

SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

POWER TO THE PEACEBUILDERS

2018

IMPACT REPORT



KENYA

Citizens And The Army Join Forces To Reduce Violence

SRI LANKA

Healing A Nation From The Ground Up

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
Women At The Helm

SIERRA LEONE

The Child Reporter Who Became Sierra Leone's Top Investigative Journalist

PEACEBUILDING IS

INDISPENSABLE

How you react to hearing the words “violent conflict” depends on who you are and where you live.

For some, it’s a harsh daily reality, disrupting each and every aspect of life—safety for yourself and your family, your ability to eat, your access to even the most basic services. For others, it’s a painful memory or a looming threat.

For many, however, it’s a distant echo of tragedies happening somewhere far away. Somebody else’s affliction.

In fact, violent conflict is simply the manifestation of a deeper problem that affects all of us: our inability to deal well with our differences. That’s not somebody else’s problem. It’s everybody’s.

Every human being has at least some experience with differences handled poorly. We live in a world that is becoming more interconnected—and falling apart at the same time. Political polarization is at a record high in Europe and the United States. Conflicts once confined to national borders now drag entire regions into cycles of violence. Today, the world is struggling to serve the needs of the highest number of refugees since World War II.

Put simply, as highlighted by the World Bank, our inability to manage conflict is the primary driver of poverty and suffering. It’s hindering every advance in human life: from education to the fight against poverty, from healthcare to coping with the effects of climate change.

The solution is not limited to treating the symptoms of violent conflict—caring for victims, reconstructing roads, rebuilding economies—though those are important too. It’s diagnosing the root causes and transforming conflict into cooperation. It’s equipping ordinary people with the tools they need to choose collaboration over confrontation.

We call it **citizen-led peacebuilding**, and we know it can build safe, healthy, and just societies anywhere in the world.

ON THE RISE

Political leaders and ordinary citizens alike are realizing the scope and urgency of the threat posed by poorly managed conflict. At the same time, they are becoming aware that adversarial ways to confront it often end up perpetuating it.

Peacebuilding is increasingly sought after, and examples can be found everywhere. In the US, the National Security Council is looking to scale up the role of peacebuilding in their strategy to counter violent extremism. In Yemen, civil society groups are organizing into local Conflict Resolution Committees to help their communities survive and meet daily needs in the midst of a brutal civil war. In Nigeria, communities of faith are coming together to break cycles of violence and segregation. In this report, you will find many examples of how leaders at all levels—from Kenyan fishermen to Sri Lankan government officials to female political candidates in Lebanon—are embracing peacebuilding.

Even the word “peacebuilding” was finally accepted into several of the most popular English dictionaries in the world, another indicator of the field’s emergence into the mainstream.

JUST IN TIME

Peacebuilders are not a new type of activist. They have been around for a while, and many of them—Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mandela—hold their own lengthy chapters in the history books.

But peacebuilding itself is evolving. As more and more people embrace it, the mantle of these legendary figures is passing onto everyday heroes like the ones whose stories you will read here.

The biggest threat to our field is the belief that peace is not possible. Today, ordinary citizens are proving that it is. They are making incredible progress toward stability, safety, and justice in some of the world’s toughest conflict zones. They have the power to ignite a global movement that can turn the 21st century into the era of peacebuilding, when we resist becoming consumed by our differences and instead resolve to collaborate to solve our biggest challenges.

We have been among the pioneers of citizen-led peacebuilding for 35 years, and we pledge to be a key player in this momentous shift.

“Search for Common Ground recognizes the difficulty of finding constructive ways to respond to conflict... but they refuse to accept that a difficult thing cannot be done.”

– THE AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE, IN THEIR LETTER
NOMINATING SEARCH FOR THE 2018 NOBEL PEACE PRIZE



**American Friends
Service Committee**



Shamil Idriss,
CEO



Isam Ghanim,
President

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE NOMINATION

In March 2018, one of the most respected organizations in peacebuilding, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), nominated us for the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the global Quaker community for having “made a profound impact in our world, inspiring and equipping people [...] to find our shared humanity.”

“In lifting up Search for Common Ground we hope to draw attention to the importance of creating a space in which dialogue is possible,” AFSC said in the nomination letter. *“They do not see the aim of dialogue as the simplistic reaching of compromise, in which everyone must be prepared to give up something important. Instead, one of their core principles is that ‘common ground is not compromise’; they aspire to a common ground where all parties collectively and creatively work toward a future in which everyone’s needs and concerns are valued.”*

“Search for Common Ground’s work is based on the belief that peace is a process, not an event, and that it takes long-term commitment and profound dedication to achieve it,” they continued. *“This personal dedication to peacebuilding also requires immense courage from staff on the ground.”*

“Search for Common Ground recognizes the difficulty of finding constructive ways to respond to conflict, but they refuse to accept that a difficult thing cannot be done.”

As recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947, the AFSC and the British Friends Service Council have the privilege to propose one nominee to the Oslo Committee each year. We could not be more honored or grateful to them for nominating Search for Common Ground in 2018. We take their nomination as a recognition of the courageous and effective work of the community of frontline peacebuilders worldwide who make up Search for Common Ground, and as a challenge for all of us to continue producing work worthy of such recognition.



TURNING VISION INTO IMPACT

We began our journey in 1982, inspired by the vision of a world where ordinary citizens could transform even the toughest conflicts.

Over the decades, we have constantly adapted to stay relevant to the ever-changing nature of society, politics, and violent conflict. We supported diplomatic efforts during the Cold War and pioneered a country program model to tackle the civil wars of the 1990s. We leveraged broadcast media for peace throughout our history and championed online media in the last 15 years. In 2018, we initiated another momentous shift toward tackling 10 of the world's most consequential conflicts.

This is how our initial vision became the world's largest dedicated peacebuilding organization.

THE NEXT 10 YEARS

In a rapidly evolving world, conflicts change quickly. In order to have as much impact as possible, our response must evolve, too.

In 2016, we launched an 18-month process to determine how. We involved more than 200 staff, partners, policy-makers, donors, and thought leaders.

This process ended in 2018 with the launch of our new 10-year Strategic Plan.

The Plan is a 3-scope strategy to

- Drive systemic change in 10 of the world's most consequential conflicts
- Popularize the *Common Ground Approach*
- Advocate for more effective support for locally led peacebuilding

This process yielded

- First-ever criteria for where we work
- First-ever unified Theory of Change
- A new definition of programmatic success
- Reforms to achieve operational excellence
- Revitalized Leadership Team structure and Board composition

Learn more at sfcg.org/strategic-plan

IN THE WORLD

AT SEARCH

1970 1980 1990 2000 2010 2020



1975
The Vietnam War ends.



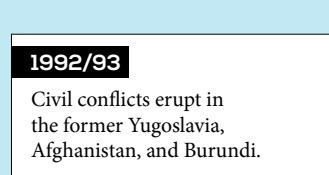
1980
Cold War tensions grow; the US and other teams boycott the Moscow Olympics.



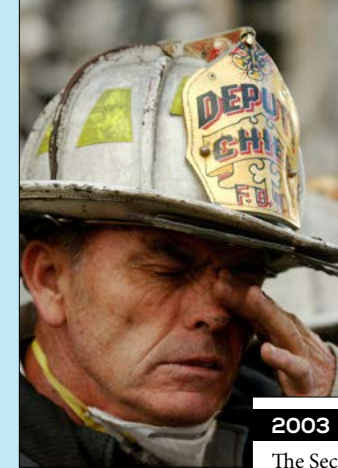
1989
The Berlin Wall falls. The Velvet Revolution begins in Czechoslovakia.



1994
The Rwandan Genocide occurs. Nelson Mandela is elected President of South Africa.



1992/93
Civil conflicts erupt in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Burundi.



2001
9/11 attacks in the United States.



2010
The series of demonstrations known as the Arab Spring begins in Tunisia.



2013
The United Nations General Assembly adopts the Arms Trade Treaty.



2015
The Nigeria National Elections mark the first-ever peaceful transfer of power in the country. The Paris Climate Agreement is adopted.

1973
US Republican Senator Clifford Case joins Democrat Frank Church to introduce a bill ending US involvement in the Vietnam War. Case's aid in this effort is former diplomat John Marks.



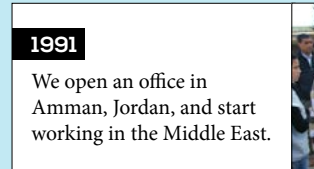
1982
John Marks founds Search for Common Ground.



1986
We establish our media unit, Common Ground Productions, and begin airing mediation shows on PBS, a major American television network.



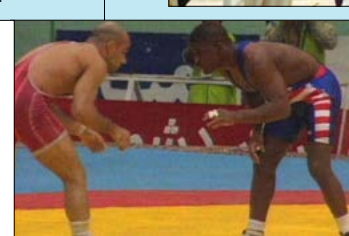
1991
We open an office in Amman, Jordan, and start working in the Middle East.



1994
We establish an office in Macedonia at the height of the Yugoslav wars, forging the template for our long-term, locally led programming. At a meeting in South Africa, a former commander of the South African ANC armed resistance coins Search's original motto, "Understanding differences, acting on commonalities."



1998
As part of a long-term effort of discrete talks and public exchanges, we arrange a historic competition between American and Iranian wrestlers in Tehran—the first public visit of Americans to Iran since the 1979 Revolution.



1995
We open our European HQ in Brussels, deepening relationships with European multilaterals. On the heels of the genocide in Rwanda and during the civil war in Burundi, we establish Studio Ijambo—the first multi-ethnic-staffed media outlet in the Great Lakes region of Africa, airing programs on reconciliation.



2001
Lead negotiators ask us to open an office in the Democratic Republic of Congo to support the peace process. Today, it is our largest program, with more than 100 staff.



2002
We establish our first Asia office in Jakarta, Indonesia. We launch Common Ground News, a news service which produced weekly balanced reporting and opinion pieces on relations between Western and Muslim-majority societies for hundreds of thousands of readers for 10 years.



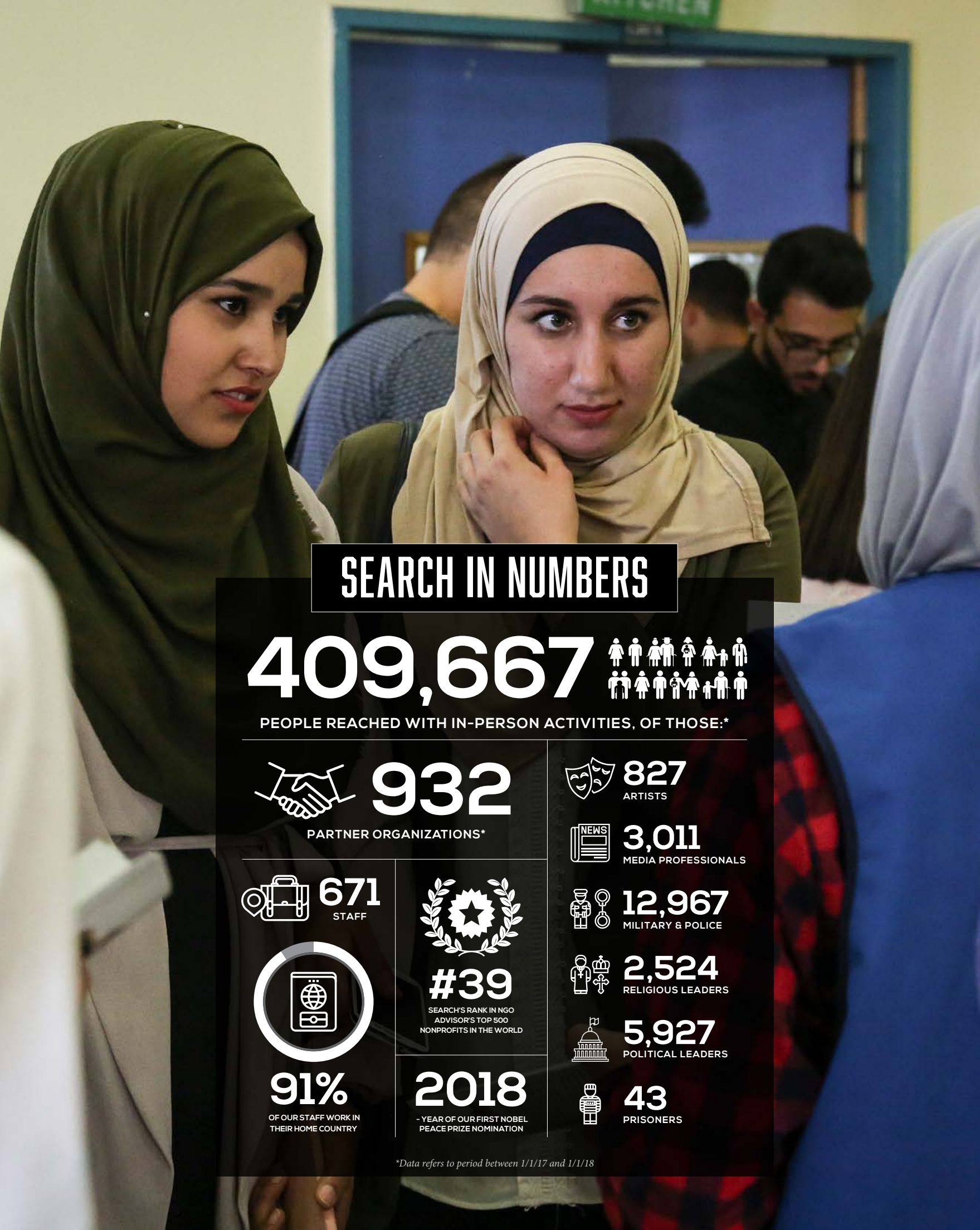
2008
The first iteration of our TV and radio drama "The Team" debuts. As of today, the show has been adapted in more than 20 countries.



2012
We open offices in Chad, Niger, and Kyrgyzstan, growing to more than 30 country programs.



2018
We are nominated for the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize. We launch a new Strategic Plan, mapping the next 10 years for our organization.



SEARCH IN NUMBERS

409,667  PEOPLE REACHED WITH IN-PERSON ACTIVITIES, OF THOSE:*

 **932**
PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS*

 **827**
ARTISTS

 **3,011**
MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

 **671**
STAFF

 **12,967**
MILITARY & POLICE

 **2,524**
RELIGIOUS LEADERS

 **5,927**
POLITICAL LEADERS

 **#39**
SEARCH'S RANK IN NGO ADVISOR'S TOP 500 NONPROFITS IN THE WORLD

 **43**
PRISONERS

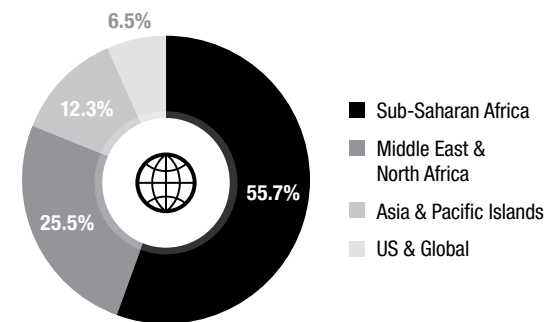
91%
OF OUR STAFF WORK IN THEIR HOME COUNTRY

2018
- YEAR OF OUR FIRST NOBEL PEACE PRIZE NOMINATION

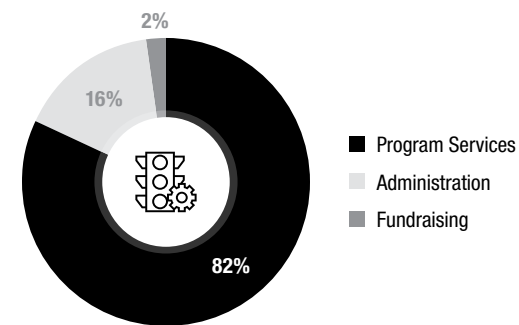
*Data refers to period between 1/1/17 and 1/1/18

FINANCIAL BREAKDOWN

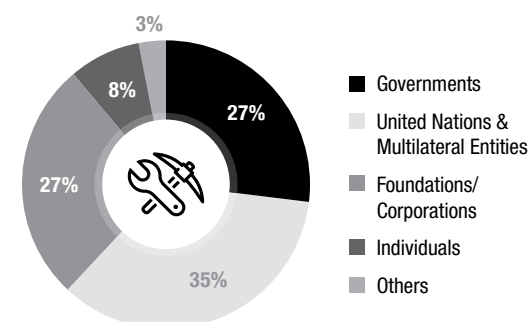
PROGRAM EXPENSES BY REGION



EXPENSE BY TYPE



REVENUE BY SOURCE



	SEARCH US	SEARCH BELGIUM	COMBINED
CURRENT ASSETS			
Cash and cash equivalents	\$ 10,321,797	\$ 2,558,272	\$ 12,880,069
Grants and contracts receivables	27,336,212	34,311,015	61,647,227
Advances and other receivables	403,957	-	403,957
Prepaid expenses and other current assets	350,120	3,080	353,200
Total current assets	38,412,086	36,872,367	75,284,453
FIXED ASSETS			
Furniture and fixtures	224,858	195,212	420,070
Office equipment	145,475	257,494	402,969
Software and computer equipment	1,267,496	34,926	1,302,422
	1,637,829	487,632	2,125,461
Less: Accumulated depreciation and amortization	(1,629,829)	(188,935)	(1,818,764)
Net fixed assets	8,000	298,697	306,697
OTHER ASSETS			
Deposit	73,054	2,957	76,011
TOTAL ASSETS	\$ 38,493,140	\$ 37,174,021	\$ 75,667,161

	SEARCH US	SEARCH BELGIUM	COMBINED
CURRENT LIABILITIES			
Recoverable grant	\$ 4,800,000	\$ -	\$ 4,800,000
Promissory note	812,000	-	812,000
Accounts payable	1,109,492	18,344	1,127,836
Other accrued expenses	1,564,910	384,748	1,949,658
Donor advances	-	451,791	451,791
Refundable advance	168,595	590,663	759,258
Provision for loss	573,344	-	573,344
Due to (from) SFCG Affiliate	358,838	(358,838)	-
Total current liabilities	9,387,179	1,086,708	10,473,887

	SEARCH US	SEARCH BELGIUM	COMBINED
LONG-TERM LIABILITIES			
Deposits	15,444	-	15,444
Total long-term liabilities	15,444	-	15,444
Total liabilities	9,402,623	1,086,708	10,489,331

	SEARCH US	SEARCH BELGIUM	COMBINED
NET ASSETS			
Unrestricted	400,229	403,924	804,153
Board designated	2,750,000	-	2,750,000
Investment in Capital	-	297,911	297,911
Provision	-	71,260	71,260
Total unrestricted net assets	3,150,229	773,095	3,923,324
Temporarily restricted	25,940,288	35,314,218	61,254,506
Total net assets	29,090,517	36,087,313	65,177,830
TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	\$ 38,493,140	\$ 37,174,021	\$ 75,667,161



KENYA CITIZENS AND THE ARMY JOIN FORCES TO REDUCE VIOLENCE

by Judy Kimamo
Country Director - Kenya

Kenya's Lamu archipelago is a famous seaside destination, home to some of the most beautiful beaches on Earth. But despite the wealth of natural resources and the potential for tourism, life in Lamu has not been easy for its citizens. The number one culprit: violent extremism.

In recent years, terror groups—most prominently, al-Shabaab—have been on the rise in my country. They have established hideouts in the forests close to the Somali border and are turning steady profits from sea piracy and human trafficking. Many young Kenyans living in extreme poverty have joined the ranks of these groups in an attempt to survive.

In response to this threat, the Kenyan government relies heavily on the use of force. In many coastal communities, the combination of terrorist activities and the army's counter-operations have destroyed the livelihoods of local citizens who depend on tourism and fishing for survival. Hotels have shut down, and the number of foreign visitors has plummeted. Most tragically, a night fishing ban enforced by the army in 2011 to

combat al-Shabaab's human trafficking in Lamu deprived the locals of a vital source of food and income. It ended up pushing even more youth to join terrorist groups.

My team stepped in to find locally owned solutions to this complex problem. In the process, we started rebuilding trust between the security forces and the community and found ways to revitalize the local economy.

In 2016, we launched a two-year project called *Inuka! Community-led security approaches to violent extremism in coastal Kenya*. We targeted four coastal counties deeply affected by violent extremism, including Lamu. We worked closely with three local organizations: *Muslims for Human Rights*, the *Kiunga Youth Bunge Initiative*, and the *Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance*.

Our first challenge was to re-establish a relationship between the local community and security officers. Given the high tensions, we first held separate dialogues with each group to hear their grievances; then, we brought them together. Thanks to our expert mediators, they began a

process of recognizing each other's perspectives and building a foundation of mutual trust. Follow-up social events and sports competitions helped reinforce the relationship.

In parallel, we set up trainings for wives, mothers, and daughters of men who have joined violent extremist groups. These women face an impossible problem; they are now the sole income generators for their families, but they often can't access employment opportunities because of the social stigma around them.

Working closely with *Muslims for Human Rights*, we established a support forum to help the women heal from the trauma they experienced upon the loss of the men in their families. Stress management trainings and group counseling sessions enabled them to gradually work through their pain. In addition, we launched a series of entrepreneurship trainings to discuss start-up fundraising strategies for small businesses. Today, some of the women are running a joint poultry farming project and a soap business; they are able to support themselves.

Finally, we looked at ways to reduce the negative impact of the army's counter-terrorism operations on local communities and develop shared security strategies.

We launched a mobile phone application that local citizens can use to quickly provide information on terrorist activities to the authorities or check the security situation in their area. The app strengthens cooperation between security actors and civilians, creates a shared sense of responsibility, and makes the security forces more accountable to the local population.

In Lamu, where the night fishing ban had wreaked havoc on coastal villages, we deployed a transformative tech solution: Mvuvi cards.

Taking their name from the Swahili word for "fisherman", Mvuvi cards are biometric identification cards that contain a fisherman's name, national ID number, Beach Management Unit registration, and other data. We distributed the cards to more than 200 fishermen and provided security officers with card readers. As a result, the

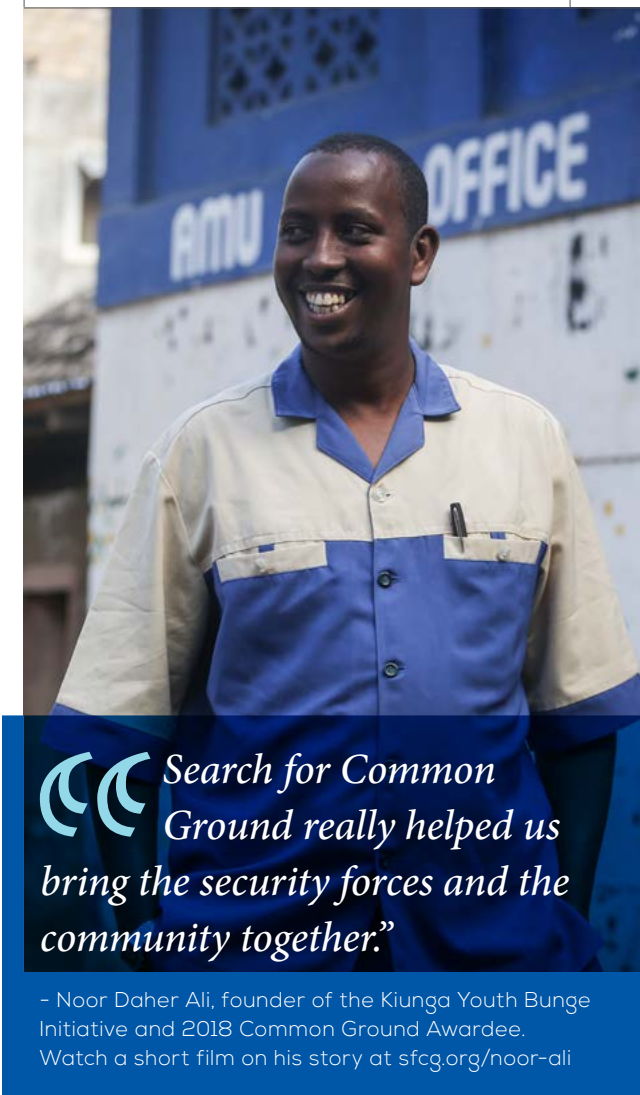
patrols are now able to identify people boating in fishing zones. They can combat al-Shabaab's human trafficking without impacting the normal economic activity of the community. Fishermen can carry on without fear of being arrested.

After seven long years, thanks to the Mvuvi cards, the authorities lifted the night fishing ban in Lamu.

Currently, we are expanding the Mvuvi cards project to thousands more Kenyan fishermen and creating more opportunities for collaboration between ordinary citizens and security forces.

Much more still needs to be done to curb the recruitment of young Kenyans into violent extremist groups. We need to create opportunities for education and work, continue to strengthen trust between communities and their protectors, and keep searching for shared solutions to security issues.

But the story of what happened in Lamu fills us with hope and reveals an important insight: we are on the right track.



“Search for Common Ground really helped us bring the security forces and the community together.”

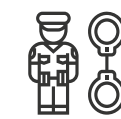
— Noor Daher Ali, founder of the Kiunga Youth Bunge Initiative and 2018 Common Ground Awardee. Watch a short film on his story at sfcg.org/noor-ali

PROJECT FUNDED BY
Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Bureau of the US State Department



222

Children and youth reached by in-person training and events



156

Police and army officers reached by in-person training and events

241

Fishermen with a Mvuvi card

18%

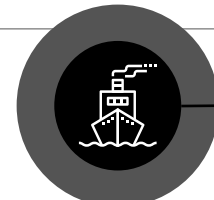
Program participants who said police and community had a positive relationship, before the project

“These dialogues have been able to build the relationship between police and youth. Before the program, youth were the enemy of police and vice versa. Nevertheless, now we are their friends and sources of their information... They don't arrest us unreasonably as they used to do.”

— Young program participant from Lamu

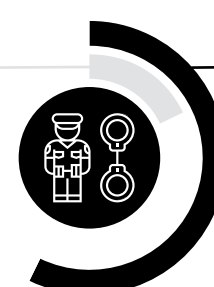
“Before the project [...] the community had no place to air their complaints such as the night fishing ban. On the other hand, police had no place to explain the reason behind it.[...] Through these dialogues, both parties were able to understand one another, and the relationship improved.”

— Program partner from Malindi



3000

Target number of Mvuvi card holders in 2019



57%

Program participants who say police and community have a positive relationship, after the project



SRI LANKA

HEALING A NATION FROM THE GROUND UP

by Nawaz Mohammed
Country Director - Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan Civil War lasted almost 26 years and killed hundreds of thousands of my compatriots.

I grew up through all of it. [I bear my own scars from it.](#) And I know how important it is to remember everything about it if we want today's peace to endure.

A decade has passed since the hostilities ended in 2009. In this time, my country has made enormous strides toward ethnic and religious coexistence, starting to repair the divisions behind our history of violent conflict. But even though tensions have subsided, they have not been vanquished.

The coalition government restored democratic institutions and created an environment conducive to free and independent media, but it has not taken the needed steps toward reconciliation and trauma healing. So far, while they have set up the Office for Missing Persons, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Reparation Programme doesn't yet exist, and the wartime Prevention of Terrorism Act is still in force, allowing for routine torture in police

interrogations and perpetuating a culture of impunity. Adding to this volatile context, a wave of attacks against Muslims in the spring of 2018 in several regions of Sri Lanka increased the risk of destabilization.

In this environment, our ongoing *Community Memorialization Project* is helping build bridges and heal trauma through the powerful testimonies of ordinary citizens who survived the war and the insurgencies of the 20th century.

Launched in October 2015, the project's goal is to preserve historical memories of these conflicts, facilitate a process of common understanding of these memories, and create platforms for people across ethnic, religious, and political divides to engage in community dialogue, memorialization, and reconciliation.

In partnership with *HerStories Project*, we started by gathering testimonies in local villages in three districts. We collected stories in the form of interviews, audio logs, videos, letters, drawings, and more. We then translated each of them into Sinhala and

Tamil, as well as English, and built [an online archive called Memory Map](#), which houses all 354 testimonies. It is the first-ever archive of stories from the conflicts in Sri Lanka.

We then organized dialogue sessions, reaching more than 1,000 people in person. At first, these dialogues featured homogeneous groups of people from the same ethnic and religious communities. Our facilitators used the archive testimonies to start difficult conversations on the trauma left by the conflict, sparking the sharing of even more stories by participants who felt comfortable doing so. We discussed their understanding of the conflict and encouraged them to think about the actions they can take to prevent harmful conflict in the future.

In the next phase, we launched joint dialogues, as well as three exchange programs, between 112 community leaders from different districts. In this phase, communities took the significant step of connecting with those on the opposite side of the conflict. Together, they visited sites where violence took place and listened to the


400+
Traveling exhibit locations


1,093
Participants in dialogue sessions

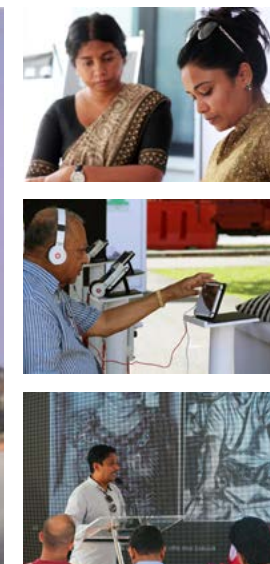
“Peace is a bottom-up process. If there are strong bonds of friendship at the ground level, we will start to question politically motivated conflicts. We will start asking who we are fighting with [...] If people are more humane, these conflicts will not arise.”
- Sinhalese participant

 **2 MILLION**
Sri Lankans reached with media campaigns



 **354**
Children and youth reached by in-person training and events

“In my childhood, I thought the Sinhalese were very bad people, and I was afraid of them. But after participating in this program, I realized that they are also waiting for our love. We realized how we love each other. I am very sorry and sad for my previous thinking on the Sinhalese.”
- Tamil participant



first-hand accounts of survivors.

Finally, we scaled the initiative to target a mass audience across the country. We launched social media, TV, and radio campaigns on remembrance, which cumulatively reached over two million people. We also launched a traveling exhibit featuring the archive testimonies that, as of the end of 2018, has stopped at over 400 locations including the capital Colombo.

As the *Community Memorialization Project* continues, independent evaluators have found that, among participants, the number saying they would prefer to live in a multiethnic area of the country is almost double the national average.

Healing the wounds left by nearly three decades of conflict will take perhaps just as much time. We have and will continue to face setbacks along the way. But I am proud to be part of a small group of peacebuilders that, alongside thousands of ordinary citizens, is advancing a more tolerant, united Sri Lanka.

PROJECT FUNDED BY
The US State Department



MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

WOMEN AT THE HELM

by Abou El Mahassine Fassi-Fihri
Regional Director - MENA

From rural villages to bustling capitals, at school and on TV, women and girls in the Middle East and North Africa are stepping up to create safe, healthy, just societies. Our local teams are on the front lines of this change, fostering gender equality across the region and supporting heroic women peacebuilders.

23,102

Women and girls reached by in-person training and events across the MENA region*



*Data refers to period between 1/1/17 and 1/1/18

LEBANON

Lebanon ranks among the lowest countries in the world on women's representation in decision-making. Today, women hold only 6 of the 128 seats in the Lebanese Parliament, and only 1 minister in 30 is a woman. Despite momentum generated by civil society groups and feminist activists, Lebanon's new electoral law failed to include a female quota to promote women's political participation.

Our *Gender Sensitive Communication Project* is a nationwide media initiative to change social norms around women's leadership and foster their willingness to run for office. The project included a series of workshops on drama for social change, a short film competition, and a social media campaign. It culminated in the broadcasting of two original miniseries on national television in the spring of 2018.

The first, *a-Ras El-Leyha* ("On top of the list"), details the struggle of a social worker trying to help a man in need of urgent medical care. After all her efforts fail, she chooses to dedicate her life to changing her country by becoming a parliamentarian. The second, *W Iza Ken Mara* ("So what if it was a woman?"), tells the story of a widely respected pediatrician who joins a local electoral list in hopes of bolstering its chances to win the parliamentary elections.

In total, more than **400,000 people** have watched the shows on al-Jadeed TV. **1 in 2 women viewers** expressed the will to run for political office if given the chance. The ratio is **70% higher** than among non-viewers.

PROJECT FUNDED BY
The British Embassy in Lebanon



YEMEN

“Being a woman here, everything is challenging. Everything.”
- Wafa Hamoudi

Wafa Hamoudi is a pioneering mediator and facilitator, born and raised in one of Yemen's most conservative communities.

In Yemen, women are often only allowed to work in certain professions that feature minor interactions with men, like teaching in female schools or working as nurses under female doctors. Wafa wanted to break that mold but didn't know how. That's where our Yemen office came into play.

We selected Wafa to participate in the *Yemen Common Ground Institute*. The project aims to identify and train trusted mediators and dialogue facilitators among the local population of three districts in Yemen.

Wafa seized this opportunity. When the men in her district refused to accept her as the leader of the mediation sessions, she persisted in trying to find ways to work with them. Eventually, Wafa won the trust of her entire community in Al-Hodeidah and became the driving force for peacebuilding projects in her area. She has opened the door for many more local Yemeni women to follow in her footsteps and has widened her male counterparts' eyes to the powerful contributions of women in leadership positions.



Despite the ongoing, brutal civil war gripping Yemen, mediators like Wafa play a key role in preventing violence in villages and rural communities. Almost everyone interviewed as part of our final project evaluation reported that dialogues led by our trained mediators have helped reach solutions to local conflicts.

Learn more about Wafa at sfcg.org/beyond-labels

PROJECT FUNDED BY
The European Union



“Through [1001 Nights] my students learned about equality between men and women and that both of them can do the same work.” - Tunisian school teacher from Kasserine



TUNISIA

We develop many of our attitudes toward diversity, gender, and conflict during childhood. That's why creating a school environment that rewards tolerance and equality is paramount.

Our Tunisia team is striving to do just that with the *1001 Nights Curriculum for Civic Education*, a project targeting 20 schools and over 1,000 students between ages 8-12 across Tunisia, in partnership with *Big Bad Boo Productions*.

In our multimedia curriculum, primary school children watch one episode a week of the award-winning animated series *1001 Nights* and discuss the content with their teacher's facilitation. They also receive homework assignments to complete with their parents and siblings. Through these activities, they explore their own understanding of social issues in Tunisia and learn positive attitudes toward diversity.

As part of this project, we have also established extracurricular Peace Clubs in six youth centers. The Peace Clubs offer workshops on nonviolent communication and conflict transformation, as well as mentorship opportunities for young people.

Independent evaluators found that **notions of gender inequality**—and specifically, that one gender is more capable than the other—**reduced by 40.6%** among children who participated in the project.

PROJECT FUNDED BY
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SIERRA LEONE

THE CHILD REPORTER WHO BECAME SIERRA LEONE'S TOP INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST

by Massimiliano Colonna

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The hilly profile of Freetown, Sierra Leone, is taking shape in the morning twilight as he drives the half-paved road to the radio station. Millions of people in the city are just waking up. He knows they are excited to hear from him today.

I meet him in the parking lot. He greets me in haste, walks inside, and gets into the producer's booth. A few minutes later, he signals the start of his program, *Gud Mornin Salone*.

"Confession time," he mutters to himself.

All across the country, the students getting ready for school, the drivers of *poda poda* vans packed with commuters, and the sellers at streetside markets are tuning in. They listen to his report, uncovering a case of corruption that involved a small political party during the recent elections. He got the party leader to admit to taking money... on record.

At the end of the report, his unmistakable, slow-paced sign-off phrase blares out the speakers.

"For the society of *Radio Democracy*, it's Michael... SA-MBO-LA."

I imagine them—the students, the drivers, the commuters, the market sellers—flashing a satisfied grin as he is now, still sitting with his arms crossed in the producer's booth.

Once again, Michael Sambola, the greatest investigative journalist in Sierra Leone, has delivered.

Since I arrived in Freetown and started following Michael's work, everyone I have met has referred to him as a hero. So, when the bright red ON AIR sign goes off and we sit in the recording studio for an interview, it feels a bit like I'm asking Peter Parker about his origin story as Spiderman.

Michael was 12 years old when the civil war finally ended in January 2002. At the time, he was living

with his grandmother, the only relative still in the country. Everyone else had already moved to the Bronx, in New York City, where Michael's father still lives today.

Ten years of war had deeply scarred Sierra Leone's children. Hundreds of thousands of them bore the trauma left by the conflict, and a significant minority had even fought as child soldiers. Access to healthcare and education was limited, as was awareness of the rights of young people.

Broadly speaking, in the eyes of the public, children in Sierra Leone fell into two categories: victims of violence, or perpetrators of it. It was Search for Common Ground who first broke this dichotomy and turned children into interlocutors—with Michael's help.

In 2000, Search opened its Sierra Leone office. One of the organization's first moves was to establish a radio production house, *Talking Drum Studio*, to create programs in support of the peace process. It was a tremendous success; within a year, *Talking Drum Studio* had already become a household name, racking up a massive audience nationwide. Among the studio's biggest hits was the show *Golden Kids*.

Nothing like it had ever aired in Sierra Leone. At a time when youth had little to no media presence, *Golden Kids* turned children into journalists, giving unprecedented power and resonance to young voices. Under the supervision of Search's staff, the titular 'golden kids' produced reports, newscasts, and interviews raising awareness of the issues faced by young people in the aftermath of the war. *Golden Kids* gained a large following, changed the social and cultural norms surrounding young people, and influenced policy at the highest levels. The show was one of the factors leading to the adoption of the Child Rights Act in 2007, a comprehensive regulation protecting the rights of children in Sierra Leone.



Michael was an avid *Golden Kids* listener. At the end of each episode of the show, a message in the local Krio language repeated, "Our office is at 44 Bathurst Street," enticing Michael to pay them a visit. Encouraged by his grandmother and uncle, a DJ and radio producer himself, one day Michael finally mustered the courage to go.

Two weeks later, he was officially a golden kid, running around Freetown to capture the stories of young people.

"The decision [to go] changed my life," he tells me. With the mentorship of Search's staff, his talent blossomed. He started by following experienced journalists and quickly learned the tools of the trade. Within months, he was leading interviews himself, speaking up to the powerful despite his young age.

"The idea was to empower people growing up. Children's rights, sanitation, corruption... burning issues were coming up, and the kids were the ones investigating them," Michael says. "We interviewed authorities, policy makers, [members of] civil society, children themselves. 'What about the Convention on the Rights of the Child? Has the government done X, Y, and Z for children? What about WASH [water, sanitation, and hygiene, Ed.]?' ... I see myself as a journalist from that point."

In his two years as a golden kid, he covered hundreds of stories, learning much more than just the profession. The experience molded his personality, instilling in him the values of integrity, justice, and truth that inform his work today. "At Search, when we started, it was all about values. You would be at a production meeting, and they would tell you about the goal and vision of Search," he recalls. "[When you are] a kid growing up, what you plant is what you're going to sow. My values, norms, and tradition—those came from Search."

From the *Golden Kids* days, it would take Michael about a decade to become Sierra Leone's leading investigative journalist. First, he volunteered as a voice actor on *Talking Drum Studio's* soap opera *Atunda Ayenda*, an ongoing radio drama that started back in 2001. Then, he became an assistant producer with Search – Sierra Leone and worked on the news show *Borderline*. He went on to study Mass Communications at the local Fourah Bay College.

Around this time, *Radio Democracy's* manager, Asmaa James, offered him a position at her station. Along with his participation in *Golden Kids*, this was another major turning point in Michael's life—and possibly in the history of journalism in Sierra Leone.

Nested on the slope of one of the city's many hills, *Radio Democracy 98.1* broadcasts from an unobtrusive one-story building in the New

England area of Freetown. Judging from its modest appearance, the station doesn't look like a media juggernaut. But, you know how the saying goes.

Radio Democracy 98.1 was the first station to broadcast programs in local Krio. It was established during the civil war as a counter-propaganda outlet, gaining nationwide notoriety. After the end of the conflict, it became the radio station with the largest listenership in Sierra Leone.

Gud Mornin Salone, the daily program produced by Michael, is its crown jewel. It's the most popular radio show in the country; according to the media professionals I asked, it garners an estimated seven hundred thousand to a million listeners every day. For a nation of seven million people, that's a staggering amount.

Michael's reporting for *Gud Mornin Salone* has had tremendous impact. One story on child brides sparked a nationwide debate on the human rights of children. Another report uncovered a system of bribery behind access to Freetown's energy grid. Michael's investigations unearthed scandals related to food hygiene, political corruption, and embezzlement, shedding a glaring light onto truth in a country that consistently ranks low in global press freedom rankings.

This groundbreaking reporting has gained Michael recognition from the two most authoritative media institutions in Sierra Leone: the *Sierra Leone Association of Journalists* (SLAJ) and the *Independent Media Commission* (IMC). He received his first award for political reporting by IMC in 2012, when he was only 21. Every year since, he has won an award from either SLAJ or IMC, the latest in Fall 2018.

As I observed Michael's work for a few days, it struck me that he can do it all. He's a detective, a storyteller, a sound technician, and an editor, able to produce his stories from ideation to broadcasting. He's passing on his techniques to the journalists he supervises at *Gud Mornin Salone*, building a formidable team of news hunters.

I followed Michael on one such hunt, the investigation behind the corruption story that aired today. Watching him, you wouldn't fathom that his name strikes fear in the hearts of those on the wrong side of the law. He looks even younger than his 28 years, wears a student's backpack, and captures sound bites with a small recorder. The whole time, he maintains a friendly, unassuming demeanor with the interviewees. However, they know that, through him, they are being held accountable in front of the entire country.

Unsurprisingly, some people try to sway him with bribes.

"They might ask you, 'How much do you need for this story? This doesn't have to go public. Just tell me your price, and we'll give [it to] you,'"



says Mabel Kabbah, Head of News at *Radio Democracy*. “But Michael, he’ll tell you ‘I don’t want your money; I’m not here for the money. I’m here to investigate the issue, and the public must know what is going on.’ [...] Whenever they hear Michael Sambola is there, people are afraid, because they know [he will] get the information he wants without any money or bribery.”

The subjects of some of his investigations offered Michael bribes up to 8 million Leones, roughly 1,000 USD. That’s a small fortune in a country where the majority of the population lives in extreme poverty.

“If you collect money from someone, [people] will know. So your credibility as a journalist becomes in the balance,” Michael explains. “When I was at Search, one thing I learned was, don’t collect money. Don’t sign for it! [...] That value about money not being the issue is paramount.”

Michael’s behavior has earned him a reputation for courage and audacity, renewing the public’s respect for the profession as a whole. It changed the image of journalists in Sierra Leone from blackmailers to heroes. “There is a new brand of journalists who are a model of integrity,”

says SLAJ President Kelvin Xander Lewis. “A lot of people are looking up to [Michael]; he is the foremost person doing this kind of investigative journalism.”

“It’s a very dangerous world. You have to be fearless in a way. You must have the guts to say, ‘I have an instinct; this is a story I can pull off’ without thinking about the dangers,” says Ady Macauley, who presides over Sierra Leone’s Anti-Corruption Commission. “He’s that kind of journalist.”

To be a successful investigative journalist, Michael must ask tough questions. Sometimes, he must ask those questions of himself.

Recently, he won a visa lottery to enter the United States. If he so desires, Michael could move permanently to the other side of the Atlantic and rejoin his father. In 2017, he decided to stay in New York for a few months and see how he would like it.

His dad was happy to see him. “Observe the system here”, he said, “and then decide.” Michael settled in and started taking college classes. One day at the end of the first semester, he made up his mind.

“Dad,” he said. “I observed the system.”

“And?” came the reply.

“And I’m going back.”

His father asked why. Michael opened his laptop and showed him one of *Gud Mornin Salone’s* broadcasts. His father was proud but still resisted the idea that Michael should return.

Michael remembers every word of the exchange that followed.

“Mike, I don’t think you should go back. Sierra Leone is not developed right now.”

“If we don’t develop Sierra Leone, who will?”

“That’s not going to happen now, it’s going to be in a long time.”

“I know. But we have to start somewhere. And I want to be a part of that change.”

Gud Mornin Salone continues to draw a million listeners every day. One of them tunes in from the Bronx, New York City.

In 2018, Michael Sambola received a [Common Ground Award](#) for his courageous reporting.

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WE BELIEVE...

CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE, VIOLENCE IS NOT.

Conflict is a natural result of human diversity. When we deal with conflict adversarially, it sparks polarization and violence. When we collaborate, conflict is transformed and catalyzes positive change.

HUMANKIND IS INTERDEPENDENT.

Human beings cannot survive in isolation. Our humanity is affirmed through relationships with others. Our world is more interdependent than ever before, and the challenges before us require collaborative approaches.

CHANGE IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE.

All individuals and relationships can change, even in seemingly intractable conflicts. Every conflict offers opportunities for transformation. All wars end.

WHEN EVERYBODY WINS, CHANGE LASTS.

When conflicts end with a winner and a loser, they often feed a cycle of violence. Enduring change arises from win-win outcomes which all parties defend.

COMMON GROUND ALWAYS EXISTS.

Despite the depth and complexity of our differences, we can always discover something we share. In doing so, we grow our human connection, mutual trust, and respect and trigger collaboration in ways otherwise unimaginable. Common Ground can always be created.



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