all the other institutions will be compromised as they all depend on the presidency". He explained that the President has the powers to hire members of the Executive, who go through Parliament for approval. This he said, is a good aspect of some form of checks and balances; but when he decides to fire any of them, he does not refer to Parliament, which does not support good governance and therefore, has a serious repercussion on the current state of peace of the country. As a network, Dr. Kamara said, they should think of how to step up strong advocacy for the review of the constitution. He updated that, reviewing the constitution was something that the previous government started, but has been shelved by the current regime because there are certain elements (excessive powers of the Executive) that are only enjoyed when in governance not while in opposition.



Madam Adenike Cole said, Sahr Kendema tried his level best not to mention names of people during his explanation. The issue of separation of powers in Sierra Leone is just a lip-service, as it does not exist in its real sense, she emphasised. She cited an instance where the Executive Director of the National Protected Area Authority (NPAA) that was supposed to be elected by the Board was now appointed by the President of Sierra Leone. “This singular act of the President has succeeded in “killing”

the Board which Dr. Sheku Kamara used to be part of representing CSSL”, she lamented. But when the Minister of Agriculture was brave enough to denounce that act, he was sacked by the President; this tells you that there are still some people whose integrity can not be mortgaged, and would prefer to drop if they found things not being right, she added. Adenike noted however that, a lot of people in political regimes only think about themselves rather than the common good. She also mentioned that, the only reason that could have prevented the opposition from going to court was the conviction that the courts would rule against them if they approached them because there is systemic corruption in the country.

Adenike disclosed that her own understanding about governance is the ruling government and the opposition working together. She however indicated that, from all what was revealed from various reports, what happened in the 2023 elections has never happened before in the history of the country. She recounted how she felt very insecure during the election after being followed to her home by an armed security personnel.

Adenike furthered that, the current shrinking civil society space was caused by CSOs which aligned themselves with the ruling government to the detriment of others and the general populace; CSOs writing press releases disassociating themselves from the actions of NEW, just to be in the good books of the government, and to get political appointments. She updated the assembly about the temporary ban on renewing registration for faith-based organisations in the country, all because of the stance of CCSL to publish their report on the outcome of the elections. She ended that the international community, including the USA, UK, EU, among others were yet to send official congratulatory messages to the President on his re-election.

c. Presentation from Liberia



Rebecca Bertsche from Liberia informed all that the main goal that Liberians would want to achieve was to have a peaceful, non-violent, transparent, free, fair and all-inclusive electoral process before, during and after the Presidential and Legislative elections on October, 2023. She furthered that, so many things had happened recently one of which could be a pointer for not having a free and fair election was the credibility of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) relative to their involvement with the ruling government. The

general fear of all Liberians is the fact that, all the elections management bodies were appointed by government, and that could compromise impartial delivery of their responsibilities when it comes to national elections, she lamented. She updated that, the thorny issue was the lack of responsiveness of NEC towards addressing the issues raised by opposition parties. Rebecca said, the civil society and the general populace were now calling on the international community to focus on safeguarding the peace and security of Liberia and the sub-region. There was a serious clash between the ruling party and the main opposition party, with hate speech everywhere. This was because no clear campaign schedule was given to any political party, she disclosed. She also indicated that, another problem that partners were trying to resolve was what she referred to as faulty voter registration done by NEC. She said the equipment were faulty, NEC staff were not deployed on time and in some places, no officials were deployed for the registration, lots of errors on the ID cards, registration of under-age school pupils was rife, less voter education. Above all, NEC requested that all grievances on the election should be taken to court after the elections. She also updated that, the CPS network intervened and requested NEC to ensure that all lost cards as well as faulty cards were replaced.

Rebecca continued that, the interest of the political parties is to use the young people to win power by any means possible, without considering their plight. There is high proliferation of drugs, including “kush”, brought into the country by influential people in society. The politicians do not consider the risk of relapsing to war because all their children are in the United States, she lamented.

Joseph Howard also updated that the issues were so many and alarming that NEC had to include civil society organisations including the CPS network to raise public awareness in all the Counties across the country on the electoral process. He continued that what he thought needed to be done by civil society is collaborative advocacy – bringing the government and all other stakeholders together to chat the way forward. He said, he knew it would be difficult, but not impossible to achieve the common goal which is building and strengthening peace.

Responding to the joint presentation for Liberia, Dr. Sheku Kamara acknowledged the fact that Sierra Leone and Liberia have commonalities in most things, but noted that from the presentations, there were also some differences. He expressed apprehension that a bad precedent has been set in his country and might just repeat itself in Liberia if care was not taken.

Kankolongo Bibiche from DR Congo requested to know the intervention of the Council of Churches in Liberia. Joseph responded that the lead authorities of the Council were linked to the ruling government, and that, they were already seen to have been compromised.

Adenike Cole said, considering the economic trend of things, like in Sierra Leone, people are on edge and prayed that everything gets well with Liberia on their elections. She cited an example on the outcomes and recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that are yet to be addressed in Sierra Leone, and related it to Liberia also as still not being addressed. She noted that those were things that caused the wars in both countries that were supposed to have been prioritized by the leaders.

d. Presentation from the Democratic Republic of Congo



Presenting on DR Congo, Odile Bulabula said the current political context in her country was not good enough to prepare them to have a free and fair election. She requested her colleague, Kankolongo Bibiche who speaks better English to continue with the presentation.

Madam Bibiche said, since independence the upcoming elections would be the country's fourth experience. She continued that, there used to be lots of violence, loss of lives and destruction of infrastructure after election. The Elections Commission had completed the registration

process to hold elections on December 20, 2023 for a five-year term, she added. Bibiche continued that the electoral laws were already reviewed, adopted and published. Additionally, she updated that the electoral calendar had been announced to allow campaigns to start sometime in late October. The President of the Electoral Commission is widely known to be a very good friend of the President of D. R. Congo, which currently worries most people regarding the outcome of the election results, she indicated. Even though things sometimes get worrisome, but the civil society are always trusted by the public to advocate on their behalf, which is somehow a good thing in that respect, she asserted. She also updated that, there was tension in their current political climate, citing an instance where the civil society requested an audit on the electoral register that was rejected by the Elections Commission, which led to a serious confrontation between the government, the opposition and the civil society.

Madam Bibiche reported that, like in Sierra Leone, there was serious repression by the government that stemmed from a request made by the opposition and civil society to stage public demonstrations. This was rejected by the security forces, and resulted in many arrests of opposition supporters, journalists and civil society activists when they decided to go ahead with the protests, she added. She also talked about how the politicians usually manipulate the young people to go into violence, including killing and kidnapping political opponents, especially in Kinshasa and North Kivu. Even when the President tried to organise a peace dialogue, that does not seem to be working because of the insecurity and violence especially perpetrated by the military, she added. She also reported that there were other serious security issues in North Kivu – a rebellion that has lasted for over a year, involving armed groups and neighbouring countries; there is also inter-communal conflicts among Congolese.

Bibiche however updated that, they were currently working with Dr Rolfe Grafe on conflict mediation in communities where there had been serious tensions and killings, and that, the process would continue after the elections.

Regarding the voter identification cards, Bibiche said their ID cards also had similar problems as those issued in Sierra Leone; the quality is very bad, they are dark and hardly recognize the persons on the cards, mismatch of gender, residential addresses and names of people, etc. She admitted that the engagement in Sierra Leone was a real peer learning as most of the issues were similar.

Bibiche also explained about how government officials mismanage public funds, especially those meant for education, health and infrastructural development. She however noted that, in spite of all of the odds, some form of visible reforms were taking place in their country.

Because there is strong need for women's inclusion into politics, Bibiche said political parties were scouting for women, even to the extent of giving them money to get them to be involved. She lamented that, it was not a good practice because they could only succeed to lure women who are interested in the money, but not the national interest. She also updated that the current President was rumoured as being interested to run again for the presidency, even though he has not made it public; he was however reported to be supporting lots of political activities behind the scenes. She as well informed all that, Dr. Denis Mukwege, a Nobel prize winner, was reported to have been approached by political parties, the Pope, the President of France, Macron and other notable figures to talk him into running for the presidency; but he has not said anything. Bibiche noted that, she did not know if it was a good thing to do because if money was provided to him or anybody to campaign and run for presidency, the person would be dependent to the sponsors.

Furthermore, Babiche mentioned about issues affecting the conduct of elections in the D. R. Congo. She talked about hate speech and its effects on the peace of the country. Another issue was the involvement of young people in the electoral process. She said, the Electoral Commission had not done enough to encourage and involve the young people in the elections process. She described this as worrisome because the young people make up of the most important majority of the population of that country. Another issue mentioned was the problem of the existence of a clear database for the voters. She said, there were discrepancies of voters' information including the voter ID cards. The Judiciary was also described as being compromised and linked to the current President, as most of the top officials were selected from the President's political region.

Ending her presentation on behalf of her colleague, Bibiche mentioned the contributions made by the CPS Network and said, they organised consultative meetings where they talked about electoral processes and the need to work together as partner organisations in the country. They decided to conduct sensitization campaign activities on the election, especially for the population to participate in the voter registration, and also planned on conducting related community engagement sessions to bring the population closer to the election process.

e. Presentation from Cameroon



Ntui-Obien, one of the National Coordinators of the CPS programme in Cameroon presented on behalf of his colleague, Madam Florentine and said, the national elections are slated to be held in 2025. He reported that their country was currently facing different issues, challenges and problems relating to politics. He said they currently have a crisis in the north-west and south-west of the country, which grew in full swing in 2016

but had been there even before then. The situation before 2016 was described by peace activists as *negative peace*, he noted. Ntui updated that Cameroon has 10 geographical regions that are divided by the English and French languages. According to reports, he said the conflict sprang up as a result of low level of infrastructural and educational development. A number of strikes took place in 2016 that included

students and professionals like teachers and lawyers, and led to sectarian groups which took up arms and went into the bush and began fighting against the government. He also mentioned about the Boko Haram issues which started in Nigeria and now in Cameroon that is also affecting the political situation in certain regions of the country especially the east region.

Ntui furthered that, the country had its last presidential elections in October 2018, after 7 years, in the height of the crisis which made some political parties boycott the election citing insecurity concerns. But the ruling party ended up having a landslide victory. There is currently high displacement of people running away from the conflict affected zones, he noted. He enumerated a plethora of power abuses by political elites; the old still wanting to continue to have a firm grip on power, with the current President being the longest serving and probably the oldest in Africa; less youth and women in politics; young people in the country being used by politicians to achieve political gains and forgotten after elections; lots of arbitrary arrests of political opponents; the ruling party creating numerous political parties behind the scenes to shrink the political space for the opposition; the current President preparing his son to succeed him, and creating a political dynasty; and several political boycotts due to perceived trampling of the country's democracy by the ruling government.



Madam Florentine continued from where Ntui stopped. She lamented over the issues of free speech; the people not being allowed to openly discuss about the President's long stay in power and related issues. She emphasised that the civil society organisations within the realm of AGIAMONDO and BftW cannot vividly include in their

programmes themes related to national political transition, which goes to indicate how intense the political climate is in the country. The issue of political transition has led to the loss of lives of many people in mysterious circumstances, including political stalwarts and journalists, she explained. Madam Florentine furthered that it was very important for people to understand the prevailing socio-political context in their country before concluding on anything. She noted that, sometimes people say Cameroonians just sit and fold their arms, doing nothing about the issues in the country. *"They fail to understand that the country had gone through a genocide during the colonial era in which families some were wiped out completely; some Cameroonians are currently on exile; people grow up learning about all of these things, and do not want for a repeat of the ugly past. There is currently a certain unit of the National Army that is always ready to go into killing action when people get to the streets to demonstrate against the government..."*, she lamented. She however indicated that, their work as civil society has been helping to instill some form of hope and confidence in the population, without which could have been something else in the country. She said, they would continue to do their best to engage especially the young people through skills trainings, and conscientization that their votes would really count, and that they should not hesitate to go out and vote for their desired candidates.

For two years now, they had had two peace advocacy campaigns in Cameroon, Madam Florentine continued. For the peace education, she updated that they had done a lot at community level, and now

decided to move at the structural/national level. With Dr. Rolfe, she said, they had held two strategic planning workshops for the next five years; what had been rolled out in the protestant schools should also be done in the public schools with new curricula. She also mentioned their plans to roll out an identity advocacy campaign on their past, using radio drama and other channels to teach the public the real history of Cameroon, as only 2% of the history of the country is currently being taught in schools and universities. She added that their aim was to have the next generation of critical thinkers.

Dr. Sheku Kamara thanked both Coordinators for their joint presentation. He noted that Cameroon was in a more precarious situation than all the other countries, citing the stark differences in the national constitution that has kept the President for the longest of time. He introduced the rest of the in house session as being exclusively meant for them (National Coordinators), and would not be covered by the Media Consultant for any form of report.

14. Outreach Session

The Peer Learning was climaxed by a visit to partners and an outreach/site seeing excursion to various places within the Western Area on 24th August, 2023. The team was first taken on a conducted tour to the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) at Fort Street in the central district of Freetown. The Chief Executive Officer of YMCA, Mr. Christian Kamara, was joined by some of his staff, and took the team around the YMCA complex, explaining the operations of the various work units and facilities. At the end of this phase of the tour, Mr. Kamara thanked the National Coordinators for the visit, and distributed some YMCA customized keyholders to every member of the team as a form of souvenir in remembrance of their visit to the organisation’s headquarters.

Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary, situated at the Western Area Peninsula National Park (WAPNP) outside Freetown, was the next stop of the team. The visitors were taken around the sanctuary that hosts lots of chimps; explanations were provided in the process by a tour guide about the life of the chimps in the sanctuary as well as the operations of the establishment.



The third point of visit was Culture Radio which is situated at Grafton community, along the Jui-Regent Highway in the Western Area Rural district, outside Freetown. The team was received by the Radio Station Manager, Mrs. Aminata Finda Massaquoi who quickly convened a meeting with her staff to welcome the CPS National Coordinators to the complex. She gave a rundown of the operations of the radio, while thanking BftW for what she described as their immense support to the organisation. She took the visitors around the facility, including the studios, a TV station that was still under construction and a multi-purpose hall.



Big Wata, a community situated along the WAPNP, was the final site visited by the team. The Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL), one of the partner organisations of the CPS network and headed by Dr. Sheku Kamara, constructed and co-manage an ecolodge with the Big Wata community. The lodge is situated within the WAPNP. The visiting team was taken to the ecolodge where a brief meeting was held with some community members and field staff of the BftW funded project. Papanie Bai-Sesay, the Project Manager took the team

through the objective of constructing the ecolodge and its operations. He said, the objective was to stop all forms of degradation and encroachment that was being perpetrated at that area of the national park. He noted that, even though it was tough for them at the beginning, they were already receiving the full support of the community to jointly protect both the lodge as well as the forest.

The visitors thanked the resident National Coordinators for what they referred to as memorable excursion, noting that they had learned a lot, some of which they would try to implement in their respective countries.