A Critical Assessment of International Efforts to Build Peace in Liberia

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The African continent is home to numbers of weak or failed states in prey to violent internal conflicts. In some cases, for instance Botswana and Mauritius, peacebuilding efforts have proven to be efficient. However, other countries such as Somalia, Sierra Leone, or Liberia which is at the focus of the present article, still have, at the beginning of the twenty first century, a long way to go.[1] For decades, Liberia was an elite-run, US-backed state and was the first African republic to proclaim its independence in 1847.[2] By 1965, it was the fastest growing economy in the world along with Japan.[3] However, following two particularly deadly civil wars between 1989 and 2003, Liberia has been home to an extensive UN peacekeeping mission, and a recovery process to which the United States is estimated to have contributed about 750 million U.S. dollars in 2005.[4]

Today, fifteen years after the 2003 Peace Agreement that ended the second and last Liberian civil war, we can assert that despite the national, regional and international efforts to establish the country as a functioning state, Liberia has experienced multiple setbacks, leading to continuing violence and insecurity.[5] Following the end of the mandate of the United Nations mission in Liberia (UNMIL) on 30 March 2018, and with the withdrawal of all uniformed and civilian units completed by 30 April 2018, this paper will endeavour to provide a critical assessment of international efforts to build peace in Liberia. Peacebuilding can be defined as a process involving a wide range of measures targeted to prevent the

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[1] Stephen Ellis, 'How to Rebuild Africa', in *Foreign Affairs*, 1 September 2005), online. (Here and subsequently, all online resources were last accessed on 14 October 2008.)

[2] Keith Somerville, *Africa's Long Road Since Independence* (Penguin Books Ltd., 2017).

[3] Andreu Solà-Martín, 'Liberia: Security Challenges, Development Fundamentals', in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 7 (2011), p. 1217.

[4] Ellis, 'How to Rebuild Africa'

[5] Brooks Marmon, 'Why the UN can't Leave Liberia', in *Foreign Affairs*, 16 June 2016, online.

country from '*relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development*'.[6] It will be argued throughout this paper that there were two main problems with international peacebuilding efforts in Liberia. First, in many cases, international actors failed to acknowledge the historical context of the country and adapt their strategy accordingly; second, the time frame of their actions was often underestimated. In this aspect, we will first provide a brief historical overview of the two civil wars before critically analysing the achievements and failures of international peacebuilding efforts.

The outbreak of the first Liberian civil war in 1989 was mostly due to the socio-economic and political environment in the 1980s.[7] In April 1980, the People's Redemption Council (PRC), led by Samuel Doe, seised power in a bloody coup. Doe's ensuing ten-year rule was mostly characterised by political and ethnic violence, corruption, dramatic economic decline as well as a lack of political reforms[8]. Doe didn't trust anyone but members of his own ethnic group, the Khran. In 1983, Charles Taylor, a former Doe supporter, formed the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), mostly comprised of the Gio and Mani ethnic groups persecuted by Doe's regime.[9]

In 1989, a first confrontation between Does's Khran-dominated army and Taylor's rebel forces took place. The conflict then quickly degenerated to eventually become a slaughter carried along ethnic lines. Thousands of civilians were killed on both sides and hundreds of thousands fled their homes.[10] The conflict, shaped around both ethnic and ideological differences as well as control over natural resources[11] also gave rise to human rights violation as women and girls were raped and sexually assaulted, and children abused (10% of Liberian fighters were under the age of 15, and 20% of the militias were between the ages of 15 and 17).[12] As a result, leaders of the Economic Community of West African States

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[6] United Nations, *Peacebuilding and the United Nations*, Report (n.d.). At the time of publication, this report has been taken down. The link previously operational was http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pbso/pbun.shtml.

[7] Max Ahmadu Sesay, 'Bringing Peace to Liberia: The Liberian Peace Process 1990-1996', in *Conciliation Resources*, Accord Issue 1 (1996), pp. 9-26, cont. pp. 75-79.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Peace Insight Organisation. 'Liberia: Conflict Profile', as updated in September 2017, online).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Sesay, 'Bringing Peace to Liberia'.

(ECOWAS) set up in 1990 a peacekeeping operation named ECOMOG, which spearheaded the 1996 ceasefire.[13] The first Liberian civil war ended with the 1997 elections, in which Charles Taylor, supported by the United States, was elected. The country remained relatively stable for two years. Yet, lack of equipment, arm, maritime and air capacities highly weakened the ECOMOG mandate.[14] On top of that, continuing human rights violations by state security agencies, crime and violence against civilians and political opponents, combined with poor governance as Taylor channelled all state income into his own hands, progressively led the country to a second civil war.[15]

The second Liberian Civil War broke out in 1999 when the Liberians United for Democracy and Reconciliation (LURD) invaded Liberia from neighbouring Guinea. By 2003, they besieged the capital, Monrovia. This, like the previous civil war, resulted in the massacre of many civilians and thousands refugees. By early 2003, another rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), emerged from the south, leaving Taylor in control of barely one third of the country.[16] Once more, many human rights violations occurred. According to Human Rights Watch, the use of child soldiers was widespread on both LURD and Taylor's sides. Many combatants, including children, were routinely made addicted to drugs as means of control.[17] The war ended in 2003 with the Accra Comprehensive Agreement (ACP). Overall, about 250,000 people died and numerous national infrastructures were destroyed.[18] The United Nations mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was then established in September 2003 to '*support the implementation of the ceasefire agreement and the peace process*'.[19]

In a post-conflict context, war to peace transition can be

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Nancy Annan, 'Violent Conflicts and Civil Strife in West Africa: Causes, Challenges and Prospects', in *International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 3 (1), No. 3 (2014), p. 11.

[15] Torunn Wimplemann Chaudhary, 'The Political Economies of Violence in Post-War Liberia', in Mats Berdal & Astri Suhrke (eds.), *The Peace in Between: Post-War Violence and Peacebuilding* (Taylor and Francis, 2011), pp. 250-252.

[16] Sarah Left, 'War in Liberia', in *The Guardian*, 4 August 2003, online.

[17] Human Rights Watch. 'How to Fight, How to Kill: Child Soldiers in Liberia', 2 February 2004, online.

[18] Peace Insight Organisation. 'Liberia: Conflict Profile'

[19] United Nations Peacekeeping, United Nations in Liberia, *UNMIL Fact Sheet*, online.

particularly vulnerable to social violence for two main reasons.[20] First, war-time generally comes with a legitimisation of violence and social destabilisation. Then, continued or renewed violence can also be attributed to floundered institutions and weak or failed states that cannot successfully reintegrate ex-combatants, nor constrain the legacy of the war and the rise of local warlords, criminal elements, mafia groups, drug trafficking, and other. In this context, institutional approaches have emphasised the need for institution-building in both public administration and the security sector to sustain the peace. However, until such institutions are in place and self-sufficient, international presence is needed to help the country stabilise itself.[21]

As such, the understanding and assessment of peace-building is based more and more on a number of aspects: good governance, economic growth and reconstruction, the rule of law as well as both Security Sector Reforms (SSR) and Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR).[22] Renewed violence would occur if one or more of these areas were to fail. Overall, it seems that the complexity of war-time violence, triggered by a multiplicity of social, economic and political factors makes it nearly impossible for violence to end as soon as a peace agreement is signed.

When it comes to Liberia, fifteen years after the implementation of the ACP, we have now enough hindsight to assess the peace process. Although Liberia demonstrates evidence of real improvement since 2003, and has made a significant step towards stability, the country shows continuing signs of violence and insecurity, as exemplified by the constant postponement of UNMIL mandate departure. In 2011 for instance, Liberian mercenaries crossed the country's unprotected borders to attack UN peacekeepers in Ivory Coast.[23] Later that year, during presidential elections, the opposition pulled out of the second round of voting, which brought about renewed violence and many casualties. Then, although the year 2013 reflected a promising economic growth of 8%, the ravages of Ebola knocked down all hope for post-war stability and gave way to a financial free fall and the breakdown of anti-corruption efforts.[24]

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[20] Astri Suhrke, 'The Peace in Between', in Berdal & Suhrke *The Peace in Between,* pp. 2-4.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Marmon, 'Why the UN Can't Leave Liberia'

[24] Ibid.

Unlike in neighbouring countries, such as Sierra Leone, there was no winner emerging from the war in Liberia. The international community therefore implemented a transitional government in which the three warring factions (LURD, MDL and Taylor's party) shared power.[25] Highly dysfunctional and corrupt, members of this government used their power to further their own interests. This lack of coherent political settlement resulted in limited opportunities for joined efforts on DDR and SSR issues.[26] UNMIL and the International Contact Group on Liberia (ICGL) established the DDR process[27] which aimed at taking adult and children ex-combatants left without a livelihood and a support network outside military structures, and helping them integrating socially and economically into society so that they could become active participants in the peace process.[28]

The first DDR program started in December 2003 and was immediately interrupted due to a lack of preparation and operational capacity from the UN.[29] Indeed, after leaving the program, ex-combatants took over the DDR camp and returned to Monrovia to start a riot that resulted in the death of 9 Taylor militia members.[30] The UN then redesigned the program, and the DDR process resumed in April 2004, ultimately with mixed results. On the positive side, participation rates ended up being unexpectedly high, as more than 100,000 Liberians took part in the program, as compared to the initial estimation of 38,000 participants.[31] When the DDR process came to its close the following November, an estimated 60% of weapons were collected.[32] However, many armaments were transferred to neighbouring countries such as Guinea and Ivory Coast[33] and, in 2007, 40,000 ex-combatants had yet to proceed towards reintegration.[34] Though they eventually were reintegrated a few months later, they launched attacks on NGOs and UN bases as they felt they had been cheated due to an unwarrantedly delayed

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[25] Christopher Von Dyck, *DDR and SSR in War-to-Peace Transition*. SSR Paper 14 (DCAF, 2016). pp. 42-43.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] United Nations Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Resource Centre, 'What is DDR?', May 2005, online.

[29] Chaudhary, 'The Political Economies of Violence', pp. 258-260.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Von Dyck, *DDR and SSR*, p. 48.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Chaudhary, 'The Political Economies of Violence', pp. 258-260.

process.[35] It therefore seems that the legitimacy of the overall DDR program was significantly undermined by its malfunctioning.

However, on a more positive note, it is important to mention that a crucial part of peacebuilding is the demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers and war-affected children in general. Indeed, it has been noticed that ex-combatants are often rejected from communities because of the atrocities they might have committed as child-soldiers,[36] which leads them towards post-war violence and crime.[37] In this aspect, the reintegration of children has been the focus of numerous Liberian and international NGOs. Although it took more than ten years to see significant progress, the overall process has been effective.[38] NGOs have learnt from past mistakes and modified their mission to broader development issues over time. The *Centre for Peace Education* (CPE), an NGO dedicated to rebuilding core values in communities after the war, endeavoured to promote a non-violent culture by providing children with '*the skills and knowledge to peacefully coexist*' by teaching peace education in schools.[39] This initiative resulted in significant drop in the level of violence and was applauded by many headmasters, as exemplified by the expansion of the program in 6 different counties in the country. UNICEF also worked on reintegrating war-affected children into the society by providing resources to teachers in order to enable them to give psychological counselling to former child-soldiers.[40]

The SSR process, established by the UN, the U.S. and Nigerian/ECOWAS authorities, was also very much fragile. The main priorities were the restructuring of the Liberian National Police (LNP) by UNMIL, and of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) by the U.S.[41] As far as the Army reforms are concerned, despite the creation

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Gracie Brownell & Randall Basham, 'NGO Strategy toward the Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Liberia, Africa: An Online Survey of Services, Roles, and Activities', in *International Social Work*, Vol. 60, No. 5 (June/ September 2017), pp. 1074-1086.

[37] Chaudhary, 'The Political Economies of Violence', pp. 248-249

[38] Brownell & Basham, 'NGO Strategy'.

[39] Ebenezer Mainlehwon Vonhm Benda, 'Activity Report: Peace Education in Liberia', in *Journal of Peace Education*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2010), pp. 221-222.

[40] Adolphus Scott, 'Vocational Training Helps Reintegrate Liberia's Former Child Soldiers', at *UNICEF*, as updated on 3 July 2007, online.

[41] Sukanya Podder, 'Bridging the "Conceptual–Contextual" Divide: Security Sector Reform in Liberia and UNMIL Transition', in *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2013), pp. 353-380. Also, Chaudhary, 'The Political

of two infantry battalions by 2008 and the recruitment and training of more than 2,000 soldiers by 2011, the AFL remains weak, does not benefit from the trust of the population and its role lacks clear direction.[42] As for the police reforms, more than 4,000 officers had been recruited and trained by 2011.[43] An efficient and almost autonomous armed LNP Emergency Response Unit of 321 men was also fully trained and equipped. However, in 2014, the LNP was still very dependent on the UNMIL, and public security remained a low priority for the government.[44] Nevertheless, the imminent UNMIL withdrawal has forced the government to focus more its police and army, as well as on building a viable and effective national security agency.[45]

Beyond DDR and SSR, the international community was also involved in anti-corruption efforts. Indeed, corruption in Liberia has been an international concern for the past few decades. After Taylor's time in office, the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program (GEMAP) established in 2005 a program challenging Liberia's right to run its own affairs, placed foreigners at the centre of Liberian internal administration and created an anti-corruption commission.[46] Though international partners perceive GEMAP as a success due to expanded revenue in the government, it appears the Liberian population does not agree with that statement.[47] According to them, current efforts in place have not solved the problem and corruption remains significant.[48] Reno indicates that corruption in Liberia is profoundly entrenched in social relations, and that a majority of the population see corruption as tolerable and compatible with economic growth and political stability.[49] Addressing the corruption problem would then require a 'cultural

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Economies of Violence', pp. 262-263.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., pp. 263-265.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Robtel Neajal Pailey & Thomas Jaye, 'The UN had to Go, but is Liberia Ready to Keep its Own Peace?', in *African Arguments*, 13 July 2016, online.

[46] William Reno, 'Anti-corruption Efforts in Liberia: Are they Aimed at the Right Targets?', in Dominik Zaum and Christine Cheng (eds.), *Corruption and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Selling the Peace?* (Taylor and Francis, 2011), pp. 126-127.

[47] Yoshino Funaki & Blair Glencorse, 'Anti-corruption or accountability? International efforts in post-conflict Liberia', in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (2014), p. 843.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Reno, 'Anti-corruption Efforts in Liberia', pp. 129-130.

readjustment' through a disruptive intervention within the population itself.[50] Therefore, given the population's overall acceptance of corruption, we can argue that focusing merely on the government, institutions and laws is not enough. As such, the UN should have focused on a population-centric approach when dealing with corruption, conjointly with a broader political and institutional one.

Additionally, Liberia has also been subject to land conflicts – a situation usually common in post-war countries, most specifically in the aftermath of conflicts that generated significant flows of displaced populations. When the conflict ended, refugees and displaced people returned to their homes and lands only to discover that these had been claimed by others.[51] This resulted in violence and riots, often with ethnic and religious dimensions. When it comes to a land conflict where one of the parties involved is the Liberian Muslim religious minority – the Mandingos – the conflict is usually more violent and takes a larger significance as an 'ethnic conflict'.[52] Indeed the Mandingos have been historically perceived as strangers and resented by the rest of the population. During the war, they were first affiliated with Doe's government fighting Gios and Manos, and then with the LURD factions. Though UNMIL succeeded in preventing a conflict escalation when Gios and Manos took arms to fight the Mandingos and they planned on attacking them in 2006, relevant land conflicts remain an ongoing problem to this day.[53] Overall it seems international actors failed to take into account the ethnic dynamics of land conflicts that date back to the country's beginnings. An important additional aspect of post-war land conflicts is that they are usually aggravated by a flawed administrative and judicial system, as well as the destruction of archival records during the wars.[54]

Finally, it is important to mention that Liberia is a country rich in many natural resources, mainly diamonds, timber, and rubber. History has shown that natural resources can play a role, sometimes even a major one, in either the outbreak or longevity of conflicts – in which case they become central focal points for peace-building missions. As combatants, rebels and insurgents frequently use

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Chaudhary, 'The Political Economies of Violence', pp. 253-256.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

natural resources as a source of finance necessary for the purchase of weapons and conduct of military operations, international actors usually intervene after a conflict to establish laws, institutions and policies regulating the natural resources sector.[55] In Liberia, Taylor first used diamond trade to finance himself and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone – a rebel army known for extreme physical and sexual violence.[56] As a result, the UN imposed sanctions on the Liberian diamond exports in 2001.[57] Though the RUF laid down arms a year later, Taylor started working with timber extractive companies to export hundreds of millions of dollars of resources in order to buy weapons and consolidate his power after his 1997 election.[58] Consequently, the UN imposed sanctions to restrain the flow of resources revenue by excluding Liberian timber from international trade in 2003. Sanctions were then lifted in 2006 on the condition that a new legislation was created. The National Reform Forestry Law (NRFL) was thus passed two months later, and 10 core regulations were signed the next year.[59] However, few efforts were made to distribute land rental fees equitably between the government, the counties and the communities (the local population being neglected). The NRFL was also short-circuited to fast-track commercial exportation and generate revenues faster. This was, according to the UN Sanctions Committee, a strategy that would result in less revenue in the long-term.[60]

With regards to diamonds exports, sanctions were lifted in 2007, and Liberia entered the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme. Diamonds exports resumed the same year. Yet, there were still significant problems with unlicensed dealers and brokers operating in the country.[61] Rubber on the other hand, although exploited as a source of revenue by warring parties during the civil war, was never subject to UN sanctions.[62] This was decided in 2001

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[55] Michael D. Beevers, 'Governing Natural Resources for Peace: Lessons from Liberia and Sierra Leone', in *Global Governance*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (April-June 2015), pp. 227-228.

[56] Richard Matthew, Oli Brown & David Jensen, *From Conflict to Peacebuilding: the role of Natural Resources and the Environment*, Report (United Nations Environmental Program, 2009), p. 10.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Beevers, 'Governing Natural Resources for Peace', pp. 229-230.

[59] Solà-Martín, 'Liberia', p. 1224.

[60] Ibid., p. 1225

[61] Ibid., p. 1226

[62] Ibid., p. 1221

because it was expected to have devastating impact on the Liberian economy, and because U.S. lobbying fought to preserve the interests of American tire company 'Firestone' in the region. This resulted in a lot of violence on rubber plantations in the years following the end of the civil wars. In 2000, the major Gunthrie plantation, although owned by the government and managed by a Malaysian company, was occupied by LURD who turned it into a military base.[63] 500 ex-combatants continued to occupy it until 2006, and every attempt by security agencies and private firms to enter the plantation resulted in extreme violence and murders. Though UNMIL eventually took back control of the Gunthrie plantation, violence occurred in many others as local communities opposed outside involvement in, and exploitation of their land.

In short, despite the relative effectiveness of UN sanctions on diamonds and timber, issues surrounding their exploitation resurfaced as soon as sanctions were lifted. The decision not to sanction rubber exploitation also resulted in extreme violence. Given these observations, we can argue that the UN poorly defined the time frame and focus of post-conflict natural resources policies.

To conclude, the article has established that international efforts to build peace in Liberia have had mixed results and could have benefited from both an acknowledgment of the national historical context (as with corruption and land conflicts) and a longer time frame (specifically regarding natural resources) to be more effective. However, it is important to note that present, post-war violence in Liberia has always remained rather limited. In 2016, the UN Security Council officially lifted all remaining sanctions on Liberia, and UNMIL '*completed the transfer of security responsibilities to Liberian authorities*'.[64] Moreover, the December 2017 presidential elections marked the country's first peaceful transfer of power from one democratically elected government to another in decades and constitutes a '*milestone for democracy in Africa*'.[65] Although the new configuration of the country seems promising, whether the UN withdrawal is premature or whether Liberia will from now on be able to sustain its own peace, remains to be seen.

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[63] Chaudhary, 'The Political Economies of Violence', pp. 256-258.

[64] UNMIL, Mandate UNMIL (n.d.), online.

[65] Riva Levinson, 'Liberia's Presidential Election is a Milestone for Democracy in Africa', in *The Hill*, 1 February 2018, online.