Undercurrents of Violence: Why Sierra Leone's Political Settlement is not Working

Debates over violence, security, humanitarian and development imperatives have long been polarised. However, as seen in Syria and Mali, the question is not simply whether one should intervene but rather how and for whose benefit. In this context, a closer look at the case of Sierra Leone – touted in many circles as a success story – yields interesting insights into the limits of its political settlement. Pro-poor development outcomes need to be at the heart of any negotiated political settlement. Failure to address fundamental issues around access to power, accountability regarding control of natural resources, and extreme poverty itself has resulted in marginalisation and disenfranchisement, and new forms of violence.

A successful political settlement in Sierra Leone?

In post-conflict contexts, political settlements are viewed as instrumental in establishing security and stability. Political settlements are ongoing political processes, which can emerge from one-off events, such as elite pacts and peace agreements; but they can also take the form of dynamic and fluid processes of bargaining, negotiation and compromises between elites that shape the nature of the post-conflict state.

Peacebuilding experts and practitioners consider that elite alliances and coalitions, and processes of bargaining and compromise between them, are more stable and less violence-prone if former rebels and contending political elites also have access to national wealth and power. In the case of Sierra Leone, the question of the governance and ownership of natural resources, especially diamonds, was a major factor in the sharing of wealth between contending elites.

Sierra Leone's current political settlement is highly influenced by the externally imposed peace agreement that ended the civil war in 2001. Prior to this, there had been several unsuccessful attempts at establishing a new political settlement between the country's various elites. Following the attacks by Revolutionary United Front (RUF) soldiers on UN peacekeeping forces in May 2000, British troops were sent in to stabilise the situation. Sierra Leone became a de facto UN protectorate.

As a result, the political settlement in Sierra Leone was essentially driven by a donor agenda led by the United Kingdom. This agenda focused on two key areas. One was security and justice, and was dealt with by the setting up of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme, the Security Sector Reform programme, the Special Court for Sierra Leone, and the Truth and Reconciliation programme. The second was political and governance reforms, namely decentralisation, including the restoration of both local councils and the institution of chieftaincy, with the aim of tackling the root causes of the war. Donors believed that the country's instability was due to a broken governance pact where society on the fringes (both geographical and political) was marginalised, and decentralisation would therefore give more power to the margins. Any new political settlement had to address this alienation of the countryside by the centre.

Although political analysts now view the country as more stable, most researchers argue that the root grievances of the civil war have not actually been addressed. While new elite coalitions, including the international community, have helped to stabilise the country, the development outcome, and in particular the revenues raised through the natural resources extractive ➡

UN Peacekeeping soldiers stand at ease during a ceremony marking both UN day and the imminent end of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone in December 2005.

economy, has benefited only a few. In fact, the new political system does relatively little to tackle the predatory and highly unequal political economy that existed before the war and that contributed to the outbreak of widespread violence.

Stability: for whom and for how long?

In Sierra Leone, the political settlement is structured around, and reflective of, the interests of a range of dominant groups, both domestic and international. These include leaders of political organisations, traditional chiefs, and the upper echelons of international peacebuilding missions and donor agencies. However, this stability has come at a price. Donor-driven governance reforms have failed to alter the political and economic structures of power.

On the economic side, Sierra Leone remains one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. In the decade after the civil war, it remained in the bottom 10 of the 180+ countries on the Human Development Index, a measure of people's freedoms and their standard of living, focusing on health and levels of education. Over the past two years, it has moved up three places, thanks to an increase in GDP, the result of royalties from the mining of the country's natural resources: diamonds, iron ore, rutile, bauxite and gold. Yet, despite this improvement and a GDP growth of 35.9% in 2012, only a narrow elite has benefited. Wealth has failed to 'trickle down' to ordinary citizens. The lack of transparency around national resources revenue and the absence of any

robust government oversight of how those revenues are spent led this year to the suspension of Sierra Leone from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI).

On the political side, decentralisation was not as transformative as donors had hoped, and it did not meet their goal of diffusing power among the elites. In fact, decentralisation became an instrument of power for central government rather than an institution accountable and responsive to the local population. The political landscape has barely changed, with the leadership of both major political parties, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All Peoples Congress (APC), remaining the same. For example, it is quite revealing that 12 years after the end of the civil war, the SLPP's candidate for the 2012 presidential elections, Maada Bio, was the military leader who launched a palace coup in 1996 against Valentine Strasser.

More fundamentally, the reconciliation and healing process was not undertaken at the community level. There are still tensions between local communities and ex-combatants. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission lacked strong political support and none of the recommendations from the Commission's report was taken up. Little effort has been made to address the lingering animosity between ex-combatants and those who suffered during 11 years of war. Ostracised from their communities, many former combatants have once again been pushed to the margins.

"The international community's emphasis on 'security first' has come at the expense of broadening access to economic opportunities and basic services."

Members of the group 'X-taci' and friends – A new musical genre combining rap, Hip-Hop rhythms and protest lyrics has emerged in Sierra Leone following the brutal 10 year civil war.

A Wade/Panos

The international community's emphasis on 'security first' after the end of the country's civil war has come at the expense of broadening access to economic opportunities and basic services, leaving the poorest members of society in the same position they were in previously, and putting the country at risk of the same grievances that led to violence.

Inequalities, frustration and new forms of violence: the prospect for durable peace?

Persistent inequalities and lack of opportunities are leading to frustration and increased, new forms of violence by marginalised groups such as ex-combatants or youth.

New forms of urban violence, especially in the eastern and central parts of Freetown, have been developing and are linked to competion between popular musicians and a new gang-war culture. In April 2013, fan clubs of two rival music labels clashed in Freetown, using stones, bottles, knives and sharpened sticks. In universities and colleges (such as Fourah Bay College or the Milton Margai College of Education and Technology), violence sometimes erupts as a result of political divisions between fraternities and sororities, 'black man' and 'white man' (where 'black' represents the ruling APC party while 'white' represents the opposition SLPP).

In rural areas, the key issues relate to the non-mining benefits that local communities gain from mining development. In the Tonkolili District, violent protests erupted in 2012 when miners downed tools in protest at poor pay and working conditions in the mines. Local residents joined the miners in demonstrations, which led to one person being killed and several others being severely injured. Similar incidents have taken place in Tongo Fields, Lunsar and Makeni where iron ore and other minerals are mined.

It is true that resentment and low-intensity forms of violence are widespread in many countries, and do not necessarily herald the outset of civil strife. Furthermore, Liberia, which played a key part in the onset of the civil war in Sierra Leone, is relatively stable now. However, the prospect for durable peace in Sierra Leone is uncertain for two reasons: first, the very divisive and conflictual nature of Sierra Leone politics involving the two major parties and the 'dormant' (but still armed) combatants who could be mobilised by these political parties. Second, illicit small arms and light weapons, made by artisan blacksmiths, are widely available to ex-combatants and officially disbanded militia groups.

Sierra Leone's winner-takes-all style of politics has been highlighted by the UN as one of the biggest risks to stability in the country. Up to now, it has been mediated largely by the international community but it is unclear whether the government can maintain this stability without the support of the international community, especially given that both sides could mobilise their own groups of ex-combatants.

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Policy recommendations

The way in which elite-coalition political settlements are shaping patterns and processes of economic development is central to developing an understanding about building peaceful states and societies. This is not a question of trade-off between peaceful states (traditional security concerns) and peaceful societies (human security concerns) but rather of the extent to which negotiated political settlement will enable state–society relations to evolve into an acceptable and sustainable solution both for the elites and for society.

Considering that there is always a real possibility of relapse into, or the continuation of, violence in other forms after the end of an internal armed conflict, violence-mitigation efforts should focus on adopting a longer-term approach to transforming the political settlement into pro-development state–society relations, geared towards implementing far-reaching governance and other political and socio-economic reforms. This will necessarily be a gradual, difficult and open-ended process, which is contingent on the capacity and willingness of dominant domestic elites and their international partners to advance it. However, the case of Sierra Leone highlights the fact that the international community has no clear pathways for transforming a political settlement that is geared towards stability and control towards more inclusive state-society relations based on liberal governance and inclusive participation. More often than not, the activities of international peacebuilders around political settlement have contributed to an order where coercion, inequality and violence remain central.

To mitigate the growing intensity and frequency of violence in Sierra Leone, international donors and the Government of Sierra Leone should:

1. focus on the proliferation of small arms by: investing in programmes to develop the capacity to control and limit the possession, trading and use of small arms; and developing alternative livelihood initiatives as incentives for artisan blacksmiths to stop producing small arms;

2. enforce codes of practice for resource extraction (such as the Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative), make multinational corporations (MNCs) operating in Sierra Leone accountable for their business ethics and support the creation of domestic natural resource-governance initiatives with a view to promoting transparency, accountability and fair use and allocation of proceeds from natural resources;

3. emphasise, as a key priority for their poverty-reduction strategies, the reintegration into economic and social life of demobilised militants in peri-urban and rural areas, with a particular focus on job creation and vocational training for youth.

Further reading

Allouche, J. (2013) *Is it the Right Time for the International Community to Exit Sierra Leone?*, Evidence Report 38, Brighton: IDS

Allouche, J. and Lind, J. (2013) *A New Deal? Development and Security in a Changing World*, Brighton: IDS

'Understanding and Tackling Political Violence Outside of Armed Conflict Settings', *IDS Policy Briefing* 37, Brighton: IDS