

Civil War Peace Settlement in Sierra Leone: The Role of Local/Insider Mediators

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This paper seeks to address a gap in the scholarship on the Sierra Leone civil war by examining the role of local and regional actors and agents in facilitating and supporting the process of peacemaking that brought about an end to the civil war. I proceed from the premise that scholarship on the Sierra Leone civil war has unduly focused on the importance of international actors in agenda setting, conflict mediation, and implementation of peace agreements. I submit that looking at the peacemaking process in the Sierra Leone civil war strictly from this perspective ignores the depth and complexity of the process. The impression that violent and complex civil conflicts such as that which occurred in Sierra Leone can be resolved by a simple, uni-dimensional agreement arbitrated by international interveners does not adequately account for the complex and multidimensional engagements that involved local actors who at levels facilitated the peace process and eventual peacebuilding. Largely understudied in the scholarship on intra-state conflict, overarching theoretical questions about the role of local actors in peace processes beg for answers. Who are these local actors? From where do they emerge? How are they constituted? How does one define and map out their roles in peacemaking processes? What is their relationship to the state, insurgent groups, and third party actors? For whom do they speak? What is the nature of their relationship to wider civil society, sovereign authority, third party international actors, or insurgents and other groups? What role or leverage do they exercise? Can that leverage be estimated and analyzed? Do they have capacity

to deliver post-conflict/peacebuilding outcomes? Are there broader theoretical implications of studying these groups for facilitating peace processes in other intra-state conflicts elsewhere on the African continent?

Establishing Contexts for Peacemaking

In the 1990s especially, there was worldwide optimism that intra-state conflicts in Africa could be settled often through third party intervention with an implied or overt threat of coercive military intervention, diplomatic isolation, or punishing sanctions for parties that sought to reject the peace process. As protracted intra-state conflicts continued to defy this model, theoreticians and practitioners started shifting their thinking away from liberal peace models to exploring the significant contributions of multiple actors and especially of local and regional actors to peacemaking processes. Acknowledging that local voices engaged in peace initiatives are sometimes complimentary or opposed to international peace support initiatives, there is a recognition that these local initiatives are driven by unique motives and deal with values and outcomes to which international institutions do not always cater. These may help or hinder overarching initiatives and therefore the need to study those local actors within the context of the wider dynamics of the conflict and peacemaking process. The discourse of liberal peace has therefore since expanded to accommodate such terms as “local ownership,” “indigenous peacebuilding,” among others to reflect the needs, perspectives, and contribution of local actors in the peacebuilding process (Curtis, 2013).¹ There are lessons from the Sierra Leone context for UN-facilitated/assisted peace processes in the global South. There are also implications for national and regional models for managing conflicts because the UN/sub-regional initiative in

¹ . Curtis draws attention to the developing breath of scholarship that makes this argument: Michael Pugh, Neil Cooper, and Mandy Turner (eds), *Whose Peace? Critical perspectives on the political economy of peacebuilding* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2008); Kristoffer Lidén, Roger Mac Ginty, and Oliver Richmond (eds), ‘Liberal peacebuilding reconstructed’, *International Peacekeeping (Special Issue)* 16, 5 (2009); Isaac Albert, ‘Understanding peace in Africa’ in David Francis (ed.), *Peace and Conflict in Africa* (Zed Books, London, 2008)

Sierra Leone took advantage of the instrumentality of sections of the civil society and related grassroots actors that were committed to conflict management and the prevention of violence in Sierra Leone. But who are these local actors and how do they emerge in intra-state conflicts?

A Critical Look at Literature about the Causes of the Sierra Leone Civil War

Scholars of the Sierra Leone civil war have advanced a number of reasons for the violent intra-state conflagration that lasted for 11 years. Some scholars have foreground resource predation, greed, and grievance as the primary motive and rational driver of the conflict in Sierra Leone (Richards, 1996; Reno, 1995; Fearon, 2005; Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner, 2009; Lujala, Gleditsch, and Gilmore 2005; Berdal & Malone 2000). Other scholars have argued that resource predation in itself may be insufficient to ignite conflict, but it sustains conflict once it starts (Elbadawi and Sambanis 2000). Ibrahim Abdullah (1998) proposes youth exclusion and youth culture as responsible for the onset of war by mapping the collective social identities deployed in the early repertoire of the insurgents. Fanthorpe (2001) suggests the nature of pre-war politics and identity and especially to the relative stability of an anocratic All People's Congress (APC) government. Others have proffered the collapse of the centralized patrimonial state as the key reason for the descent into civil war (Gberie, 2005; (Richards 2006; Bates, 2008; Keen, 2012; Krijn, 2011; Bardal and Keen, 1997). Jackson (1994), has suggested the salience of the politics of elite survival for understanding the Sierra Leone war and Franks (2004) has argued for the failure of the Westphalian system as *raison d'être* for conflict.² The proposal by Lake and Rothschild elsewhere that “the transmission of civil violence to the neighborhood through diffusion or contagion mechanisms” has resonance for the Sierra Leone war especially in understanding the specific threat pronounced by National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)

² See also Jackson's 2002 work “Violent internal conflict and the African state: towards a framework of analysis. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20(1), 29-52.

leader Charles Taylor and the eventual participation of NPFL vanguard troops and trainers as well as arms transfers to the RUF.

Examining Typologies of Violence in the Sierra Leone Civil War

The literature on the Sierra Leone civil war is conclusive that mistrust, anger, and fear deepened as the RUF insurgency spread from the east through the northeast, the south and parts of the north. High casualty figures, unspeakable random atrocities targeting civilian population centers and traffic, and large-scale displacement of the civilian population narrowed the basis of support for the RUF insurgency. This also led to the formation of amorphous and localized counterinsurgency militia groups loosely allied with government forces that undertook limited offensive and defensive operations against the RUF. All this deepened the climate of fear and mistrust in the country. Added to this toxic mixture was the persistence of reports that Charles Taylor was using the RUF to establish strategic breath against Liberian ULIMO-J adversaries based in Sierra Leone as well as exploit the alluvial diamond deposits in the east of Sierra Leone to finance his forces in the ongoing war in Liberia. What emerges therefore between 1993 and 1996 in the Sierra Leone civil war is a pattern of self-sustaining violence where the main insurgent group – the RUF – persistently redefined the political cleavages from overthrowing autocratic one party rule to fighting against military rule for democracy (which once promised) was promptly transformed into fighting for accountable and transparent mineral resource management. But the macro-level cleavages were in no way identical to the micro-level rationalization of persistent and widespread violence by individual combatants. Kalyvas (2003) observes that persons or loose groups committing violent acts do so for reasons that are often particular to them and do not reflect or have a studied impact on the national cleavage.

Local Actors in the Sierra Leone Civil Conflict

Who are these local actors? From where do they emerge? How are they constituted? How does one define and map out their roles in peacemaking processes? What is their relationship to the state, insurgent groups, and third party actors? For whom do they speak? What is the nature of their relationship to wider civil society, sovereign authority, third party international actors, or insurgents and other groups? What role or leverage do they exercise? Can that leverage be estimated and analyzed? Do they have capacity to deliver post-conflict/peacebuilding outcomes? Are there broader theoretical implications of studying these groups for facilitating peace processes in other intra-state conflicts elsewhere on the African continent?

Early Local Actor Initiatives

As the war ground to a series of well-publicized battles, low-level skirmishes, ambushes, random atrocities against the civilian population as well as loss and capture of territory, local actors started independent and localized engagements with the RUF insurgents and the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) government.

The Soro-Gbema Peace Overture

Encouraged by the NPRC in late 1994, leaders of the displaced population from the border Soro-Gbema Chiefs and community leaders sanctioned engagement with the RUF. They walked across the bridge and three of them, including the mother of the local rebel commander, volunteered herself along with two others into captivity as a confidence-building measure. Sustained hostilities and military actions led to the higher rebel leadership calling off all engagements at all levels with the NPRC. Inasmuch as the gesture raised awareness of the need to engage the RUF, nothing concrete came of the project.

The National Coordinating Committee for Peace, NCCP

Formed as an umbrella coalition of civil society and trade union organizations led by the Sierra Leone Teacher's Union leader as spokesman, M'Ban Kabu, the group sought to kickstart peaceful dialogue through public sensitization and workshops on the need to strategically alter/change public rhetoric about the insurgents and insurgency as a way of encouraging the insurgents to engage with the sovereign authority of the state. As the demonization of the insurgency had served the military government's propaganda interests in prosecuting the war, humanizing the rebellion was seen as subversive and M'Ban Kabu and a Newspaper editor for a leading daily were arrested and thrown into jail (Phan, p. 145). Although the other constituent organizations independently continued their work for peace, the NCCP had effectively died after losing respect.

Interfaith Contact Groups

The Supreme Islamic Council (SIC) of Sierra Leone representing the country's Muslims who constitute 60 percent of the country's population instructed local preachers to local Muslim clerics that they should consistently drive home the need for a negotiated end to the war. The Council of Churches, Sierra Leone, through its secretary, Alimamy P. Koroma, collaborated with the SIC on propagating the need for a negotiated end to the conflict and made several overtures between the RUF and the NPRC government. As churches, mosques, and schools became targets of arson by the insurgents, the Inter Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) comprising leaders of the Muslim and Christian faiths took on a more pronounced role in influencing opinion leaders among the NPRC, and later among the government of President Tejan Kabbah and the leadership of the insurgency. They were particularly suspicious of a two pronged military action-dialogue approach to making peace and voiced concerns that the use of coercive force

would only make insurgents less likely to engage in the peacemaking process. The council developed good faith and built confidence with the insurgents by supplying basic humanitarian needs. In turn, the council was invited to consultative meetings on peace and it acted as advisers to the eventual Lome peace process (Penfold, 2005; Jessop, M, Aljets, D, & Chacko, B 2008; Turay, 2002; Koroma, 2007; Lord, 2002).

An ill-fated 1995 venture of a group of “mothers, sisters, and wives” went disastrously wrong when rebels abducted or executed the entire voluntary party of women who had ventured into rebel held territory to establish contact with them on peace. The Sierra Leone Women’s Movement for Peace (SLWMP) led by Fatmata Boie Kamara was a broad coalition of women’s groups and its strategies included “appeals to government and rebels, marches, prayer rallies, and meetings with government and the international community in order to apply pressure for a negotiated solution” (Jusu-Sheriff, 2002, p. 47). This was an amalgam of the Sierra Leone Association of University Women (SLAUW), Young Women’s Christian Association, Women’s Association of National Development (WAND), National Organization of Women (NOW), Women’s Wing of the Sierra Leone Labor Congress, Representatives of Women Petty Traders, the National Displaced Women’s Organization, and much more. These predated the Women’s National Salvation Front that organized to resist the 1997 military coup (Badmus, pp. 825-826). Inasmuch as the SLWMP triggered debate on peace and the need for a negotiated settlement, they lacked a rigorous ideological framework with the effect that the movement did not achieve much more than raise awareness through public sensitization programs.

Other Civil Society Groups and Humanitarian Agencies

Other civil society groups and humanitarian agencies either established contact and tried building confidence between the two adversaries, or they also facilitated discreet and open

engagements between representatives of the two groups. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Alert (IA) and Conciliation Resources (CR) among others were thus engaged. Suspicious in some cases that some of the activities of these organizations and close fraternizing with the rebel commanders and leadership were suspect and therefore perceived as directly contesting the sovereignty and legitimacy of the military government. ICRC and IA were either restricted or the goodwill for their unbridled operation withdrawn.

While all these organizations and civil society groups were all active in “mobilizing public opinion in favour of peace and democratization, “they were neither formally recognized as part of a larger civil society initiative and were largely ignored for external third party talks organized by third parties and supported by sub-regional bodies and the international community (Lord, 2000).

Understanding the Role of Local Actors in Conflict Dynamics

As discussed above, sustained and random violence targeting mainly civilian populations and population centers creates residual resentment for all combatant groups and particularly for insurgent groups. Where the state lacks definitive coercive military power to defeat the insurgency, as was the case in Sierra Leone, the ebb and flow of the insurgency makes the possibility of a final military solution to the conflict less likely. In the absence of or even with third party intervention (especially one that is seen as sufficiently trustworthy and fair but with evident coercive force to enforce an agreement), local actors foreground their vested interests in peacemaking. They do so by seeking to transform the dynamics of the conflict and hence influence the parameters and outcomes of the conflict. They set their own micro agendas for peacemaking either in support of or in spite of the broader context of other peacemaking initiatives during civil war violence. Those local actors may seek to temper down residual

hostilities against armed factions recognizing they have more to lose or gain from making peace.³ As Mckeon argues, local actors may also participate by way of consultation with key parties in the conflict, facilitate representative decision-making, and direct participation. In the case of Sierra Leone, however, local actors did not directly participate in the peace process although sections of those groups were consulted extensively during and after the framing of the various peace accords. Ultimately, they set their own agendas for transforming the dynamics and parameters of conflict. But local actors are not always cohesive, persistent and robust. There are cleavages within collective agendas and agendas can be subjective to the disruptive branding of those actors as spoilers or saboteurs. With the imposition of external peace, this tangible internal dynamic is often overlooked.

But in promoting their vested and limited interests in peacemaking in specific sites of conflict, local actors can be seen to either leverage overarching peace moves or can be seen by the sovereign authority as potential spoilers and can therefore be treated with deep suspicion.

Rather than confirming state legitimacy and sovereignty, their outreach to the insurgents may be interpreted as undermining the legitimacy of the state and state authority. In both instances, they risk resistance, suspicion, and fatal hostility by either one or both parties. All of these have the potential for undermining the basis of a cooperative peace upon which most external/third party peace negotiations are based. In the Sierra Leonean case, local actors had a greater incentive to make peace rather than to subvert the legitimacy of the state. Some organizations lacked a national reach and so when they engaged specific rebel commanders (such as in the case of the Soro Gbema Peace initiative), the thorny problem of issue

³ Jessop, Aljets, and Chacko note that ripeness theory as proposed by Zartman and Touval is developed around “the presence of a mutually hurting stalemate (MHS) and availability of a mutually enticing opportunity (MEO)” and civil society uses this moment to set its agenda. They also argue that local actors can provide communication linkages and foster constituency building where there is deep suspicion.

indivisibility emerges where local rebel volunteers maintain a set of local concerns that are completely different from the overall national agenda articulated by their leadership. Local actors additionally wage a game of balance where they should be seen to facilitate and leverage/maximize the outcomes for each of the groups or they risk being branded or perceived as spoilers and cooperation may be withdrawn from them.

There is also the tendency to see local actors as representative umbrella groups that engage in a horizontal inclusion of and engagement with its membership. For this reason, future research should look into not only the nature of power relations between local actors and third party international actors but also power relations among various local actors. The Sierra Leone situation illustrates that local actors coalesced around umbrella groups or acquiesced in a collective and representative agenda in order to gain more clout or leverage their legitimacy and credibility in the peace process. These often asymmetric power relations need to be modeled and studied extensively in order to estimate which local actors practitioners must first engage and what the mode of that engagement may well be.

Another element is that local actor groups and networks seem to represent coalescing interests of elites. Apart from the few community initiatives highlighted above, these organizations looked more like elite groups projecting a patron-client relationship with their memberships. This raises legitimate questions about agenda setting and intended outcomes of their activities and how various parties respond to those local actor groups. Kanyako (2011) observes that local actor groups emerged in Sierra Leone because of a perceived space for advocacy on a number of issues everything from peace, child soldiers, displaced persons, corruption, gender, governance, and democratization. Their peace rallies and their engagement

with international media and third parties enhanced their profiles both within and outside Sierra Leone.

Worth more rigorous scrutiny also is gauging how much local actor participation can be injected into the peacemaking and peacebuilding process. Steadman (2002) advises that international intervenors or mediators use a democratic measurement benchmark to decide the level of participation of local actors in peace processes. The less democratic mandate a major parties to the conflict can lay claim to, the higher the profile one needs accord local actors. In spaces where one party holds a higher democratic mandate, local actors are less likely to be used prominently. They may act as facilitators and consensus makers and do little else to dictate the terms of peace.

At several points in the history of the Sierra Leone conflict, various governments tended to depend on local actors in establishing communal justice mechanisms, facilitate participation in the county's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, helping create the atmosphere for participation in democratic processes and guarantee non-retributive community reconciliation which had a strong impact on eventual demobilization of combatants and the resettlement of displaced persons. Understanding local actors and their role in civil war peace settlement can help to mitigate threats, harmonize outcomes, and thus lead to the construction of a more robust and sustainable peace infrastructure. Certainly, external actors play a pivotal role in peacemaking using political, diplomatic, economic and other resources to enhance mediation efforts. However, "in all cases, a lasting settlement is likely to depend on the achievement of a relatively unified external involvement in addition to local ownership by relevant social and political actors" Whitefield (2010, p.).

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