



Understanding NGO Peacebuilding Interventions: A Case of the Activities of Search for Common Ground

By

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Abstract

This study examines the peacebuilding interventions of Search for Common Ground (SFCG), a prominent international non-governmental organisation (NGO) working in conflict-affected areas, with a specific focus on Nigeria. Using Lederach's conflict transformation theory, the paper explores how SFCG tackles both immediate violence and the underlying structural causes of conflict through multi-level interventions. Employing a qualitative approach, the study analyses secondary data including project evaluation reports, scholarly literature, and policy documents. SFCG's activities are classified into three main strategies: dialogue facilitation, media engagement, and community empowerment. Findings suggest that SFCG's initiatives build trust, strengthen local institutions, and foster inclusive peacebuilding by involving youth, women, religious leaders, and marginalised groups. Nonetheless, challenges persist, such as short-term donor funding cycles, political sensitivities, and difficulties in assessing long-term impact. The paper concludes that sustainable peace in Nigeria requires combining relationship-building with structural reforms, emphasising the importance of local ownership and inclusive processes. These insights offer practical lessons for NGOs, policymakers, and practitioners working in fragile and conflict-affected environments.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, NGOs, Nigeria, Search for Common Ground, Conflict Transformation, Conflict Resolution



1. INTRODUCTION

Since the post-Cold War era, there has been a shift in modern-day conflicts from inter-state wars to predominantly intra-state conflicts. The conflicts are mostly identity-driven and embedded within structural inequalities (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2016). To address the conflict dynamics, top-down peace efforts, which are largely militarised, provide short-term solutions for peace and thereby promote negative peace, are inadequate. Galtung (1969) emphasises that the absence of violence, “negative peace,” is insufficient but must encompass the presence of justice, equity, and cooperative relationships to promote “positive peace”. For positive peace to be achieved sustainably, there is a need for synergy of diverse actors across governmental, societal, and grassroots levels (Diamond & McDonald, 1996).

In recent decades, non-state actors have become increasingly involved in conflict resolution as critical actors in the advancement of peace, reflecting a global shift from state-centric to multi-actor approaches in peacebuilding. NGOs, faith-based groups, and community-based actors now play crucial roles in mediating disputes, facilitating dialogue, and addressing the root causes of violence (Paffenholz, 2010; Richmond & Mitchell, 2012). This trend is closely linked to the growing recognition that sustainable peace requires not only formal agreements between elites but also inclusive processes that engage local communities and civil society.

SFCG is a prominent NGO involved in peacebuilding. It is the world’s largest dedicated peacebuilding organisation, operating in over 30 conflict-affected countries. SFCG has undertaken innovative peacebuilding activities through dialogue, media, and community engagement to transform conflict from adversarial relationships into constructive cooperation (SFCG, n.d.). The peacebuilding interventions of SFCG, as a case study of NGO-led conflict transformation, will be analysed using secondary literature to highlight SFCG's global approaches.

1.1 The Aims and Objectives of the Study

The study objective is to understand how the peacebuilding activities of SFCG



complement government efforts. By analysing SFCG's interventions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of NGOs' peacebuilding activities in the context of fragility, the contributions they make, and the challenges they encounter. Academically, the study will contribute to NGO peacebuilding literature, while offering lessons for policy and practice by asking: What are SFCGs' main peacebuilding strategies? How do these address both immediate and structural causes of conflict? What challenges shape SFCG's peacebuilding work?

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory serves as the theoretical reference for the study, emphasising how SFCG contributes to sustainable peace across diverse conflict settings. However, the article does not provide a comprehensive country-level analysis, nor does it compare SFCG with other NGOs. Its reliance on secondary data also limits the depth of context-specific insights, meaning findings should be interpreted as illustrative rather than universally representative.

1.3 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative methodology, utilising programme reports and secondary literature to examine the peacebuilding interventions of SFCGs. The analysis includes programme evaluation reports, journal articles, books, and policy documents. It employs qualitative content analysis, reviewing 11 programme evaluation reports and peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2023. Reports were chosen for their relevance to SFCG's interventions in Nigeria and the availability of outcome data. Due to its reliance on secondary data, the study may not fully capture context-specific nuances or undocumented local experiences. Furthermore, the absence of primary data collection restricts the ability to triangulate findings. Consequently, conclusions are presented as illustrative rather than definitive.

1.4 Conflict Background and Government Responses in Nigeria

Over the years, Nigeria has experienced the effects of devastating conflicts that have threatened socioeconomic progress and people's livelihoods. The causes of conflict



include, but are not limited to, poverty, politics, religion, ethnicity, corruption, widespread unemployment, social exclusion, rapid population growth, climate and environmental issues, and competition for limited resources.

The modern state of Nigeria emerged from the 1914 British amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates with the Colony of Lagos. Prior to this, over 450 autonomous ethnic and linguistic groups existed independently (Nnoli, 1978; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Nigeria gained independence in 1960, but by 1967 the country descended into a three-year civil war following the attempted secession of the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region as the Republic of Biafra, which claimed over one million lives (Achebe, 2012; Obasanjo, 1971). Since independence, Nigeria has experienced persistent ethno-religious, political, and socio-economic conflicts, with notable incidents including the Tiv riots of the early 1960s, the Western region crisis of 1962, and the 1966 military coup, which fractured the armed forces along ethnic lines (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Okpeh, 2007).

During the 1970s, relative stability was achieved through policies such as the creation of states between 1967 and 1976 and the introduction of federal character principles in the 1979 Constitution, which promoted power-sharing among diverse groups (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). However, these measures failed to address the underlying grievances fully. By the 1980s, conflicts resurged with Maitatsine religious uprisings, Kano religious riots (1982), and the 1987 Kafanchan ethno-religious clashes, which were fuelled by religious polarisation and economic decline (Chistelow, 1985; Albert, 1994).

The 1990s witnessed violent disputes between indigenes and settlers, such as the Ife-Modakeke crisis, the Aguleri-Umuleri land conflict, and the Jos ethno-religious riots (Albert, 1999; Best, 2008). Political unrest intensified after the annulment of the June 12, 1993, election, sparking protests and the rise of militant groups like the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) and Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) (HRW, 2003; Murray, 2007).

Following the return to democracy in 1999, Nigeria faced new security challenges, including Boko Haram insurgency, farmer-herder conflicts, banditry, Niger Delta



militancy, and recurrent electoral violence (Gilbert, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2018). Boko Haram's activities since 2009 have caused mass displacement, destruction, and deaths, including the Chibok schoolgirls' abduction in 2014 (Kristof, 2014; Blanchard, 2014). Meanwhile, farmer-herder clashes have escalated, claiming over 6,000 lives in the Middle Belt region between 2016 and 2018, driven by competition over scarce land resources (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018).

Government responses to the conflict have relied mainly on military and police interventions, including Joint Task Forces and emergency rule declarations in conflict-prone states (Akinwale, 2010). Efforts such as the amnesty program for Niger Delta militants (2009) and the establishment of peacebuilding institutions, including the National Peace Committee, have been notable steps toward conflict resolution (Egbuta, 2018).

However, these interventions are mainly reactive and coercive, lacking comprehensive strategies to tackle the root causes of issues such as poverty, youth unemployment, political exclusion, and competition over resources (Falola, 1998; Erinosho, 2007). The main gaps in the government's efforts include an over-reliance on security forces, limited community participation, weak traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and ineffective policies, such as the land use and resource distribution policy. NGOs such as SFCG have aimed to complement government efforts.

1.5 Search for Common Ground Responses to Conflict in Nigeria

SFCG, also known as 'Search', aims to change how the world approaches conflict by moving from adversarial methods towards cooperative solutions through the 'common ground' approach. Its slogan is 'Understanding our differences, Acting on our commonalities (SFCG, 2003).' The Common Ground Approach is a conflict transformation model that considers conflict as a natural and potentially constructive phenomenon. When addressed adversarially and focusing only on peacebuilding without addressing root causes, conflict can lead to polarisation and violence. However, through collaboration, conflict can be transformed, encouraging positive change.



The common ground approach is based on the belief that humanity is interdependent and that sustainable peace depends on relationships and cooperation. It assumes that change is always possible, with an emphasis on addressing problems rather than individuals, recognising that peace is an ongoing process that requires long-term commitment, inclusive partnerships, and mutual benefit. SFCG operates a multi-level and multi-actor strategy, engaging communities, institutions, and national actors. At the grassroots, it empowers youth, women, and marginalised groups to become agents of reconciliation. At higher levels, it works with policymakers, security forces, and political leaders to reform governance and enhance accountability (SFCG, n.d.).

SFCG tailors its interventions to be context-specific rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model. Its multi-partiality ensures engagement across diverse religious, ethnic, and social groups, fostering inclusivity. In Nigeria, for instance, peace efforts ensure the inclusion of representatives from all relevant communities, recognising that working with only one group would be ineffective (SFCG, n.d.; Shankar, 2023).

Innovation is at the heart of SFCG's work, using technology, media, theatre, and sports for peace messaging while collaborating with local and international organisations. This integrated and flexible model establishes SFCG as a global leader in sustainable conflict transformation by bridging divides, building trust, and strengthening societal resilience.

In Nigeria, SFCG's interventions focus on bridging divides across ethnic, religious, and gender lines, especially in conflict-prone regions. SFCG began operations in Nigeria in 2004, initially through media programming, including Common Ground Productions. One of its early flagship media interventions was *the television drama series "The Station,"* targeting youth to foster narrative change around tolerance, shared identity, and non-violent conflict resolution.

SFCG has implemented a range of projects aimed at transforming conflict dynamics and promoting social cohesion. The organisation's first major initiative, *Preventing Inter-Religious Violence* in Plateau State (2011–2013), funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour (DRL), sought to curb recurring cycles of violence between Christian and Muslim communities. The project



expanded its initial target group of religious leaders to include women, youth, journalists, and civil society actors. Activities included training in rumour management and conflict resolution, as well as media programs such as *Common Ground Drama* and *Talking Peace Roundtable*. The final evaluation (Ashton, 2013) found increased awareness of tolerance and nonviolence, as well as improved mechanisms for dialogue and conflict prevention. Recommendations included expanding programming to address farmer-herder conflicts and growing outreach to youth and women.

In 2012, SFCG piloted an SMS-based early warning system (EWS) for conflict prevention, funded by the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP). This project operated in eight LGAs in Plateau State and aimed to enhance local actors' capacity to analyse and respond to emerging tensions. The evaluation (Stine, 2013) reported moderate success, highlighting the need for more precise objectives, stronger partnerships with security actors, and more strategic public outreach. Between 2012 and 2015, the *Promoting Accountability for Ethno-Religious Violence* project strengthened local accountability mechanisms in Plateau and Niger States. Supported by DRL, it enhanced the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) to monitor human rights, advocate for justice, and collaborate with institutions such as the judiciary, police, and the National Human Rights Commission (Fortune, 2015).

The *Plateau Will Arise* (PWA) project (2013–2015), funded by the European Union, focused on building a sustainable, locally driven peace architecture. Through conflict resolution training, media engagement, and dialogue platforms, the project fostered collaboration between communities, security agencies, and government actors. The final evaluation credited PWA with contributing to reduced violence and improved intergroup relations (Consensus, 2015). The second phase, PWA II (2015–2017), consolidated these gains by strengthening community-led peace structures and enhancing participation among women and youth (Foster & Kellogg, 2017).

Addressing farmer-herder conflicts, SFCG launched the *Building Bridges Between Herders and Farmers* project (2015–2018) in Plateau, Kaduna, and Nasarawa States. The initiative used cultural exchanges, mobile cinema, and community dialogues to foster understanding between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers. The final



evaluation confirmed the project's effectiveness and recommended scaling it up to other volatile regions, including Benue and Taraba States (Ogbozor, Omale, & Umar, 2018).

SFCG has also addressed religious intolerance through the *Advancing Religious Tolerance (ART.38)* project, implemented across six northern states. Activities included interfaith dialogues, training, and media campaigns. The endline evaluation (PARE, 2020) reported improved interfaith collaboration and understanding, with recommendations to expand outreach, prioritise youth engagement, and develop conflict-sensitive educational materials.

In Northeast Nigeria, SFCG focused on reintegrating children associated with armed groups, including the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). This initiative provided psychosocial support, mentoring, and community-based reintegration programs. Findings indicated increased empathy and acceptance towards reintegrated children, emphasising the need for sustained community involvement and targeted economic support (Bangura, 2021).

In the Niger Delta, SFCG implemented projects such as *Tomorrow is a New Day* (TND) in the Niger Delta (December 2011 – June 2013), financed by the European Union. The project focused on the reintegration of ex-militants and broader community healing through media dramas in Pidgin English (e.g., *Sweet Motherland* and *Day Don Break*), radio, and feedback loops via hotlines, utilising FrontlineSMS to monitor listener responses and adapt content. Local partners across seven communities helped ground the project in local realities of corruption, environmental degradation, unemployment, and inter-communal conflict. (Oliphant, 2014). TND I's successful implementation and the need to consolidate on the peacebuilding gains gave birth to the TND II project funded by the European Union, *Search for Common Ground* (SFCG) carried out *Tomorrow is a New Day, Phase II: Building a Peace Architecture* in the Niger Delta for 2015 and Beyond in collaboration with four local organisations. Building on Phase I, which concentrated on reconciliation and access to dialogue, Phase II aimed to reduce youth tensions, support peaceful elections, and strengthen community decision-making structures. Implemented across 12 communities in four



Niger Delta states, the project addressed key drivers of instability. Findings showed the project improved trust, promoted non-violent conflict resolution, and fostered reconciliation. Participants reported adopting peaceful behaviours, mediating disputes, and encouraging dialogue within their families and communities. The programme also contributed to peaceful elections, with increased citizen participation, particularly among women. However, budgetary constraints hindered the achievement of some planned outcomes (SFCG, 2020).

Another project, Sharing the Green Grass and Deepening Peace in the Niger Delta (2019–2020), aimed to reduce farmer-herder violence and strengthen local peace structures. These interventions emphasised participatory, bottom-up approaches that engaged government actors, CSOs, and marginalised groups, including women and youth. Evaluations highlighted the effectiveness of community-led initiatives and recommended scaling up successful strategies to neighbouring regions to prevent conflict spillover (PARDI, 2021; Emenogu, 2020).

Collectively, these interventions demonstrate SFCG's operationalisation of Lederach's conflict transformation theory by moving beyond merely managing conflict to transforming relationships, strengthening local capacities, embedding sustainable peace architectures through local ownership, and addressing both structural and narrative dimensions of violence. By integrating dialogue, media, and grassroots engagement, SFCG has contributed to building resilient peace systems in Nigeria.

1.6 Discussions

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) provides a clear example of how conflict transformation theory can be applied to complex, long-standing conflicts. Unlike conflict management, which focuses on limiting violence, or conflict resolution, which emphasises settling disputes, conflict transformation tackles the deeper relational, structural, and cultural roots of conflict (Lederach, 1997; Miall, 2004).

Conflict in Nigeria is complex, involving tensions between different ethnic and religious groups, clashes between farmers and herders, electoral violence, militancy, and insurgency. SFCG's work in the country employs a comprehensive approach that



involves communities, local actors, and national institutions simultaneously, following Lederach's (2005) peacebuilding pyramid. At a local level, SFCG encourages people to take part through community dialogues, participatory theatre, and joint projects. These activities help build trust and empower young people, women, and underrepresented groups to contribute to the peacebuilding process. By utilising tools relevant to local communities, SFCG ensures its interventions have a meaningful impact.

At the societal level, SFCG employs radio dramas, television series, and other creative media platforms to challenge stereotypes and reshape narratives around identity, governance, and reconciliation. These methods reach millions of Nigerians, influencing public perceptions and fostering social cohesion. At the institutional level, SFCG collaborates with government officials, policymakers, and security forces to improve accountability, bolster governance structures, and enhance relationships between citizens and the state. This integrated approach addresses both immediate security issues and long-term systemic challenges.

A key aspect of SFCG's strategy in Nigeria is multi-partiality. This involves actively engaging all sides of a conflict rather than staying neutral. For example, in areas affected by farmer-herder clashes, SFCG collaborated with both farming and pastoralist communities to promote dialogue and create mutually beneficial solutions. This inclusive approach ensures that no group feels left out, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of peace processes. Another distinctive element is SFCG's principle of proximity, with more than 90% of its staff drawn from within Nigeria. This enhances trust, ensures cultural relevance, and promotes local ownership, a critical factor for sustainable peace (Slachmuis, 2023).

While these approaches have generated significant progress, challenges remain. Many peacebuilding efforts are constrained by short-term donor funding cycles, which prioritise quick, measurable outcomes over the long-term, iterative processes required for profound transformation (Paffenholz, 2015). In fragile contexts, gains are vulnerable to reversal if systemic issues such as inequality, exclusion, and weak governance remain unaddressed.



SFCG's experiences in Nigeria demonstrate that NGOs alone cannot resolve structural conflicts. While they can promote dialogue, rebuild trust, and enhance local resilience, government reforms and political will are crucial for lasting peace. For donors and policymakers, these lessons underscore the need to reassess funding and policy frameworks. Sustainable peace requires flexible, adaptive, and long-term strategies that simultaneously address the personal, relational, structural, and cultural aspects of conflict (Miall, 2004). Policies should prioritise inclusivity and systemic reform, enabling NGOs like SFCG to support government efforts rather than replace them.

1.7 Summary and Conclusion

In summary, SFCG's work in Nigeria demonstrates how conflict transformation in practice can foster reconciliation, build social trust, and address underlying causes of violence. Thereby supporting the government's efforts in addressing the conflicts. However, lasting change depends on aligning local, national, and international efforts to create a peace process that is inclusive, locally owned, and resilient to future challenges.

In conclusion, the conflict transformation theory provides a robust framework for understanding NGO peacebuilding interventions. The theory bridges the micro-level dynamics of interpersonal relations with macro-level structural reforms. It highlights the importance of relationship-building, inclusivity, and long-term transformation, all of which underpin the activities of SFCG. By applying this framework, the study contributes to the theoretical and practical understanding of how NGOs operationalise transformative peacebuilding in complex conflict settings.

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