INCLUSIVE PEACE AND SECURITY

Editor **Robin Luckham**

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Peace Through Agrarian Justice

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1 Introduction

The extent to which recent African civil wars have also been agrarian crises has been underestimated. Urban "loose molecules" and the lure of mineral resources have been put forward as reasons for protracted conflicts. Recent research in Sierra Leone (Richards *et al.* 2005; Humphreys and Weinstein 2004; Richards *et al.* 2004) shows that most combatants came from rural backgrounds and were induced to fight by promises of food, jobs and marriage partners, not diamonds. Many ex-combatants want to go home (to rural areas), but are unwilling to do so without major agrarian reforms. These include strengthening the land and property rights of women and youth. Through failing to understand the rural roots of recent African conflicts donors and policy-makers have risked rebuilding the causes of war. Attention to agrarian justice, we argue, is now essential if further violence is to be avoided.

2 The issue of forced labour

A striking photograph from the 1970s shows "gentlemen farmers" of the Mabole Valley (in northern Sierra Leone). The fathers and grandfathers of the group in the picture had maintained large slave-managed estates to grow rice to feed the trading caravans along the Falaba Road (between Port Loko and Guinea). The photograph showed the group waving aloft a collection of rusty trade cutlasses. They had posed in response to a question, "how had landowners prevented farm slaves from running away?"

The war in Sierra Leone became infamous for its atrocities, which included the cutting off of victims' hands and feet. After intervention by private security forces (former South African Defence Force counter-insurgency specialists simultaneously contracted by the government and international diamond mining companies) and the consequent collapse of a promising peace process a destabilised rebel movement exacted terrible revenge. Too little is made of the fact that the weapon of atrocity was an ordinary agricultural implement, the cutlass.

It is hard to talk objectively about the issue of slavery in Sierra Leone and Liberia. The two countries were founded as homes for freed slaves, and the issue embarrasses national elites. This embarrassment also extends to friends of the two countries. At a meeting about the Sierra Leone crisis organised by the British government in the early 1990s the senior civil servant in the chair bluntly warned speakers 'not to waste our time this afternoon by raking over old issues concerning slavery'. The issue does need to be raised, however, because it left an institutional legacy, which forms an important background to recent wars in West Africa.

Domestic slavery was not finally abolished until around the end of the third decade of the twentieth century (1928 in Sierra Leone, 1930 in Liberia). There are still plenty of Liberians and Sierra Leoneans who were born into a world of domestic slavery. It was illegal to acquire new slaves in provincial Sierra Leone after the enactment of the Protectorate Ordinance (1896). But colonial government considered the 1898 uprising of interior chiefs a response to the threat to free existing slaves. In 1896 it was estimated that as many as half of all provincial Sierra Leoneans were slaves. Not wanting to risk further instability, the British soft-pedalled abolition. The institution (it was hoped) would die a natural death.

In Liberia, developments followed a similar path. The country had been founded as a frontier settler outpost for free Blacks from the USA. Little initial thought was given to the issue of relations with African peoples. The constitution gave government sovereignty over the interior, but there was no

effective presence when the British and French expanded into neighbouring up-country Sierra Leone and Guinea. The colonial powers gave the Liberians an ultimatum – occupy the interior or face British and French claims on Liberian territory. President Arthur Barclay adopted Indirect Rule (the British-devised system for licensing interior chiefs to administer on behalf of the state according to "custom"). The Liberian frontier force "pacified" the interior, driving many communities deep into the forest, and waited for chiefs to negotiate with the Executive Mansion. So long as local rulers then did Monrovia's will their control over domestic slaves remained unchallenged.

Domestic slavery remained important in both countries. Roads and plantations for export crops were made by slaves. The British were frank that the prospect of forced labour helped motivate candidates for chiefly election. Colonially supervised local courts in Sierra Leone still assisted slave owners to recover runaways as late as the 1920s (Grace 1977). Although slaves as a proportion of the rural population declined sharply in districts close to Monrovia and Freetown, the figure in some more remote Sierra Leonean chiefdoms adjacent to Liberia remained 50 per cent or more in 1927 (Grace 1977).

The League of Nations prodded the British government of Sierra Leone into abolition by 1 January 1928, and a similar reform was enacted in Liberia in 1930. In the Mabole Valley the government introduced a work oxen ploughing scheme to compensate the cutlass-wielding "gentleman farmers" – a clear indication the slaves had no intention to stay. In western Liberia, the anthropologist Warren d'Azevedo (1969–71) records that slaves departed in droves, and Gola owners wept at the thought of the work they would now have to do.

3 The issue of gender and rural marriage relations

After abolition control of rural elites over the labour of the rural underclasses was reasserted through other institutions legitimated by colonial (or Monrovia) rule. Marriage arrangements became a key. Leading men used their wealth to patronise poorer families, and received a disproportionate number of young women as wives. Poorer men could not afford bridewealth. Many of their liaisons were, perforce, with the wives of polygynous village chiefs and elders. Local courts in both countries cracked down on these relationships. An impoverished young man might find himself heavily fined, and the fine commuted to labour on the husband's farm (a kind of retrospective bride service), for the offence of "woman damage". Young women were married to rich elders whether they liked it or not.

Gibbs (1965: 215) summarised the class structure of Kpelle society, in rural north western Liberia in terms of the marriage system. His account could be extended to neighbouring groups in both countries. Three groups are distinguished: "rich people", "children of the soil" and "clients". Wealth was measured (for a man) not only in terms of money and goods but also in control over women and children. Control over marriage exchanges was the key to the differences between the classes of men as "wife givers", "wife keepers" and "wife borrowers". The three classes were, Gibbs notes, the freeborn, the slaves and pawns. The *toh nuu* (literally "upstanding", prominent person) might allow some of his wives "to become consorts of poor men of the lower class who become his *tii keh nuwai* [workmen or clients] … a ready-made claque … sure to praise the man's name".

In recent discussions of war and its causes in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, the issue of marriage (including women's property and the exploitation of the labour of young men) was regularly raised by villagers and ex-combatants (cf Richards *et al.* 2005; Richards *et al.* 2004). Young wives reported being locked in abusive marriages because parents could not afford to refund bridewealth, and complained that the family of the husband seized the assets of the marriage where a widow refused levirate marriage. More generally, it was reported that 'the chiefs take everything intended for women', including postwar relief supplies, and that legal redress was impossible, since the same male elders sat in the local courts (only the daughter of a wealthy family could afford to appeal a "customary" case to a higher court). Young men repeatedly objected to being fined large amounts because of their inability to marry legally. Many openly stated a preference for vagrancy to forced labour exacted in lieu of fines.

Militia forces in both countries exploited this issue. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone – a movement in which 87 per cent of ex-combatants were abducted, mainly from farms or rural primary schools – formed a "combat wives units" to offer marriage partners to young men who

would otherwise have been too poor to marry. Asked about inducements to remain within the movement (Humphreys and Weinstein 2004), 24 per cent of RUF ex-combatants mentioned being given a marriage partner. The RUF also sought to empower young women by training them to fight. As many as a quarter of the movement's ex-combatants were female, though underrepresented in demobilisation (nationally, women accounted for only 7 per cent of ex-combatants with benefits). Some women fighters were explicit that they had joined a militia faction because of gender-based rural poverty, disadvantage and discrimination (Richards *et al.* 2003).

4 Testimony

The part played by marriage, labour and gender disempowerment in fostering conflict are illustrated in the following comments, typical of the perceptions of ex-combatants and villagers concerning the causes of the two wars (cf Richards *et al.* 2005; Richards *et al.* 2003).

I joined the rebel forces to fight inequality in the country, and because of this issue I also encouraged my three children to join. (Female ex-combatant, Margibi County, Liberia, 2004)

Chiefs victimise youths by imposing heavy and unjust fines … [but] protect their own children from doing communal work; criminal summonses make youths run from the village. (Youth focus group, Kamajei Chiefdom, Sierra Leone, 2002)

This war was caused by poverty and injustice. Our (youth) poverty is caused by having no education, no training, no money and no jobs. [The chiefs] fine us too much for any small thing. Because we are poor, we cannot pay. So somebody "buys" our case, and then we have to work for that person, and for the chief. This means we cannot work for ourselves, so we get poorer, so some have to steal to survive and, when … caught … get fined again. (Youth focus group, Margibi County, Liberia, 2004)

Elders ... force [us] to marry … as soon as we harvest our first … palm fruits. If you refuse … they charge you to court for smiling at a girl … But the bride service is not reasonable. You will

be required to do … jobs for the bride's family, like brushing and making a farm for the family … sharing the proceeds of your own labour, harvest or business … You will be forced to give them 70 per cent [of your drum of palm oil], or you will lose your wife and be taken to court ... Most of us … avoid the scene ... [in Tongo Field, a diamond mining area] you can … marry a woman of your choice. Marriage [in the village] is the same as slavery. (Male ex-combatant, eastern Sierra Leone, 2003)

5 Policy implications

International opinions about war in Liberia and Sierra Leone are heavily affected by the views of national elites. The "children of chiefs" protected from "community labour", arbitrary fining and other abuses, tend to deny or downplay the role of agrarian factors. Rural commoners, for their part, are deeply sceptical about the role of elites. In Sierra Leone they notice the rapid postwar spread of fine houses in the hills above Freetown in a country with no effective economy for the past ten years, while isolated villages, too far off-road to be visited by aid delegations, continue to lack even the most basic facilities (schools, health posts, sanitation). The contrast re-ignites some of the bitterness that fed the war.

We argue (cf. Richards *et al.* 2004; Richards *et al.* 2005) that only fundamental agrarian reform will serve to reduce resentment. Five requirements stand out:

1. Land reform (to introduce guaranteed shorthold tenancies to reduce the dependence of mobile young people on traditional patrons)
2. Marriage reform (to protect women's property and reduce vulnerability of young people to labour exploitation)
3. Reform of local courts (to document custom, and abolish it where inconsistent with national law, e.g. on rural women's inheritance; to supervise court officials)
4. Reform of basic schooling (to increase participation of rural girls, enable management of schools by parents, shift curriculum towards knowledge and skills important in rural livelihoods, and offer incentives to trained teachers to work in remote localities)
5. Reform of rural skills training (to stimulate application of appropriate agricultural

technologies and business methods, including electronic networking of rural post-primary institutions and teaching of information technology [IT]).

On this last point, it is interesting to note that IT was among the preferred options of many ex-combatants. When RUF ex-combatant computer trainees were interviewed (Richards *et al.* 2003) several mentioned that they thought electronic connection might have mitigated the violence. With the internet, RUF grievances would have been harder to ignore, with less chance for resentment to escalate out of control. One female signals technician talked about how radio training in the movement had helped give her a sense of gender empowerment, now being put to good use in making a success of her small postwar computer-based typing service. Young women should certainly be included in any scheme for rurally oriented IT.

More generally, agrarian technologies should be chosen or designed with a clear understanding of the institutional disadvantages faced by impoverished women and rural youth. For example, bio-engineered seed technologies with a propensity to spread from farmer to farmer (e.g. disease-resistant rice or groundnut types, and hybrid oil palm seedlings) should be preferred to schemes requiring heavy involvement of government and landowning elites (such as subsidised agricultural credit or tractor cultivation).

But technology will be powerless to create employment and encourage young rural people to bind with wider society without institutional reform. The reluctance of governments and donors to contemplate such reform is a worrying sign. Social advisers – based in metropolitan capitals and lobbied on their brief forays into the countryside by non-agrarian elites – sometimes seem oblivious to the urgent need for reform of land tenure, rural justice and marriage. It is argued that these issues are "too sensitive" in the immediate aftermath of war. In Sierra Leone we have been told that to seek to limit the customary privileges of the rural

landowners would risk re-igniting conflict. This rates risk of a recurrence of the war of 1898 as higher than that of the war of 1991.

Liberia sets a somewhat better example. When Charles Taylor stepped down (August 2003), the women's caucus in the Liberian Senate introduced a law recognising many abuses associated with custom, as applied to marriage, labour and women's property. *The Act to Govern the Devolution of Estates and Establish the Rights of Inheritance for Spouses of Both Statutory and Customary Marriages* approved by the Liberian House of Representatives on 7 October 2003 bans recovery of bridewealth ("dowry") by a husband if a marriage fails (s. 2.4), renders it illegal for parents to 'compel the daughter or other female relative to marry a man not of her choice' (s. 2.10); forbids a husband to 'aid, abet, or create the situation for his customary wife to have illicit sexual intercourse with another man for the sole purpose of collecting damages' (s. 2.7) and renders it unlawful to 'compel or demand any female of legal age, whether or not she is his customary wife, to "confess" or call the name of her lover ... in order to collect damages from the said lover ...' (s. 2.8). The Act addresses some of the concerns cited above, and has relevance elsewhere in the region.

Other institutional reforms are also needed if impoverished young people are to return to rural communities and contribute to agricultural development. Clear and enforceable contracts concerning land and labour are as crucial as an end to the arbitrary workings of undocumented "custom". A British-funded scheme to build chiefs' houses through "community" labour sent a wrong signal in Sierra Leone. It was seen by many young people as "punishment" for challenging elders during the war. But donors also need to put their own house in order. Abolition of rich country farm subsidies combined with emphasis on agrarian rights and justice within the West African region might serve the interests of peace more than other aid initiatives combined.

Note

* This article expresses the personal views of the authors and not those of their organisations.

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