**Empowering Women as Key Partners in Building Peaceful and Resilient Communities in Cross Border Areas in the Mano River Union**

**A SOCIAL INITIATIVE CHANGE**

**SUBMITTED BY**

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1. **SUMMARY**

This initiative seeks to deepen the foundations for peace and social cohesion in key border communities of Liberia and the neighboring countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast. It hopes to enhance national and community dispute-resolution capacities of women living in border communities; provide dialogue platforms for consensus and confidence building between women and key stakeholders, including border and custom guards around shared values; foster tolerance, and encourage inclusiveness and collaboration in the equitable delivery of development dividends.

The project will be implemented over the course of 9 months.

1. **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

UNSCR1325 recognizes the important role played by women in the “prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction”. The participation of women is critical to the success of any peacebuilding process as women peacebuilders bring different perspectives and priorities to bear on the process. Their role in re-establishing the social fabric in the aftermath of conflict is therefore vital.

The Mano River Union basin has been the grounds of protracted cycles of violent conflict for the past three decades. The cycles of regional conflict entrenched fear and mistrust among populations divided by national borders. Although drivers of conflict are linked to the political and economic interests of the elite, the impact reverberates at the grassroots level, where rumors, prejudices and political manipulation have entrenched divisions, fear and mistrust between individuals and communities across borders. While most conflicts originate in one particular country, they have often spilled over to involve neighboring countries through the border areas

Countries in the Mano River basin are closely linked not only by their common borders and ethnic groups but also by their history and conflicts. This is particularly significant because of the key role borders played in starting the conflicts and in recruiting the fighters. Since 2002, a significant level of peace building activities, resulting from a number of international, local and regional initiatives have been undertaken across the four countries. Sierra Leone achieved peace in 2002 following the disarming, demobilization and reintegration of ex combatants. Liberia followed in 2003 with the signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) by the warring parties, which ushered in a Transitional Government and general elections in 2005. In Ivory Coast, after disputed elections in 2010, the conflict came to an end in 2011 after former president Laurent Gbagbo was arrested and the winner of the election, Alhassan Ouatarra was sworn in as President. Both Liberia and Sierra Leone witnessed a peaceful transition of power in 2018.

Though violence in Guinea has been limited, little progress has been made on the political impasse that has blocked the country since the 2010 presidential elections. Instead inflammatory rhetoric and key stakeholder inflexibility leaves citizens in electoral limbo, as they await the legislative vote. The political stalemate reflects the increasing narrowing of the peaceful political space in Guinea, with several tense confrontations between the parties’ supporters and government crackdowns on opposition. Most worryingly, the political conflict is often being openly defined along ethnic lines. Recent developments and violence resulting from attempts by President Alpha Conde to change the constitution and run for a third term has raised panic across the region.

However, recent developments in the region seem to indicate that there are still considerable challenges of a cross-border nature to the stabilization of the region. Challenges facing border communities include cross borer illicit activities, proliferation of small arms and weapons, the lack of harmonization and enforcement or implementation of agreed principles, protocols and conventions by member nations, harassment and extortion by security personnel, weak government accountability, poor infrastructure, youth marginalization, violence, drug trafficking and organized crime.

Efforts to avoid a relapse into conflict and to consolidate sustainable peace must take this dimension into consideration particularly because of the key role borders played in starting the conflicts.

Women can play important roles in ensuring that border areas in the Mano River Union Basin remain peaceful. Women represent the majority among actors involved in civilian peacebuilding and conflict prevention. During the conflicts, as well as in the present, women play a crucial part in two areas of conflict prevention: peace and conflict resolution education and anti-war activism. Since the commencement of the conflict in the Mano River Union Basin, women in the region have been actively involved in the search for peace. The Mano River Union Women Peace Network (MAROWNET) has been actively involved in a number of initiatives designed to restore peace to the region. In spite of their success, the work of the group has not directly trickled down to rural women, especially women living in border communities.

The above raises the necessity for promoting equal access information and resources – particularly for those most marginalized from governance and decision making like women through cross border trade, which will also strengthen the resilience of the border communities to manage conflicts in their communities more widely. One group that can be mobilized to help promote peace at border areas and cross border cooperation but have been largely ignored are women. Women are becoming increasingly engaged in the regional trading system, although there is a particularly high concentration of women operating in the informal sector. Challenges at formal border crossings, ranging from illegitimate fees to harassment and gender based violence, have led many women traders to seek informal routes for cross-border trade. Such trade deprives the state of much-needed revenues for economic and social development.

Regrettably, the potential of women, especially women involved in cross border trade, and female journalists working for community radio stations have not been fully cultivated and tapped to foster peace and security at key border posts in the Mano River Union. This project seeks to address that problem. Women in four MRU countries stand to gain by contributing to how peace consolidation and conflict mitigation agendas are defined and by making their voice heard during such defining moments through the key activities that will be implemented.

1. **PROPOSED SOCIAL CHANGE**
2. **Overall Objectives:**

The overall objective of the project is to empower women as key partners in building peaceful and resilient communities in border communities in the Mano River Union, while improving mechanisms for inclusive dialogue platform responsive to the peace, security, cross border trade and reconciliation of all citizens, in the trans-border communities.

1. **Specific objectives**

Specifically, the project aims at:

1. Improving the role of women as peacebuilders in targeted communities;
2. Mobilizing media outlets in border communities to contribute to intergroup understanding and conflict resolution;
3. Strengthening mechanisms for communication and problem solving among key actors living in border communities for conflict prevention;

**Target groups**

**Primary**: Women, including women traders and women leaders in key border areas; Female Journalists

**Secondary:** Border security personnel (Immigration, Police, Military and Customs) Traditional leaders, local authorities, Bike Riders, Local People),

1. **Methodology, Activities and Strategies**

The project will take place in three border areas in the Mano River Union:

Liberian-Sierra Leone border

Liberia-Ivory Coast Border

Guinea-Liberia border

Most of the peace and security work on the border zones is related to official state security and early warning networks. This project brings a female perspective for the majority of the activities, seeking to build positive relations and confidence between agents involved in cross border trade and border security guard. Confidence is developed through face to face interactions and combines knowledge sharing from groups who have more information that is relevant to cross border trade and will create a dialogue platform where a common understanding is reached in public of selected issues. This common understanding then provides the foundation for problem solving and conflict prevention with an eye towards the future.

Women leaders will lead animating small discussion-groups aimed at proposing potential solutions. The project activities will have the dual role of affirming women leadership within the community on sensitive issues, while also aiming to develop a share community level understanding of problems and concrete possible actions.

1. **Cross Border Peace, Security and Trade Workshop**

The project will organize one cross-border workshop in each border area for women. Each workshop will take place for three days and will be attended by 20 participants (10 from each side of the border) The workshop will provide innovative training in conflict resolution, violent extremism, non-violent conflict management, networking for peace, as well as open opportunities for partnership and collaboration between women around conflict prevention and early warning signals. By identifying their common interest in maintaining a secure border, channels for reporting and addressing problems will be created to establish cross border trust and cooperation that have not previously existed.

1. **Cross Border Community Dialogue Forum**

The project team will convene one Cross Border Dialogue Forum in each of the target border locations. These one-day forums will bring together youth and women involved in trading, traditional leaders, civilian authorities and displaced authorities as well as border officials from the Police, Immigration, Customs and the Military. The forum will discuss and analyze the potential application of non-violent problem solving approaches in the face of chronic, impacted violent conflicts resulting mostly from terrorism and extremism in the region. By ensuring that these dialogues on the conflict issues are held in the public sphere, with the participation of community leaders and security personnel, the public discussion can encourage new approaches to problem-solving and reduce inter-group tensions.

Each dialogue will include a participatory session aimed at developing a common understanding of conflicts and impediments to peace in the region, and then walk participants through a problem-solving exercise. Women leaders will lead animating small discussion-groups aimed at proposing potential solutions. The dialogue sessions will have the dual role of affirming women leadership within the community on sensitive issues, while also aiming to develop a shared community level understanding of problems and concrete possible actions. Each Dialogue will have 40 participants (20 selected from each side of the border)

The forum will provide a platform for concern about regional security to be raised while the potential for cross border collaboration between different stakeholders will be explored.

1. **Training for Community Radio Stations**. This initiative aims to strengthen the capacity of community radios to act as vectors of peaceful messages, while also making use of their ubiquity and popularity to reach those sectors of the population not directly participating in project activities. The training will cover topics in conflict transformation, national reconciliation, and the role that media can play in these processes. Partnership agreements will be signed with community radios to cover the community dialogues and project activities and to produce and broadcast project-related materials
2. **Sustainability**

To ensure the sustainability of the project, the project team will work directly with women groups and community radio stations based at border areas in the target countries. By working with these established groups, the project will strengthen the capacities of women leaders in the areas of peace building, countering violent extremism and nonviolent conflict transformation. The project activities will also provide the platforms for networking through which new ideas and insight could be developed.