

# Contextualizing peacebuilding activities to local circumstances

Liberian case-study field report

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## Acronyms

CA	Civil Affairs (UN)
CBO	Community-Based Organizations
CDA	County Development Agendas
CDSC	County Development Steering Committee Meetings
CS	Civil Society
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
CST	County Support Teams
DaO	Delivering as One
DPKO	Department for Peacekeeping Operations (UN)
DSRSGI	Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary General
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FST	Field Support Team
GoL	Government of Liberia
HoFO	Head of Field Office
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
MilObs	Military Observer
MODEL	Movement for Democracy in Liberia
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PC	Peace Committee
PRS	Poverty Reduction Strategy
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers
RRR	Reintegration, Rehabilitation and Recovery
SRSR	Special Representative of the UN Secretary General
UNCT	UN County Teams
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNMIL	United Nations Mission in Liberia
UNOL	United Nations Office in Liberia
UNOMIL	United Nations Observer Mission to Liberia
UNPol	United Nations Police
WFP	World Food Programme

# 1. Executive summary

The UN mission in Liberia stands out from other UN peacekeeping missions in the way it has managed to integrate the sub-national level through organizational innovations. County Support Teams (CST) were set up in 2006 and the position of the Head of Field Office (HoFO) established in each county in 2008.<sup>1</sup> The HoFO positions were in most cases filled by a senior Civil Affairs (CA) officer with experience in the respective county. These organizational innovations equipped the UN with formalized representatives and coordination in each county, which strengthened the decentralization of the mission. A horizontal level of information sharing was introduced and a central authority on county the level was institutionalized. Improvements in the coordination aspect were further reinforced by a joint approach with UNDP as partner, supported by the entire UNCT, and the central role of CA and later the county-level HoFOs.

This report is part of a comparative study of UN local peacebuilding in three countries – Liberia, Haiti and South Sudan. When initiating this study, the research team chose the Civil Affairs section of UN peacekeeping operations as an entry point, since this section is usually deployed wherever the peacekeeping mission has established presences, and is tasked, *inter alia*, with acting as the intermediary with local authorities and populations, as well as with the rest of the UN peacekeeping mission and other UN actors.

Civil Affairs is the UN component most consistently present in the field in UN peacekeeping operations. It is one of the largest civilian components in UN peacekeeping, with around 800 staff members deployed globally to facilitate the implementation of peacekeeping mandates at the sub-national level.<sup>2</sup> CA officers frequently act as space-makers for other actors to fulfil their roles and peacebuilding activities.

In Liberia, the focus of the CA section has evolved with the development of the mission. It can be divided into three phases. First, prior to the 2005 elections, CA work centred on the restoration of state authority. In this period, CA officers were often the only civilian permanent

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<sup>1</sup> Although most of the HoFO were and still are CA officers, they have been given a new rank and now report directly to the DSRSG, not to the CA sections, but. Nevertheless, many HoFOs still see themselves at least partially as 'CA people'.

<sup>2</sup> Including professional national and international officers and UN Volunteers. Information as of January 2010. Interview with UN DPKO Best Practices Officer, New York, July 2010.

UNMIL staff in the counties. Second, after the elections and the inauguration of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2006, CA support turned towards capacity building and logistical support to the newly-elected officials, serving as a central source of information to other UN agencies and INGOs that were beginning to develop projects in the counties. The increasing number of actors required a strengthening of coordination, and in 2006 the CSTs were set up, followed by the HoFos in 2008. And third, in 2010 the mission initiated the drawdown phase. This meant that during our fieldwork in 2011 much of the mission's attention, including CA, was on transition and the withdrawal plan. A main CA priority in this phase was to ensure that local governments and non-state actors would be able to continue functioning without the support of UNMIL.

As shown with these three phases, UNMIL, through Civil Affairs, has a strong presence and continuity at the sub-national level. Officers often are present for several years and can establish stable relationships with county authorities in the administrative and civilian sectors. Their focus is on *the county*, on the local circumstances, rather than specific projects and issues.

At first sight, many of our findings at the sub-national level seem to contradict the findings of the critique of liberal peacebuilding. Local populations are consulted in development planning. The local level has been strengthened, and field offices provide an institutionalized infrastructure for contextualizing peacebuilding to local circumstances. The field offices work rather independently of the national level, and sensitivity to local needs is high among local staff. However, global dynamics and donor concerns often impact on local needs, challenging the contextualization to local circumstances. Our conclusion thus is a double-edged one. On the one hand, there is a huge potential for contextualizing peacebuilding to local circumstances within the existing structures in Liberia. With the organizational measures that have been taken and the many tendencies that point towards success, there are many lessons to learn from Liberia on local-level peacebuilding in post-conflict countries. However, this potential of contextualization has not been fully utilized, and is often not adequately valued at the national level.

## **Summary of recommendations**

### *On implementation of the mandate:*

- Local and traditional structures should be better mapped and better understood. On this basis, regular feedback on how to interact in situations of norm conflict could be provided.
- Enhance the learning process within the various institutions, to ensure that knowledge is shared between regions and handed over in the case of staff turnover.
- CSOs should be engaged pro-actively by UNMIL and state authorities as partners in peace building. The role of CSOs in the County Steering Committees should be strengthened.

### *For UNMIL and the national government:*

- To help ensure a successful transition, UNMIL should continue to support the strengthening of the communication infrastructure between the capital, and the county and the district capitals, building on the ongoing work of the CSTs. CA should continue to encourage and support the set-up and continuity of these structures, but also focus on handing over this role.

### *For the transition:*

- Before UNMIL withdraws, a national mechanism should be developed to replace the CA presences in the counties. This should be done by building on the ongoing work of the CSTs.
- CA should play a supportive role in setting up regional civilian coordination hubs to serve as a continuous county extension of the UN's 'Delivering as One' concept.
- CA should encourage and support the government of Liberia in its work in establishing local Liberian monitoring teams that can ensure accountability for and implementation of various development projects. The Peace Committees in these counties, established with the support and the facilitation of CA, represent a first step in this direction.
- The various agencies and UNMIL sections should build more on the county-specific expertise of HoFO and CA.

### *For local-level peacebuilding:*

- Continue decentralization efforts of national strategies and strengthening the development of county funds and county-specific agendas.
- Increase the influence of local consultations on final outcomes in development strategies and similar documents. Strengthen the capacity of local state and non-state actors to produce adequate documents. Provide greater flexibility for local adaptation of national frameworks.



- Conduct sector-specific consultations and ensure that all groups are heard through consultations. Move beyond consultations wherever possible, and engage local organizations in dialogue and negotiation of final documents.
- UN peacekeeping missions should work to reinforce the capacity of civil society as early as possible.
- The HoFO structure should be seen as an overall success in combination with the earlier foundation of County Support Teams (CSTs). Equally strong coordination should be envisaged for new missions.

## 2. Introduction

‘Some things in Liberia are quite different and it just doesn’t work based on international best practices. That’s where we assist our international partners with providing context.’<sup>3</sup>

‘In the first time in our history, people could make some suggestions. There was a determined effort to get citizens to participate. (...) But then most was lost on the way, in the effort to adapt to World Bank standards.’<sup>4</sup>

The UN and other international organizations engaged with peacebuilding<sup>5</sup> have been heavily criticized by scholars for being *stuck in the global* and applying a deductive Western rationality in their work. The consequence, the critics argue, is a huge gap between the needs on the ground and the means provided by these organizations. Current scholarly research has focused on the challenges within international organizations and the failure to adapt their efforts to local needs, with resultant poor delivery.<sup>6</sup> Few attempts have been made to investigate and empirically analyse the challenges on the ground and take into account the structures and approaches already existing within local societies.<sup>7</sup> The practical links between local approaches and international peacebuilding have been poorly covered, and the sub-national level of international peacebuilding remains widely ignored by scholarly research. The academic literature often criticizes the international community for being post-colonial, orientalist and stuck in a Western rationality when deployed to a post-conflict country such as Libe-

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<sup>3</sup> National CA officer, Monrovia.

<sup>4</sup> Leading CSO representative, Monrovia.

<sup>5</sup> Peacebuilding was first defined in 1992 by former UNSG Boutros Boutros-Ghali as ‘action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse into conflict’ Boutros-Ghali, B. 1992. An agenda for peace: preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, and peace-keeping: report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the statement adopted by the summit meeting of the Security Council on 31 January 1992, New York, United Nations: para. 21. This project has examined how the UN is undertaking local-level early peacebuilding, focusing on the efforts of the UN DPKO Civil Affairs section. The rationale for making this connection between CA and local-level peacebuilding is grounded in the evolving understanding that ‘peacekeepers are peacebuilders’ and should implement early peacebuilding tasks. United Nations 2012, Peace: Keep it. Build it. The Contribution of United Nations Peacekeeping to Early Peacebuilding: Strategy. UN DPKO and DFS, New York: p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Autesserre, Séverine. The trouble with the Congo: Local violence and the failure of international peacebuilding. Cambridge studies in international relations 115. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010. Paris, Roland. ‘International peacebuilding and the “mission civilisatrice”’, Review of International Studies 28 (2002): 637–56. Barnett, Michael. ‘Building a Republican Peace. Stabilizing States after War’. International Security 30, no. 4 (2006): 87–112.

<sup>7</sup> Neumann, Hannah. ‘Taking a Micro-social Perspective of Impact of Peacebuilding Interventions on Rural Citizens: Case Study of a Liberian Community.’ Peace, Conflict & Development 18 (2011): forthcoming

ria.<sup>8</sup> Such critics rarely take into account the components of the international community specifically designed for adapting to local needs and political realities, especially at the sub-national level. Such critics further fail to acknowledge *who* the actors working for these organizations are and *where* they come from. A recent overview mapping the nationality of all the 870 UN's Civil Affairs officers deployed to the field shows that most of these officers actually come from Africa.<sup>9</sup>

Empirical research with a focus on Liberia has often been critical to the mission.<sup>10</sup> UNMIL has been present in Liberia since 2003. What has been mandated as a non-executive mission has turned into a tacit trusteeship,<sup>11</sup> with UN 'making plans for Liberia'.<sup>12</sup> This holds the danger that standardized approaches may be implemented at the expense of contextualized solutions. Morten Boas, for example, has called for a more pragmatic approach from external actors that should draw on a wider segment of the Liberian society.<sup>13</sup> Boas' focus was on the central government, government policy production and the elitist circle around the president. His research, like most research dealing with post-war reconstruction, focuses on the national level and is concerned with activities in the capital. The failure of the scholarly literature to include the sub-national level represents a weakness that is repeated, and not only in studies focusing on Liberia. Scholars often seem aware of the activities of the many INGOs, UN agencies and UNMIL working at the more local levels.<sup>14</sup>

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- <sup>8</sup> Atkinson, Philippa. 'Liberal interventionism in Liberia: Towards a tentatively just approach?' *Conflict, Security & Development* 8, no. 1 (2008): 15–45.
- , Sending, Ole. 'Why Peacebuilders Fail to Secure Ownership and be Sensitive to Context'. NUPI Working Paper Series 761.
- <sup>9</sup> Including professional national and international officers and UN Volunteers. UN 2012. *Civil Affairs Staffing January 2012*. UN DPKO, New York. A total of 1009 officers have been mandated, but only 870 are actually deployed.
- <sup>10</sup> Atkinson, Philippa. 'Liberal interventionism in Liberia: Towards a tentatively just approach?' *Conflict, Security & Development* 8, no. 1 (2008): 15–45. Andersen, Louise. 'Outsiders Inside the State: Post-Conflict Liberia between Trusteeship and Partnership.' *Journal of intervention and statebuilding* 4, no. 2 (2010): 129–52.
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- <sup>11</sup> Andersen, Louise. 'Outsiders Inside the State: Post-Conflict Liberia between Trusteeship and Partnership.' *Journal of intervention and statebuilding* 4, no. 2 (2010): 129–52.
- <sup>12</sup> Boas 2009. 'Making plans for Liberia – a trusteeship approach or good governance?' *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 7 (2009): 1329–41.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1246.
- <sup>14</sup> Severine Autesserre, for instance, spent one year in east Congo doing fieldwork for her *The Trouble with the Congo*. She argues that the international community lacks the means

Roland Paris has identified ‘the emergence of what might be called a “hyper-critical” school of scholars and commentators who view liberal peacebuilding as fundamentally destructive or illegitimate’.<sup>15</sup> According to Paris, such scholars portray peace operations of the last two decades as doing ‘more harm than good’ and as a form of Western liberal imperialism that seeks ‘to subjugate the societies hosting the mission’.<sup>16</sup> Paris aims to save liberal peace mainly because he thinks it is a good project worth saving. In this report, we have a less normative intention, and simply argue that the criticism of liberal peace has not taken into account the more inductive parts of the UN apparatus that have actually been designed in order to adapt peacebuilding efforts to the needs *on the ground*.<sup>17</sup> We argue that UN peacebuilding is aware of the need to tailor peacebuilding to local circumstances, but cumbersome processes and predefined frameworks have hampered the full exploitation of this potential.

The data of this report were generated during a four-week field trip to Liberia, with fieldwork at UNMIL HQ and four field sites. The aim of the project has been to take a closer look at how the UN is undertaking local-level peacebuilding. The entry point for this exercise has been the UN’s Civil Affairs section of the DPKO (Department for Peacekeeping Operations). Civil Affairs (CA) is the civilian component of peacekeeping missions that is most frequently deployed throughout the host country and present at the sub-national levels. Our project has used Civil Affairs as entry point, to see how different missions implement their mandate and contextualize international guidelines to national and local circumstances. We have also examined how UN peacekeeping is organizing its work on the local level and working together with local authorities, other UN agencies and development actors. Within this overall project, fieldwork has been conducted in Haiti (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti – MINUSTAH), Liberia (United Nations Mission in Liberia – UNMIL) and South Sudan – (United Nations Mission in South Sudan – UNMISS). While the present report focuses on the role of civil affairs, it will frame these within the broader UN engagement in local-level peacebuilding in Liberia. It will, however, not be able to map every single actor involved in local-level peacebuilding, nor will it delve into precisely which entity is contributing to which outcome. It aims to offer an aggregated account of local-level peacebuilding with a focus on UNMIL and its

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for dealing with local conflict, and consequently fails to build peace in the country. However, despite her lengthy fieldwork, she makes no mention of any of the UN components present at the sub-national level and heavily engaged with local actors.

<sup>15</sup> Paris (2010: 338). ‘Saving liberal peacebuilding’, *Review of International Studies* 36, no.2 (2010): 337–65.

Reno, William. *Warlord Politics*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> See for instance, Schia, Historical overview of the UN Civil Affairs, forthcoming NUPI-report.

interaction with the local population, government and society; but the authors are very much aware that many other national and international actors are involved.

### 3. Structure of the report and guiding questions

We begin with a brief overview of Liberia and the challenges to local-level peacebuilding, before proceeding to sketch the involvement of UN and CA. The following questions form the core of the research:

- What kinds of mechanisms have been used to feed the voices of local state and non-state actors at the sub-national level into political processes?
- Are local state and non-state actors at the sub-national level able to influence national decision-making processes, and if so, how?
- How are the needs for service provision and political participation dealt with at the sub-national level, and how do these needs feed into decision-making processes?
- Do CA officers promote ownership and effective participation of all stakeholders in national and especially sub-national decision-making processes, and if so, how?
- How can CA officers contribute to strengthen the confidence of the local population in local authorities, and in the support given by the UN and other international actors?
- How does the cross-mission representation role of Civil Affairs facilitate implementation and/or transition?

The overall objective is see how the activities of these actors are contextualized to local circumstances. There is increasing recognition that the peacekeeping/peacebuilding nexus is an artificial divide, and that, in reality, civilian peacekeepers can be considered early peacebuilders.<sup>18</sup> The question then is how/if they can perform a catalytic and enabling role to facilitate the developmental activities of other actors, UN and others, so as to create peace dividends from their presence.

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<sup>18</sup> The *Accord* issue 3/2011 was dedicated exclusively to the peacebuilding-peacekeeping nexus Accord, 'Conflict Trends 3/2011: Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding Nexus,' (Accord, 2011).

## 4. Methodology

Our research in Liberia builds on four weeks of fieldwork in September 2011. Approximately 80 extended qualitative and 20 short interviews were conducted in four counties. The research team was composed of Hannah Neumann, Niels Nagelhus Schia, Felesu Swaray and Saah N'Tow.

The first week was spent in Monrovia interviewing UNHQ senior staff, Liberian intellectuals and academic staff from the University of Liberia. Two one-week visits were made to the counties of Lofa and Sinoe. Interviews were limited to the county capitals, Voinjama and Greenville. A further short visit to Tubmanbourg (Bomi County) and the field office of Montserrado County (located in Monrovia) complemented these intensive case studies (see figure 1). The last few days were spent in Monrovia where the team met with UN stakeholders and arranged focus groups with Liberian non-state actors to discuss the preliminary findings.

The methods and tools used throughout the research were anthropology-based and qualitative. In addition to participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the research team held several informal discussions with UN CA officers, other substantive sections within the mission, UNDP staff, state-level government, and civil society organizations. Five focus-group discussions (FDGs) were carried out in local markets, on university campus and among rural villagers.

**Table 1: Interview partners<sup>19</sup> on county and national level, by organizational background**

	CA staff	Other UN staff	Government authorities	INGO, NGO and CSO staff	Local citizens
National level	15	8	4	10	0 <sup>20</sup>
County level	10	15	13	11	24 (in FGD) / 20 (individual)

<sup>19</sup> This table shows only those interviews formally conducted as interviews. It does not include our many background talks and informative exchanges with people from all organizational backgrounds. These serve to inform the following text as much as the formal interviews, and should be seen as part of the participatory observation and fieldwork process.

<sup>20</sup> We have interviewed average citizens and local leaders, such as town chiefs, in various field locations, as well as in Monrovia. But those are not actors at the national level. Thus we all aggregated them on county level, seeing those interviewed in Monrovia as citizens of Montserrado or their respective home counties.

Discussions were aimed at outlining key experiences and challenges in UN local-level peacebuilding, including strategies for contextualizing the mandate. Interviews with non-CA participants were intended to develop alternate perspectives on the work of CA, to better understand cross-mission coordination and cooperation, as well as cooperation with non-UN actors, including local stakeholders. Discussions with the wide array of local actors also sought to assess expectations and understandings of UNMIL in general, and CA in particular. Additionally, individual case studies were explored to unpack the processes and approaches of CA and other international actors at the sub-national level.

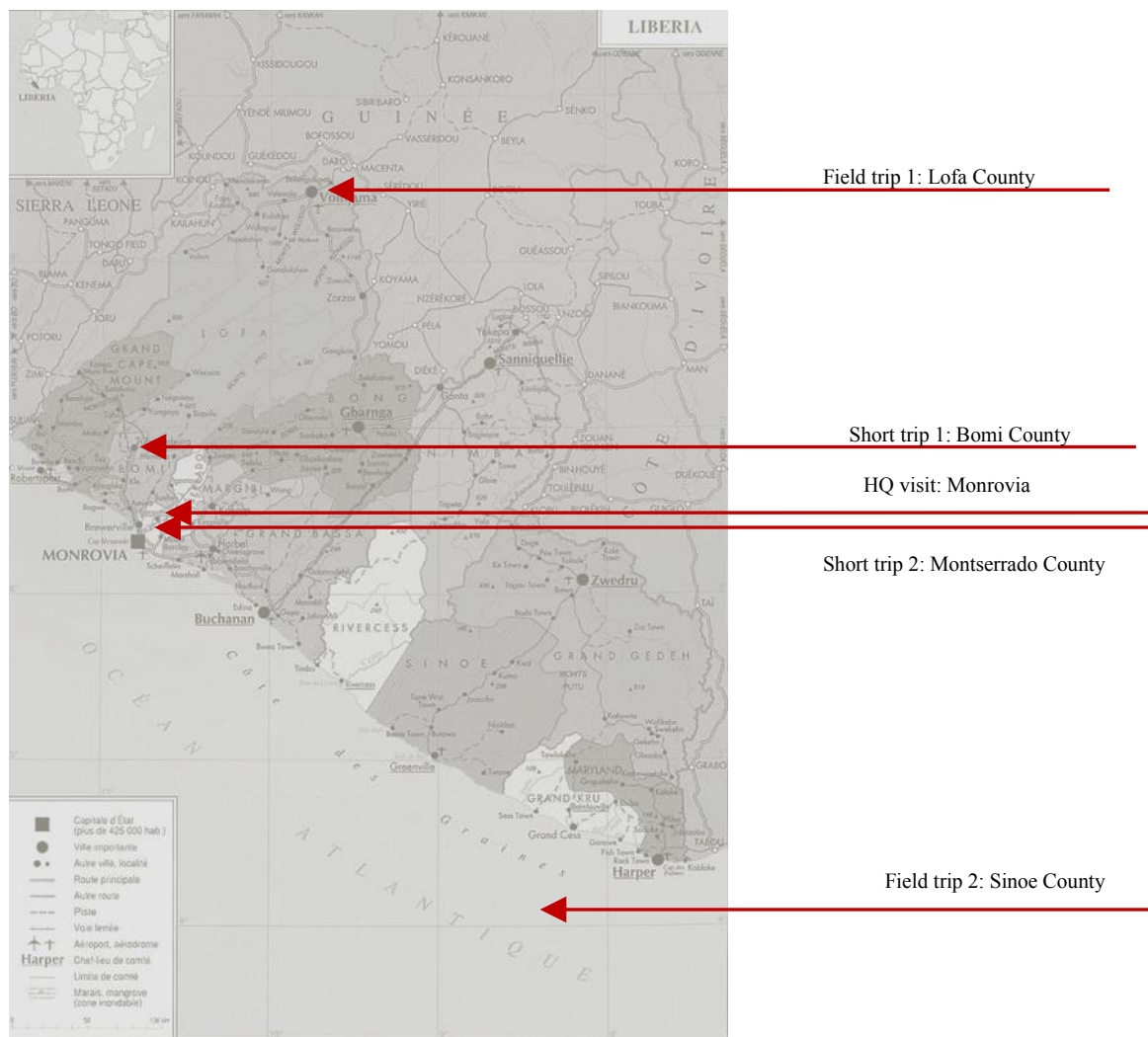


Figure 1: field sites



### **Challenges in methodology**

The study offers some useful insights and reflections on the UN's local-level peacebuilding work in Liberia, from the perspective of CA officers as well as from local actors. However, this is not intended to be a comprehensive account of UN efforts in local-level peacebuilding, nor of CA work in Liberia, particularly given the highly localized nature of local conflict dynamics and responses. More time would have been needed for a more comprehensive and deeper analysis.

While we enjoyed the excellent support and hospitality of CA in Liberia, we also made deliberate accounts to include Liberian voices in our research. In each of the field visits, we took a dual approach. The international researcher interviewed local state authorities and key partners of CA among the civil society. The national researcher travelled independently in the county and spoke with local religious leaders, elders and representatives from local civil society groups. It was not possible to find many women in relevant local government positions and there is an overwhelmingly male voice throughout the research. Whenever possible, the team made efforts to seek out women, so that female voices could be included.

## 5. Country context

Liberia was established in 1822 by the American Colonization Society as a colony for freed American slaves. It was founded as a country in 1847. The freed American slaves, later called the Americo-Liberians, acted as the ruling class for more than a century.<sup>21</sup> This created a divisive society of ‘civilized’ rulers and ‘native’ dependants,<sup>22</sup> consisting of 16 tribal/ethnic groups. In 1980 Samuel Doe overthrew the Tolbert government and became Liberia’s first native (i.e. non-Americo-Liberian) president. However, Doe’s regime proved no less repressive and exploitative than those of his predecessors.<sup>23</sup> Tensions erupted when Charles Taylor’s party National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) challenged Doe’s regime. Doe was overthrown and killed in 1990, and by 1993 Taylor had taken control over most of the country. A first UN Observer Mission to Liberia (UNOMIL) coupled with military personnel from ECOWAS (ECOMOG) secured a 1993 peace agreement. The subsequent democratic elections in 1997 were won by Charles Taylor. A United Nations Peace-building Support Office (UNOL) tasked with assisting the government in consolidating peace superseded UNOMIL.

Today, Liberia is still struggling with the material and social devastation after two civil wars with 14 years of conflict and instability in Liberia between 1989 and 2003.<sup>24</sup> When the peace agreement was settled, 270 000 people had been killed, one third of the population had been displaced and the country’s institutions, infrastructure and economy were in ruins.

The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), currently in a draw-down phase, was deployed in 2003 as a multidimensional peacekeeping mission with 15,000 peacekeepers and civilian personnel.<sup>25</sup> Today, nine years after the peace settlement, political authority has largely

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<sup>21</sup> One-party rule continued from 1870 to 1980. ‘Natives’ (see footnote below) were not allowed to vote until 1964.

<sup>22</sup> The terms ‘civilized’ and ‘native’ were introduced by the Americo-Liberians to differentiate between settler and indigenous population. They still occur in government documents of today, such as the Rules and Regulations of the Hinterland.

<sup>23</sup> Boas 2009, Outram 1999.

<sup>24</sup> This period began with the revolt against the government and the execution of Samuel Doe in 1989 and ended with the peace accord and subsequent deployment of UNMIL in 2003. The Liberian parties signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Accra requesting the UN to deploy a force to support the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) and assist in the implementation of the Agreement. With the subsequent deployment of the ECOWAS Mission (ECONMIL), the security situation improved. UNMIL took over peacekeeping duties from ECONMIL and 3,500 West African troops were provisionally ‘re-hatted’ as UN peacekeepers.

<sup>25</sup> UNMIL’s mandate was based on Security Council Resolution 1509 of September 2003.

been restored at the local level, a minimum amount of basic services has been established and people have returned to their communities and started to re-organize their lives. Furthermore, two peaceful elections in 2005 and 2011, a police and military reform, as well as a generally calm situation, appear to have reduced the necessity for a peacekeeping mission. Liberia was placed on the Peacebuilding Commission agenda in 2010 and a *Statement of Mutual Commitments* was issued on October 29 of the same year.<sup>26</sup> Initial funding of US\$ 20 million was granted to the Liberian Peacebuilding Fund and projects were implemented throughout 2011. The focus of the Peacebuilding Commission in Liberia is to ensure a smooth transition for UNMIL.<sup>27</sup> Projects have been implemented in three core areas: strengthening rule of law, supporting security sector reform and promoting national reconciliation.<sup>28</sup> In early 2012, a Technical Assessment Mission was evaluating the current role of UNMIL which will probably lead to a final plan for withdrawal. Despite this progress, the country still continues to face several serious challenges, such as:

**Political centralization:** The government is overly centralized on the national level and in Monrovia.<sup>29</sup> Central county-level positions are appointed by the president.<sup>30</sup> The county authorities have very limited funds.<sup>31</sup> Poor infrastructure impedes communications between the capital and the outlying counties.

**Popular mistrust towards government authority:** National administration in Liberia has a long history of corruption, exclusion, abuse and violence.<sup>32</sup> The government has been ‘more extractive in nature than catalytic’.<sup>33</sup> Local and national authorities continue to be perceived as unpleasant, untrustworthy and corrupt by many people in the rural regions.<sup>34</sup> Local resources have often been exploited without proper accounting, circumventing the local communities concerned.<sup>35</sup> The recent account is ambivalent, but turnout for the October 2011 was 71.8%, which indicates a belief in the political process despite negative perceptions of the authorities.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations, ‘Statement of mutual commitments on peacebuilding in Liberia: Peacebuilding Commission, Forth Session, Liberia Configuration,’ (General Assembly; Security Council, 2010); PBC/4/LBR/2.

<sup>27</sup> United Nations, ‘Draft of the Peacebuilding Commission on its fifth session: Peacebuilding Commission, Fifth Session, Organization Committee,’ (General Assembly; Security Council, 2011); PBC/5/OC/L.1.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations, ‘Statement of mutual commitments on peacebuilding in Liberia’.

<sup>29</sup> International Crisis Group, ‘Rebuilding Liberia: Prospects and Perils,’ (2004); *ICG Africa Report No. 75*.

<sup>30</sup> 1986 Constitution of Liberia; Art 56 Sec. A.

<sup>31</sup> Ibrahim Nyei, ‘Liberia Decentralization Policy: a roadmap to participatory governance and development in Liberia’.

<sup>32</sup> Philippa Atkinson and Edward Mulbah 2000, J. G. Liebenow, 1987., Mary H. Moran 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Sawyer 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Richards et al., 2005: 32.

<sup>35</sup> Reno 1999..

**Tribalism and ethnic conflict:** Ethnic, religious and tribal tensions were strongly mobilized during the civil wars.<sup>36</sup> They have continued to influence interaction between various groups on the local level and influence voting behaviour in the counties.<sup>37</sup> Ethnically-based marginalization and exclusion still take place.<sup>38</sup>

**Lack of justice and sense of impunity:** Like many other African countries, Liberia has a dual justice system.<sup>39</sup> While the international community firmly supports the formal system, it remained largely ignorant of the customary system of justice, through which some 90% of all cases are dealt.<sup>40</sup> Although the customary system lacks the formal authority to enforce verdicts, the statutory system is widely mistrusted and ineffective in the counties.<sup>41</sup> This has led to a general crisis of confidence in the Liberian justice system.<sup>42</sup>

**Lack of basic infrastructure:** Rural infrastructure has always been poor in Liberia. Despite manifold investments, basic infrastructure is still largely lacking.<sup>43</sup> The Poverty Reduction Strategy seeks to deal with this situation, but implementation remains slow.<sup>44</sup>

The above-mentioned problems are not equally pronounced in all the counties of Liberia. Nevertheless, they provide a broader description of the general challenges and serve as background information for the following analysis.

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<sup>36</sup> Boas 2005, Ellis, 2007, D. E. Dunn, 1999.

<sup>37</sup> Sawyer, 2008, Neumann, 'Taking a Micro-social Perspective of Impact of Peacebuilding Interventions on Rural Citizens'.

<sup>38</sup> Civil Affairs Section UNMIL, 'Dealing with conflict creatively: Consultative Fora on Reconciliation, Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution', (2009); Richards et al., 2008.

<sup>39</sup> A formal statutory system largely reflecting the US legal system is complemented by a state-authorized customary system. The statutory system is prevalent in urban areas and has final oversight on the customary system, which is regulated through the Rules and Regulations of the Hinterland.

<sup>40</sup> Patrick Vinck, Phuong Pham and Tino Kreutzer, 'Talking Peace: A population based survey on attitudes about security, dispute resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in Liberia'.

<sup>41</sup> See: Schia and de Carvalho 2009, Deborah H. Isser, Stephen C. Lubkemann and Saah N'Tow, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Felicia Coleman 2008, Schia and de Carvalho 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Vinck, Pham and Kreutzer, 'Talking Peace'.

<sup>44</sup> For the current PRS see: <http://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/Final%20PRS.pdf> (last accessed 22 December 2011).

## 6. Contextualizing peacebuilding activities to local circumstances – findings from Liberia

There are several components, programs and actors focusing on local-level peacebuilding in Liberia. CA places a key role, as the only civilian component continuously present in all counties since the early phase of the mission.

### 6.1 Brief introduction to Civil Affairs in Liberia

Civil Affairs is the component most consistently present in UN peacekeeping. With around 800 staff members deployed globally to facilitate the implementation of peacekeeping mandates at the sub-national level, it is one of the largest civilian components in UN peacekeeping.<sup>45</sup> CA officers act as intermediaries between the local population and local government and the mission itself, frequently acting as space-makers enabling other actors to fulfil their roles, including peacebuilding activities.<sup>46</sup> The *Policy Directive on Civil Affairs* outlines three main roles for CA in the field, depending on the mandate and the stage of mandate implementation:<sup>47</sup>

- cross-mission representation, monitoring and facilitation at the local level
- confidence-building, conflict management and support to reconciliation
- support to the restoration and extension of state authority.

The focus of the CA section in Liberia has evolved with the development of the mission and can be divided into the following three phases:

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<sup>45</sup> Including professional national and international officers and UN Volunteers. Information as of January 2010. Interview with UN DPKO Best Practices Officer, New York, July 2010.

<sup>46</sup> For policy documents on the role of UN DPKO on the local level, see e.g. United Nations DPKO, 'Policy Directive on Civil Affairs,' (2008), <http://www.undg.org/docs/8915/Civil-Affairs-Policy.pdf>. and United Nations, 'United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: 'The Capstone Doctrine', (UNDPI, 2008), [http://www.peacekeepingbestpractices.unlb.org/Pbps/Library/Capstone\\_Doctrine\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.peacekeepingbestpractices.unlb.org/Pbps/Library/Capstone_Doctrine_ENG.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> United Nations DPKO, 'Policy Directive on Civil Affairs'.

**Phase 1:**

Initially, the focus of CA work was on the restoration of state authority, prior to the 2005 elections. Until 2005, CA officers were often the only permanent staff assigned to the counties. In addition to their primary roles as CA officers, they represented other UNMIL sections and UN agencies in the counties.

**Phase 2:**

After the election and the inauguration of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2006, the CA focus shifted capacity building and logistical support to newly elected officials. CA served as a central source of information to other UN agencies and INGOs that started to develop projects in the counties. The increasing number of actors necessitated greater coordination. County Support Teams (CST) were set up in 2006, and in late 2008, the position of Head of Field Office (HoFO) was created in each county.<sup>48</sup> These positions were generally filled by a senior CA officer with experience in the county in question. Both these organizational innovations equipped the UN with formalized representatives and coordination in each county, and the HoFO positions strengthened the decentralization of the mission.

**Phase 3:**

The mission started its drawdown phase in 2010, increasing its efforts after the successful elections of November 2011. During our fieldwork in 2011, much of the mission's attention, including CA, was on transition and the withdrawal plan. A main CA priority in this phase was to ensure that local governments and non-state actors could continue to function without the support of UNMIL.

Throughout these three phases, CA has had a strong presence and continuity at the sub-national level. Its personnel are often present for several years and have established stable relationships with county authorities in the administrative and civilian sectors. Their focus is on *the county*, on the local circumstances, rather than on specific projects and issues.

## **6.2 Feeding local voices into the process: working with state and non-state actors**

UNMIL was mandated as a peacekeeping mission to assist the government of Liberia.<sup>49</sup> By its very nature, it is expected to operate side by side with and in support of the national and local governments.

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<sup>48</sup> See also footnote 1 above.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. the report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on Liberia in 2003, which served as foundation for the Mandate 1509 and the subsequent establishment of UNMIL: [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2003/875](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2003/875) (last accessed 20 January 2012).

This strong focus on government support has proven difficult: ‘If government doesn’t work, there is nothing we can do.’<sup>50</sup> Civil society and other non-state actors played an important role in the initial years of the mission when state representatives were not yet present in the counties. It was not until after the 2005 elections that the local representatives of the national government grew stronger and became involved as actors. UNMIL continued to work with civil society actors, but not as extensively as before. CA officers have often facilitated and supported key tasks of civil society organizations, such as mediating in conflict, monitoring project implementation and holding local government accountable. Furthermore, CA has provided logistical support to government and civil society, as well as organizing local consultations which have served as a basis for later county assessments and development programmes. Through these efforts, UNMIL has been able to get very close to local events and discussions, on which they report regularly through CA and the HoFo. Within UNMIL, CA serve as ‘the eyes and ears of the mission’<sup>51</sup> at the sub-national level. Much of their work focuses building and maintaining relationships, acquiring and distributing information and providing space for the local population to articulate and exchange their ideas and concerns amongst themselves.

### 6.2.1 Civil Affairs and County State Authorities

CA support to the county authorities in Liberia has been extensive. They have helped facilitate local meeting and reporting structures, trained local personnel and provided logistic support – from printing minutes, to helicopter transport of staff. ‘They have given us an idea of how to run a government’, we were told.<sup>52</sup> During our fieldwork in 2011 we learned that many county ministries still lacked basic office resources. These offices often continue to rely on CA to forward information to and from their national counterparts, or for travel to more remote parts of the county.<sup>53</sup> Despite the general drawdown of the mission, CA remains central in ensuring the functioning of local government authorities, especially in the remote counties.

We still have to do many things that the government should be doing. And if we leave today, nobody would do it. So we are trying to make sure the government will do it.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> HoFO, Greenville.

<sup>51</sup> This expression was repeated used by CA officer in Monrovia and the counties in referring to their role within the mission.

<sup>52</sup> County Inspector, Greenville.

<sup>53</sup> In the counties, we often saw county representatives of the ministries printing minutes in the CA office or using UN computer facilities to write and receive emails from Monrovia.

<sup>54</sup> National CA officer, Voinjama.

These activities also provide a vehicle for informal exchange of information and advisory functions.

Often the whole thing is like gambling. You put money on the table and get people to do things. Civil Affairs doesn't have money. Civil Affairs has knowledge. Civil Affairs has contact and it is present. That's what we are offering to the authorities and to other UN partners.<sup>55</sup>

The withdrawal of CA from remote counties, such as Lofa and Sinoe, would be a challenge to local government authority if it were to happen today. True, the performance of local governments has improved since 2005, attendance rates have reportedly improved and reporting structures have been established. But despite all the work done to build up capacity, including hardware (buildings, vehicles, computers, printers, internet etc.) the drawdown of UNMIL and the CA will inevitably mean a massive lack of equipment in the counties. This might paralyse local state apparatuses and their involvement with the region and with the national level.<sup>56</sup>

### 6.2.2 Support to national non-state actors

CA's support to non-state actors, such as civil society organizations (CSOs), traditional authorities and national NGOs, was and still is central to their role at the sub-national level. For CA, this supportive function provides avenues of exchange with non-state actors. However, while CA has a pro-active approach towards the government, many interviewees stated that CA supports only those non-state actors that actively seek their advice and services. Several interviewees with experience with CA expressed appreciation, but also dependency on CA support: 'they even went to the bank with us because we had no account'.<sup>57</sup> Communication infrastructure beyond cell phones is non-existent in many county capitals, so the only access to internet and computer infrastructure is at the CA office. Further, CA staff are often asked by local CSO groups to provide or coordinate transport to remote areas to conduct investigations in cases of human rights abuses and gender-based violence or to facilitate workshops.

Sometimes it comes up in meetings. They need support. The whole town uses our facilities. This will be a big challenge if the mission closes. Most don't have resources because they are locally based. Sometimes they have small UNDP funding, but rarely. They catch us in town and ride with us to the office. And then they ask for using PC or doing small printing.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> International CA officer, Monrovia.

<sup>56</sup> Member of local government, Greenville; UNMIL and other agencies have invested huge efforts in rebuilding infrastructure, building capacity and equipping offices. As of 2011, however, many entities of the local administration were still dependent on UNMIL.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with a local NGO focusing on youth empowerment, Voinjama.

<sup>58</sup> HoFO, Greenville.



Representatives from umbrella organizations for CSOs increasingly voice their concern as regards the transition of UNMIL. They fear that only CSOs with continuous international support will be able to survive without CA support. This would drastically decrease the plurality of CSOs and make it nearly impossible to establish new organizations.<sup>59</sup>

### **6.2.3 Creating space and linking state and non-state actors**

CA continues to be an important space-maker between the local population, non-state actors and government authority on the sub-national level. This role emerged due to the continued presence of CA officers in the rural areas and their support to the restoration of state authority in the immediate post-war period. But it is also linked with the work they did for the county consultations of the County Development Agendas (CDAs) through the CST, which was the first time that Liberians were consulted across the country in preparing development planning.

Furthermore, through their role as facilitators, CA officers have helped organize local meetings and brought together people who had previously refused to talk to one another.<sup>60</sup> These meetings have been complemented by national monthly County Coordination/County Development Steering Committee Meetings (CDSC) and pillar meetings<sup>61</sup> and are a key component of the national development plan and its county-level extensions. They serve as a venue for state and non-state actors as well as representatives of the various donors to share information on developments and projects in the various counties and coordinate their efforts.

Some NGOs paid for their arrogance when they were circumventing the County institutions. Many projects are abandoned today.<sup>62</sup>

Initially, CA scheduled, chaired and documented these meetings. At the time of our fieldwork they were working to lessen their impact, but kept reminding officials about the importance of such events, and helped ensure that they were held regularly.

With their strong presence and achieved credibility on the county level, CA officers have become key facilitators in conflict mediation.

<sup>59</sup> This conclusion has been the result of our own research and was strongly confirmed in Focus Group Discussions held with CS umbrella organizations at national level.

<sup>60</sup> For these people CA also served as the gateway to the UN systems and INGOs. Thus local actors were interested in cooperation with CA and attended at the meetings.

<sup>61</sup> The names of this meeting change from county to county, but they follow the same mode and structure. While the County Coordination Meetings provide a general overview, the pillar meetings deal with specific areas, such as rule of law, gender or economic revitalization, and vary from county to county.

<sup>62</sup> National CA officer, Monrovia.

They are credited for ‘providing space of exchange’ between the various competing local actors, civil society organizations and the government, without influencing the outcome of such processes:

Some time ago, there was some misunderstanding between us here (...). We saw them [CA] and received them and they played a major role in solving that problem. The major role they played was that they found out what brought that argument and they helped to solve that problem. They did it by how we settle things here. They said the way things are being done here, is how we will do it. Like the way you would solve the problem is how we will solve it too.<sup>63</sup>

The main conflict mediation asset inherent in CA is the capability to generate a space for communication and mediation, where local actors can deliberate on local solutions to their problems and conflicts.

#### **6.2.4 The challenge of including non-institutionalized actors**

As the preceding accounts have shown, CA is a key section at the interface between UNMIL and the Liberian people. Among many of our informants, CA was broadly perceived as being approachable and an accommodating component of the UN: ‘they are more like Liberians. They open up and associate with people.’<sup>64</sup> Many people still perceive the UN, including the CA offices and meetings, as quite inaccessible.<sup>65</sup> Massive fences, strict security checks and offices often located outside the town and on the premises of a military camp<sup>66</sup> serve to discourage many from contacting CA. Security regulations and limited availability of vehicles also keep CA from travelling to the more remote and inaccessible parts of the country.

Where CA interacts with the population, the support of its national staff is central in contextualizing international approaches. National CA officers serve as a ‘sourcebook’<sup>67</sup> of local cultural and political knowledge, lowering the approachability threshold for local people, who often contact CA through its national staff as ‘the bridge to UN’<sup>68</sup>.

We complement each other. Some things in Liberia are quite different and it just doesn’t work based on international best practices. That’s where we assist our international partners with providing context. Like when we negotiate concession benefits with the communities.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Interview with a local town chief in Lofa county.

<sup>64</sup> Youth Representative, Voinjama.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with a scratch-card seller opposite the HQ in Monrovia.

<sup>66</sup> UNMIL tried to locate their civilian offices close to town and re-locate them from military camps to predominantly civilian offices. This was not possible in all counties. Further, the CA office of Montserrado had reportedly fewer civilian visitors since it moved to HQ premises and the security checks were stepped up.

<sup>67</sup> This specific term was used by an international CA officer in Greenville; similar observations were mentioned by CA officers in all field offices.

<sup>68</sup> Student at University of Liberia, Monrovia.

<sup>69</sup> National CA officer, Monrovia.

Still, CA has experienced challenges on the local level with the many Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) in Liberia. Because these organizations often lack formal structure, it is almost impossible for them to apply for funds or receive other means of support. ‘We have no petty cash to give to them’, a CA officer explained to us.<sup>70</sup> In consequence, CA has started to encourage and support these CBOs to organize themselves in larger umbrella organizations, making them more attractive to donors and strengthening their voice in county meetings.

CA helps us with how to promote ourselves. How to tell other organizations and donors about our network and what our positions are. In this way we hope to be able to increase our funding.<sup>71</sup>

Another challenge comes from the traditional structures and secret societies, especially in northwest Liberia. These are widely perceived as religious organizations, but historical and ethnographic studies clearly show that they had, and still have, considerable political and economic influence in Liberia.<sup>72</sup> The aspects of secrecy enshrined in their traditions, in addition to documented reports of human rights abuses,<sup>73</sup> put CA and other UN agencies in a difficult situation. According to their mandate, CA is to respect local cultures, while at the same time advocating human rights and transparency. CA is sensitive to this issue through its presence in the counties and its national staff members. Nevertheless, many interviews with the local population showed that interventions are perceived as interfering in their cultural practices:

Sometime they are hurt. Traditional is how they used to handle things. Sometime civil affairs under UNMIL they want to change it in their own way that is Western Culture. It does not correspond with our own culture sometime. Really, the aborigines of this land had their own cultures and tradition. Even some areas, if you look at some of the cultures it can be changed but there are some that cannot be changed. If you try to change certain cultures it hurts the local people.<sup>74</sup>

UNMIL work to support formal education, formal courts etc. but would never support secret society schools such as the Sande or Poro schools. Furthermore, UNMIL works with NGOs, government, churches etc. but not with Zoes (leaders of African traditional religion). This is an aspect of ‘local voices’ that has been widely ignored or used only sporadically when needed for traditional reconciliation.

<sup>70</sup> Local CA officer in Voinjama.

<sup>71</sup> Head of a local CBO umbrella organization, Voinjama.

<sup>72</sup> Little 1966, Bellman 1984, Richards et al., *Community Cohesion in Liberia: A Post-War Rapid Social Assessment*; Atkinson and Mulbah, ‘Peacebuilding and Complex Political Emergencies’.

<sup>73</sup> Since the end of the war, there have been documented cases of ritual killing and trial by ordeal. However, investigation has proven nearly impossible, as secrecy is upheld by most local communities.

<sup>74</sup> Member of a council of elders, Voinjama.

In general, the Liberian population sees CA as being much closer to the state actors than to the non-state actors.

Often state authority and societal perceptions of what is right and what is wrong are in conflict. The role of local societies varies considerably from county to county.<sup>75</sup> Many local CA officers and other UN staff expressed the need for more training on how to tackle such cases.

**Recommendations:**

*General recommendation on the implementation of the mandate:*

- Local and traditional structures should be mapped and better understood. Based on such a mapping, regular feedback on how to interact in situations of norm conflict could be provided. The results of such a mapping should impact on UNMIL's and CA's cooperation with sub-national state authorities
- The learning process on how to deal with local processes and institutions should be enhanced within the different international institutions to ensure that knowledge is shared between regions and handed over in the case of staff turnover.
- CSOs should be engaged pro-actively by UNMIL and state authorities as partners in peacebuilding. The role of CSOs in County Steering Committees should be strengthened.

*Specific recommendations for CA work and the transition period:*

- The continuity of CA work is a major asset. Staff turnover should be minimized in the counties.
- Field offices should be situated so as to enable easy access by the local population.
- Preparation for field officers should include a thorough introduction to the historical and cultural specificities of the location.
- The access of local CBOs to computer and Internet facilities should be ensured after the field offices have closed.

UNMIL and the UN agencies should work with the government of Liberia to develop mechanisms that will ensure the continuity of CDSC meetings after withdrawal. For instance, CSOs could take the lead, with UNDP playing a supportive role (capacity-building and logistical support). All actors should support the government of Liberia to establish a control mechanism to ensure continued participation and accountability of local authorities after the transition.

<sup>75</sup> Isser, Lubkemann and N'Tow, 'Looking for Justice'.

### 6.3 Role of local actors at the sub-national level

Liberia has always been a heavily centralized state. Poor infrastructure has contributed to this problem, and communication links between the capital and the more remote counties are still weak. County development is decided upon in Monrovia. Services like the issuance of drivers' licenses and birth certificates are available only in the capital, and local revenues are administered on the national level.<sup>76</sup> Some county capitals are physically disconnected from Monrovia during rainy season and can be reached only by helicopter. Communication between the national government and local county authorities is limited. Many of the county representatives we interviewed in September had still not received the Work Plan for that year. To the extent that they were aware of new policies regarding their duties, they had often received this information through CA.

CA is a tremendous assistance. We receive information that come from head office in Monrovia, from the Ministry office. And they help us collect information and send to Monrovia.<sup>77</sup>

The downwards sharing of information in the Liberian state apparatus is weak, and upward sharing is even weaker. The national government often approaches CA for information on the counties or even asks them to monitor the implementation of certain projects. One CA officer explained to us how this happens in the case of the county school boards:

After the policy had been signed and the county schools boards had been established. We [CA] sent out a query to the counties with questions like 'Can you please tell us what works or what the problems with the county school boards are?' So we could go and tell the minister what we can do about it. The same happens within the UN. At the One UN meetings we can share this information, and then the agencies can step in with funds. These boards will have to resume responsibility when we draw out.<sup>78</sup>

In many cases CA is the only link of correspondence between the local and the national levels. CA staff attend meetings to ensure the participation of local authorities. They provide information from the national level to local authorities and to the national authorities regarding the situation in the counties. The UN County Teams (UNCT) made efforts in 2011 to facilitate lines of communication between the local and national government as part of the decentralization process. However, according to UNMIL HQ staff and CA staff in the counties, the impact of regional information on the national level has remained

<sup>76</sup> These problems are taken up in the current decentralization strategy, but ratification of this strategy has proven difficult. See Ibrahim Nyei, 'Liberia Decentralization Policy: a roadmap to participatory governance and development in Liberia'.

<sup>77</sup> Minister of Education, Greenville.

<sup>78</sup> CA Officer, Monrovia.

limited. UNMIL has a supporting and partnering role in Liberia. The mission and the SRSG have no direct influence on the government. We were told that reports rarely impact on processes at the central level on the Liberian side or even within the UN. Both administrations seem to be overly bureaucratic and slow on this matter. Information and reports from the ground are not properly heeded, a CA officer told us. This officer further pointed out:

Information often gets lost with the many steps it has to pass to the head. There are just too many reports. If they are shared widely, they don't have any sensitive information. If they have sensitive information, no one gets to see them. Except maybe the really high-ups.<sup>79</sup>

It can take years of continuous insistence by CA officers until a case or complaint reaches the higher levels before it can be solved on the ground.<sup>80</sup>

The international community in general, and UNMIL in particular, are equally centralized. This reflects the increasing urbanization of Liberia, but ignores the historical legacy of a state in which centralization of political power in the capital has led to numerous conflicts. The main focus of the international community has been on Monrovia and the national government. After 2006, however, this picture became somewhat more nuanced with the implementation of the CSTs and deployment of county-based staff from Political Affairs, Human Rights section and some agencies. Projects were extended to the counties. Still, CA is the only civilian component present in all counties.<sup>81</sup> Many officers we spoke with complained about the scant contact they had with the national level: 'I send report after report, and receive no feedback.'<sup>82</sup>

Due to the character of the CA officers' role in the field, they work very independently. In general, they draft their own work plans, based on the county's priorities, and they translate the rather broad mandate into daily realities.<sup>83</sup> This allows for a substantial amount of contextu-

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<sup>79</sup> International CA officer, Monrovia.

<sup>80</sup> One such case which we came across in our fieldwork involved the sentencing of four people for witchcraft in Grand Geddeh; they were released only two years later. Secondly, there the case of a regulation to be approved by the president to monitor exploitation rights for natural resources: it kept disappearing on the way to the president's office.

<sup>81</sup> UNPol and the MilObs are present in the field offices, but they have a high staff turn-over and have very little continuous contact with local actors. Other sections, such as Political Affairs, Human Rights or Rule of Law have representatives in several counties (though not all), but they are very specialized in their responsibilities. CA, with the HoFO, is the only component that is present in all counties and has a generally holistic focus on county developments.

<sup>82</sup> CA officer, field office.

<sup>83</sup> The national Work Plan of CA prior to its review in 2010 was structured into five pillars: (1) Governance and Local Administration, (2) Natural Resource Management, (3) Infrastructure and Basic Services, (4) Economic Revitalization and (5) Civil Society Organizations, Youth and Peacebuilding).

alization. CA officers with several years of experience in the counties have made deliberate use of this possibility.

We have the five pillars: Security, Economy, Governance, Basic Services and Peacebuilding. That's the base of the Work Plan. Within that framework we do our work. Whenever there is tricky situation, we consult the national focal points. (...) We have free space, much free space. If I say there is a need for this or that, I can do it. There is no micro-managing.<sup>84</sup>

CA serves as a resource for county-specific knowledge also on the national level, but the upward influence of CA from the counties remains weak. Whenever mention was made of a strong role of the local authorities, this was in relation to the implementation of projects coming from the national level. The case of the Sinoe Rubber Plantation can illustrate the roles of different national and local actors and the coordination role often taken by CA.

#### **Case Study 1: Sinoe Rubber Plantation**

The Sinoe Rubber Plantation has not been under the control of the Liberian government for years. Former combatants of the MODEL faction<sup>85</sup> controlled large parts of it and illegally exploited rubber. Negotiations in 2005 brought no change to this situation. Ownership of the plantation remained unclear and local government authorities were profiting from illegal rubber exploitation. Local communities often sided with the ex-combatants because they mistrusted any government efforts.

The local CA officer repeatedly raised this issue in reports and personal communications with CA HQ who forwarded the issue to the joint UN – GoL Rubber Plantation Task Force. This task force was established in 2006 by the SRSG and the Liberian President, and was mandated to re-establish state control over Liberia's rubber plantations. It comprised a cross-section of ministries as well as key UNMIL sections and UN agencies.

When rubber prices dropped in late 2009, illegal exploitation became less lucrative and the local government, under pressure from the Task Force, made an attempt to take control of the plantation. The local CA field office was heavily engaged in this process and kept the Rubber Plantations Task Force informed. CA monitored the activities of the local actors, remained in constant contact and discussed possibilities to ensure their support. According to one member of the Task Force, they would call the HoFO in Greenville for advice and a general appraisal of the situation before taking any action.

CA played a crucial role as the link between the local level (getting information), the national level (pressuring for action) and potential donors (increasing the peace dividend).

<sup>84</sup> CA officer, Voinjama.

<sup>85</sup> During the Liberian civil war, the MODEL faction was a rebel group that launched attacks from Ivory Coast against Charles Taylor. Its leader, Thomas Nimely, later became Liberia's foreign minister in the Transitional Government.

When there are discussions between communities and companies or the government for concession benefits, CA facilitates such negotiations. Usually CA brings confidence and credibility to the process. Communities are very suspicious of the government. Judging from the time past, government often did not honour their commitments.<sup>86</sup>

The leaders of the ex-combatants were arrested. At the same time, the RRR unit in Monrovia initiated a road rehabilitation project in the county to absorb former illegal exploiters and provide legal income opportunities. Further, Quick-Impact Projects were used as a way of negotiating with local communities to support interim management of the plantation. The situation was still fragile at the time of our fieldwork, but the plantation was finally brought under government control – with the initiative coming from the national level, but with the support of the local level.

### **Recommendations:**

#### *General recommendations for UNMIL and the national government:*

- In order to help ensure a successful transition, UNMIL should continue to support the strengthening of communications infrastructure between the capital, the county and the district capitals. This would help to raise awareness among national-level actors as to local needs. Such efforts should build on and enhance the ongoing work of the CSTs. CA could encourage and support the set-up and continuity of these structures.

#### *Specific recommendations for CA work and the transition period:*

- The field offices should build a reliable ground-structure that ensures the continuity of the ongoing CSTs and the exchange of information between the national and county levels.
- CA should support and encourage national efforts towards political decentralization (such as the national decentralization strategy) while remaining sensitive to challenges such as ethnic marginalization.
- In order to help ensure a successful transition, the frequency of visits of CA focal points to the different villages in the counties should be increased. This would contribute to enhanced capacity of the respective local authorities in preparation for the exit. CA should play a supportive role in order to strengthen the decentralization process in the country. Focal issues could include natural resource management and the national reconciliation process. Strengthening the decentralization process should become a mandated task included in the work plans and performance assessment.

<sup>86</sup> Local NGO representative involved in the negotiations with the local communities, Greenville.



## 6.4 The UN and local-level peacebuilding in Liberia

The first programmes of UN agencies in Liberia (after the initial immediate humanitarian aid) were individual agency projects at large. This changed with the launch of the Liberian Poverty Reduction Strategy 1 (PRS1).<sup>87</sup> The agencies developed the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF, in accordance with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness) as a ‘joined-up’ UN response to national priorities.<sup>88</sup> This was reflected on the local level by the foundation of County Support Teams (CSTs) in 2006. Cooperation between UNMIL and the agencies further increased when the UN Security Council approved Liberia as a ‘Delivering as One self-starter country’ (DaO) in 2010. The implementation of DaO has resulted in closer cooperation between the UN agencies and UNMIL, especially in the area of technical collaboration.<sup>89</sup> DaO proved more successful in Liberia than in many other pilot countries. However, the DaO design has also triggered *turf wars* among the agencies. ‘Many just don’t get over this “this is my agency” thinking, and with Delivering as One they had to push it even stronger.’<sup>90</sup> As many of the agencies depend on donations, they need to promote their work vis-à-vis potential fundraisers; working under a one-UN umbrella sometimes leads to fear among the agencies that their market value is being compromised. Many of our interviewees emphasized that coordination was needed in order to improve the agency programmes. The continuing competition between the agencies and the absence of a strong national-level coordinating body often made such cooperation a tightrope walk.<sup>91</sup>

### 6.4.1 Cooperation and Coordination

Cooperation and coordination in the counties has been much closer from the beginning, mainly for pragmatic reasons. CA became the natural *hub* for information about the respective counties, due to their early deployment and long-time presence in the counties. They gained a role as central coordination body of UN activities at the sub-national level because they were able to provide local knowledge and monitoring capacities.

<sup>87</sup> The PRS1 is the main development strategy for Liberia. It has been developed with the World Bank and is the base for IMF support to Liberia. It is currently under revision. The document as well as further information can be found on the website of the Liberia Economic Forum: <https://sites.google.com/site/liberiaeconomicf/home> (last accessed 20 January 2012).

<sup>88</sup> This term was used by a member of the Residents Coordinator Office. The UNDAF document itself can be found at: [http://unliberia.org/doc/undaf\\_doc.pdf](http://unliberia.org/doc/undaf_doc.pdf) (last accessed 20 January 2012).

<sup>89</sup> The UN in Liberia now has one travel agency: it cooperates closer with regard to IT infrastructure and maintenance and for transportation needs inside the country.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with UN staff, Monrovia.

<sup>91</sup> The Resident’s Coordinator office at UNMIL had only three permanent international staff as of 2011. Staffing was not improved after Liberia became a DaO pilot country. Support from DPKO or external consultants was scant, as reported by the staff members.

When the agencies came, there was no one else but us in the counties and they needed UNMIL for transport and for protection of their offices. They needed CA to know whom to work with. Local authorities often had no offices, so we were the ones who helped finding them and inform them. And when they had gone, we followed up on the implementation.<sup>92</sup>

Despite such operational cooperation, information in the field offices tended to be sent upwards. Horizontal sharing across sections or between agencies needed to be improved. Staff in various agencies were working on similar issues, but under different chains of command.<sup>93</sup> This resulted in a ‘stove piping’ of efforts that slowed down decision-making processes within the organization and led to a continuous shifting of individual responsibilities and accountability.<sup>94</sup> At times, it could even represent a security threat.<sup>95</sup>

#### **6.4.2 A New UN Field Structure and County Support Teams**

A joint UN project ‘Strengthening Capacity of Local Administration’ (the CST project) was established in 2006 and led by a joint steering committee co-chaired by the UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General / Resident Coordinator (DSRSG/RC/HC) and the Minister of Internal Affairs (MIA). The project focused on three main areas: restoring the functionality of county administrative offices and transportation; developing capacity of county officials; and strengthening data and information management in the counties.<sup>96</sup> The CSTs worked through the local CA staff and later through the HoFO.<sup>97</sup> The SRSG Loj approved a new UN field structure 2008. Field offices were strengthened in each county and headed by Heads of field Offices that were direct representatives of the SRSG in the counties, in order to ensure a coherent and consolidated UN approach to the specific challenges of the counties, and to support the local government and the Superintendent’s office. These attempts were in line with the decentralization strategy of the Liberian government.

This project worked through the local CA staff, but management was with the UNDP. Humanitarian and Political Section also dedicated staff, in addition to the CA, to the CST coordinator roles. CA further

<sup>92</sup> National CA officer, Voinjama.

<sup>93</sup> This problem was described by international staff from various sections, especially by those who had been in the field offices during early stages of the mission and who now work at HQ in Monrovia.

<sup>94</sup> Winckler 2011.

<sup>95</sup> HoFO and former CA staff, Monrovia in an interview. Prior to the establishment of a HoFO position, the local CA officer had only limited knowledge on security situations as neither UNPol, nor Military Observers, nor local battalion officers would share their information. And yet, local CA officers were responsible for taking security decisions, as in the case of evacuation of the office.

<sup>96</sup> See UNCT’s joint programme document 2009.

<sup>97</sup> CA was mainly responsible for the County Support Teams. Management, however, was with UNDP. Humanitarian and Political Section also dedicated staff to support CST coordinators. The HoFO replaced the CST coordinator in late 2008.

turned one UNV per county into project staff under a joint management. This approach added considerable value to UN peacekeeping in Liberia because it provided a county comprehensive, but specific focus to the activities. This was confirmed by CA staff at the national level and staff within the Ministry of Planning and Infrastructure. The joint approach through CST meetings, the field offices in each county and the strong position of the HoFO in the field provided the UN with an organizational framework and a common vehicle for action at the local level. It helped organizations without local representations to extend their reach and deliverance to all counties.

### 6.4.3 Head of Field Officers

The CST coordinators established in 2006 were further developed, and in 2008<sup>98</sup> the local representation of the UN was enhanced with the SRSG's appointment of Head of Field Officers (HoFOs) to each of the 15 counties.<sup>99</sup> They are formally situated under the DSRSG/RC.<sup>100</sup> The HoFOs were and still are mostly CA officers, but work on behalf of the entire UN family. Their role is to serve as the overall facilitator of the CST process in their respective counties. The Field Offices are supported through the Field Support Team (FST) at headquarters level.

The CST and later the HoFO structure introduced a horizontal level of information sharing and institutionalized a central authority on the county level. Today, all reports from the local section and UN agency representatives are to go through the HoFO. The improvement of the coordination aspect through the jointness of the approach (with UNDP as a partner, with the support of the entire UNCT and the central role of CA and later the HoFO in the counties), was confirmed by all agency representatives we met with in the counties. This new model also represented an improvement with regard to contextualization of the activities. For instance, CA was now receiving and sorting all incoming requests to the mission, making sure that they ended up on the most relevant desk. This channelling of requests was valued from both sides: the agencies needed to review only 'serious requests'. Local partners felt that requests channelled through either CA or the HoFO had a better chance of getting funding. As a UNDP representative in Voinjama told us:

<sup>98</sup> Field offices were headed by CST coordinators before 2008. Those were CA officers in most cases.

<sup>99</sup> Although most of the HoFO were and still are CA officers, they needed to be given a new rank and were no longer reporting to the CA sections, but directly to the DSRSG. This was necessary because other sections of UNMIL and other UN agencies would not report to CA, but to the County Representative of the SRSG. Nevertheless, many HoFOs still see themselves at least partially as 'CA people'.

<sup>100</sup> The UN resident coordinator is the coordinator of UN Agencies in programme countries. In Liberia he is at the same time DSRSG (Recovery and Governance), Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Representative of UNDP.

The CA are interacting with the people, so the bulk of the requests goes through them. They look through the requests and make sure that they are complete before they are forwarded to us. The CA is not doing development projects, so when the community requests for instance a hand pump, they come to us and ask: 'Do you have annual provision for that in your work plan?' Then we send a request to Monrovia. And when we get feedback we tell CA who are the ones who will inform the community that we will build a hand pump. The Civil Affairs brings us requests once or twice a month.<sup>101</sup>

In most field offices, this was institutionalized in 2006 with the introduction of local 'One UN' meetings once or twice a month.<sup>102</sup> All the agencies and sections present their projects and challenges at these meetings and coordinate their efforts. In theory, such channelling and coordination of efforts between UNMIL and the various agencies are central to the task of the HoFO. In practice however, the distribution of tasks is not that clear-cut, and the roles of CA and HoFO tend to overlap, according to our interviewees.

Informal contact among staff members is important for coordination and contextualization beyond formal meetings. This aspect is enhanced in the few rural areas where all agencies and sections are working in one compound.<sup>103</sup> The international staff members often meet in the canteen or the recreational facilities, and join in activities at the week-end.

The relation between the staff is very close because we are in one compound. In Voinjama, UN is in one compound. So we talk with each other every day. UNMIL, UNDP, WFP, FAO and all the others. In Zwedru it's the same. We have very good experience with this (...) And when we go to lunch together, of course we ask, 'how is this project going?', 'how is that project going?' And we share.<sup>104</sup>

Such, direct and personal relationships are central to making inter-agency cooperation and contextualization work.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> UNDP representative, Voinjama.

<sup>102</sup> UN agencies have already withdrawn their permanent staff from some field offices.

<sup>103</sup> The number of counties with a considerable representation of different agencies and UNMIL sections is decreasing with the drawdown of the mission.

<sup>104</sup> UNDP staff, Voinjama.

<sup>105</sup> This becomes particularly evident in cases where cooperation is poor. The Montserrado County Office was initially located in Bensonville, next to the county administration. It was later transferred to the UN HQ Annex. Since then, UN Police and military observers have been stationed with their national command, none of the UN agencies has staff with a special focus on Montserrado, and the members of UNMIL sections except for CA are located in the HQ. This makes inter-agency cooperation and even cooperation with other UNMIL sections at the sub-national level more difficult. According to both CA officers, the situation was much better when the office was located in Bensonville.

**Recommendations:***General recommendations for local the transition:*

- The continuous presence of CA in the counties is central to international efforts at the sub-national level. A national mechanism should be developed that can replace the CA presences in the counties before UNMIL withdraws. Due to lack of capacity when the mission withdraws, the mechanisms currently in place will probably need to change. Therefore it is important that these mechanisms are followed up by the UN agencies that will remain in the country.
- Before the withdrawal of the mission, CA should play a supportive role in setting up regional civilian coordination hubs, to serve as a continuous county extension of the UN Delivering as One idea.
- CA should encourage and support the government in its work to establish local Liberian monitoring teams that can ensure accountability for and implementation of various development projects. The Peace Committees in the counties, established with the support and the facilitation of CA, are a first step in this direction. They could be further developed, institutionalized and mandated by the government to monitor development projects and the implementation of the County Development Agenda. Uninterrupted funding to local monitoring committees needs to be ensured independent of government approval, whether through a mix of international donors or bilateral projects.
- The various agencies and UNMIL sections should build more on the county-specific expertise of HoFO and CA.
- In some areas, various sections and UN agencies in the field are already co-located in one compound, an arrangement that offers informal venues for exchange. In order to ensure a culture of exchange between actors from the various agencies, this should be done in as many places as possible. The compounds could also to a greater extent be open to other members of the international community, as this would contribute to improved exchange of information in the field.
- The HoFO structure should be seen as an overall success in combination with the earlier foundation of County Support Teams (CSTs). Equally strong coordination should be envisaged for new missions.

**6.5 Dilemmas When Promoting National Ownership**

Actors at the local level have good possibilities for contextualizing, and they make frequent use of them. The setting on the national level is much tighter. The abstract strategic goals of the intervention are pre-set by the programmatic portfolio of UN peacekeeping. This abstract outline is not negotiable.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, strategies for achieving these goals are based on the organizational know-how of UN Peace-

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<sup>106</sup> Sending 2009.

keeping. There may be some differences in implementation, but peace operations very commonly include such strategies as elections, rule of law, security sector reform, poverty reduction, and protection of civilians. Also here, the procedures for reaching such strategic goals are dominated by international processes. International experts and know-how impact heavily on the conceptualization of concept papers, reporting and steering committees.

So, a lot was done by the international institutions. In terms of making commitments in funding, they know who has to sit at the table to make sure money is coming. This is to ensure the funding is coming. Only 1/3 is coming from the government. So when you have the money you have the lead.<sup>107</sup>

The complicated processes underlying policy papers, development agendas and processing guidelines are often overstraining the capacities of the national ministries. They are supported by international consultants, paid by the donors, who assure that final papers are in line with donor interests and funds can be assessed.

Government institutions have capacity challenge. So they have international consultants working along with them. (...) of course they had influence on priorities.<sup>108</sup>

What seems like a win-win situation at first sight in fact often impedes true ownership for the Liberians. What is planned as 'doing with' ends up as 'doing for'.<sup>109</sup>

In the first time in our history, people could make some suggestions. It was a determined effort to get citizen to participate. (...) But then most was lost on the way in the effort to adapt to World Bank standards. People were just asked 'do you want schools' and they said 'yes'. Who doesn't want school? But maybe they would have liked something else better. Something that was not on the World Bank list.<sup>110</sup>

CSOs are only *consulted* in such processes. They have no active voice and are reduced to mere implementing partners, fully dependent on international funds.

It's always consultations. When they need us, they invite us and ask as what do you think about this and what do you think about that. But never for true cooperation, where they are actually negotiating with us and we have a compromise in the end.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with head of a national CSO network, Monrovia, September 2011

<sup>108</sup> Interview with leading Liberian political analyst, Monrovia, September 2011

<sup>109</sup> Wilén and Chapaux 2011.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with leading CSO representative, Monrovia, 2011.

<sup>111</sup> CSO representative, Monrovia 2011.

Much policy-making and policy-shaping on the national level proves to be a negotiation process between national elites and donors, with the donors in the lead. Ownership gets lost in the need to produce documents that meet international standards, and are on time. Far too often, national ownership is based on international expertise. Contextualization is possible and local actors can have impact, but the frame pre-set by international standards and donors on the national level is a very tight one. The security hubs, currently established in five locations spread over the country, are a first approach to institutionalizing decentralization. They focus on security and rule of law, but similar approaches could and should be envisaged for other sectors and issues.

#### **Recommendations:**

##### *General recommendations for local-level peacebuilding:*

- Continue decentralization efforts of national strategies and strengthen the development of county funds and county-specific agendas.
- Increase the influence of local consultations on final outcomes in development strategies and similar documents. Conduct local consultations before drafting national agendas. Increase the capacity of local state and non-state actors to produce adequate documents. Provide more flexibility for local adaptation of national frameworks.
- Strengthen the voice of marginalized groups in consultations. Conduct sector-specific consultations and ensure that all groups are heard throughout the consultations. Move beyond consultations wherever possible, and seek to engage local organizations in dialogue and negotiation of final documents.
- UN Peacekeeping missions should increase the capacity of civil society to move from implementing partner to strategic analyst, from the very beginning of the mission. They should provide continuous funding to CS, independent of specific project implementation, and strengthen CS as an independent player to *complement* the government.
- Donors should lessen the bureaucratic red tape and preconditions for accessing international funds and credits, to enable more small-scale projects

## **6.6 Can the UN strengthen the confidence of local populations in central authorities?**

After the war in Liberia, lack of confidence in local representatives of the state was a major problem. In 2004 the International Crisis Group summed this up:

Politicians have tended to see the capital ‘as a pseudo colonial power with the hinterland and the indigenes being colonized. The local level has no input in

decision-making'. (...) There are numerous posts at chiefdom, district and county level, with overlapping tasks and meaningless positions whose only objective is to make money and feed the patronage system while taking a heavy toll on revenue.<sup>112</sup>

Although there have been considerable improvements, confidence in authorities continues to be a challenge in post-war Liberia. People in powerful positions are perceived as delegates of a small and unapproachable elite in Monrovia. The local population has little influence on choosing its county and district leadership, apart from national elections. Engaged citizens still have few opportunities to take action against the exploitative behaviour of local officials.

UNMIL as a whole, and CA in particular, are there to support the government. They are not mandated to interfere in the selection of personnel for positions. Moreover, there is little that they can do if such persons refuse to work or to cooperate with Civil Affairs. In several such cases, CA in the counties has worked closely with CSOs and documented misconduct on the part of local authorities.

According to several interviewees, there is still much work to be done in order to build up local confidence in the central authorities. In the population, mistrust of the government remains rampant. If conflict arises, people tend to ask CA for advice, rather than local authorities. A local NGO coordinator in Voinjama confirmed this:

If people have an issue, they very often go to Civil Affairs and not directly to the local authority, because through civil affairs there is a good chance that their issue is actually followed up.<sup>113</sup>

For many of the non-state actors, CA constitutes a third neutral party that can report on issues and provide increased transparency on a matter. Through its presence, 'CA is making sure that the government delivers'<sup>114</sup>. Complaints about government authorities are often channelled through CA in an attempt to increase recognition and weight, while at the same time protecting the complainant against retributive action.

This role is central to local-level peacebuilding and future stability. But what CA has done is to build confidence among the local population in the capacities of CA, not in those of the local authorities. This poses a threat to transitional and post-UNMIL stability. The Peace Committees (PC), currently built up in the counties with the support of CA, represent one possible way out of this dilemma. At best, they can

<sup>112</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Rebuilding Liberia', 22. Parts of this quote have been taken from an interview ICG conducted with a historian at the University of Liberia in Monrovia in 2003.

<sup>113</sup> Local NGO coordinator, Voinjama.

<sup>114</sup> Professor at University of Liberia, Monrovia.



strengthen the confidence of the local people in their own capabilities to make governments work.

### Case Study 2: Peace Committees

In 2009 a unit in Civil Affairs strongly pushed for local consultations as part of its peacebuilding and reconciliation programme. 15 County Consultative Forums were initiated in early 2009, one in each county.<sup>115</sup> Members of these forums articulated the need for a local mediation mechanism, working with community approaches to resolve conflict. Leading actors of the CS established community driven PCs throughout the country facilitated by CA.

The composition of these Peace Committees was regarded as a critical condition. It was decided that members had to be local people, that they should reflect the variety of the population (women, youth, religious leaders, traditional leaders etc.) and have a deep understanding of the cultural and historical background of the area. Their work is voluntarily and unpaid.<sup>116</sup> They are not part of any governmental authority.

These committees today are engaged in a broad range of activities: land-dispute mediation, educating communities on land and property acquisition, SGBV issues, peace education in schools, mediating ethnic feuds, engaging with traditional leaders and compiling updates of land conflicts. In the current setup, they even support state authority by taking over some of its roles and responsibilities. When conflicts occur, the PCs step in to mediate and solve the issue based on traditional approaches. This helps reduce the workload of courts and often produces resolutions that are more accepted by the community.

When we were in displaced camp in Monrovia, we heard that someone has taken our garden and was claiming ownership. When this case went to authorities in Voinjama, the authorities were bribed to put the case on hold. Nothing happened for years. When we returned we wanted the land back. So there was nearly fight. Finally, we settled the traditional way. The town chief said it has been our land before. The other person was given other land. Now we are all in peace.<sup>117</sup>

In the case of land disputes, the interventions of the PCs are currently being formalized. Until now, traditional resolutions have been non-binding. Parties in conflict who accepted a ruling in the first place, could go back to court at any point in time and restart the whole process, even years after the initial agreement. After formalization, resolutions of the Peace Committee will become legally binding if they are in accordance with legal standards and if the parties in conflict sign a memorandum of understanding prior to the negotiation.

<sup>115</sup> A comprehensive description of these events and issues discussed can be found in *Dealing with Conflict Creatively*, published by the Civil Affairs Section of UNMIL, 2009.

<sup>116</sup> Since 2009 these committees have received training in mediation, conflict resolution, conflict prevention and reconciliation from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and others.

<sup>117</sup> Local farmer, village near Voinjama.

**Recommendations:**

- CA as well as the UN agencies should focus on supporting Civil Society to increase its capacity to monitor and support the local government as well as to mediate in local conflict.
- The UN should continue its efforts to support the national government and the efforts to increase the capacity among local government staff.
- The UN should continue to support the government's efforts to build confidence in local authorities.

## 7. Conclusion

Our fieldwork was conducted at the central level in Monrovia and in rural areas of the country. We found several sections, programmes and agencies within the UN family that are working to contextualize peacebuilding activities to the local level. Their activities seek to ensure that local needs are included in national processes and that a certain number of projects are implemented in the counties. The close cooperation between UN agencies on the local level has been strengthened by the DaO framework and can be evaluated as generally positive for sub-national efforts. There is a danger that the county-specific focus currently provided by the HoFO structure and the presence of CA might get lost with the transition. The number of permanent representative will decrease when UNMIL draws out, taking security and information infrastructure with it.

There is not yet an institutional learning process to ensure that the wide range of local and context-specific knowledge is secured and passed on within UNMIL and among UN agencies. Awareness as to the need of local sensitivity and contextualization of peacebuilding to local circumstances was high among many of our interview partners in the field. Local staff were familiar with local circumstances and the local context in general. On the other hand, such sensitivity has not been seen as a job requirement. It was described as ‘useful asset’<sup>118</sup> that would have to be gained ‘on the job’<sup>119</sup>.

It’s not that they tell us, it’s like this and that in Lofa. And those are the groups and the conflicts. All I knew about Liberia was from international press. Like the war and Taylor. Everything else was training on the job.<sup>120</sup>

Local, context-sensitive, cultural knowledge was greatly valued as a resource. But it was not a knowledge pro-actively encouraged, guarded and intentionally passed on within the mission. Awareness of how it could better inform the work of the UN still needs to be created.

Despite such inherent limitations within the UN system, UNMIL’s efforts at decentralization in Liberia have indeed been impressive. The CST joint programme has institutionalized and formalized local-national communication on the side of the government. The programme (re-)builds information infrastructure between local authori-

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<sup>118</sup> CA officer, Voinjama.

<sup>119</sup> CA officer, Greenville.

<sup>120</sup> CA officer, Voinjama.

ties, via the superintendent, to the national government. The success of this programme will be crucial for the transition phase. The programme has not yet been fully implemented, and high priority should be given to further decentralization. It is important for the future of Liberia that basic services are well handled by the Liberian state apparatus when UNMIL withdraws, otherwise considerable efforts and resources may be lost. It is further important to strengthen the voice of local actors in a heavily centralized state. A specific programme should be envisioned to ensure the continued functionality of local CSOs after UNMIL's departure.

At first glance, many of our findings at the sub-national level may seem stand in contrast to the findings of the criticisms of liberal peacebuilding. UNMIL is indeed supporting the national government. Local populations are consulted in development planning. The local level has been strengthened, and field offices provide an institutionalized infrastructure for contextualizing peacebuilding to local circumstances. These field offices work rather independently from the national level, and sensitivity to local needs is high among local staff. However, we have found that national dynamics and donor priorities often reduce their impact on national strategies and policy development. Some contextualization to local circumstances takes place, but within the frameworks pre-set by international guidelines and priorities.

Our conclusion thus is a double-edged one. Yes, there is a huge potential for contextualizing peacebuilding to local circumstances within the existing structure in Liberia, and there is much in the case of Liberia that points towards success. However, this potential for contextualization has not been fully exploited and often not adequately valued at the national level. Moreover, in focusing precisely on the national level, scholarly research has often failed to acknowledge this important potential.

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