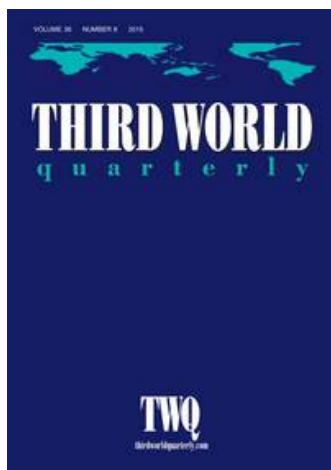


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Peace building and the depoliticisation of civil society: Sierra Leone 2002–13

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Over the past two decades there has been a rapid increase in funds for local civil society actors in fragile states. Current peace-building and development efforts strive for the recreation of a vibrant, active and ‘liberal’ civil society. In the case of Sierra Leone, paradoxically, this growing support has not strengthened civil society actors based on that liberal idea(1). Instead of experiencing enhanced proactive participation stemming from the civil sphere, Sierra Leone’s civil society appears to be largely depoliticised. Drawing on empirical data gathered over the past four years, this article offers three interrelated causal explanations of why this phenomenon occurred during the country’s peace-building phase from 2002 to 2013. First, Sierra Leone’s civil society landscape has become instrumentalised to serve a broader liberal peace-building and development agenda in several ways. Second, Western idea(1)s of participatory approaches and democracy are repeatedly challenged by the legacies of colonial rule and socially entrenched forms of neo-patrimonialism. Third, abject poverty and the lack of education affect activism and agency from below.

Keywords: civil society; peace building; development; depoliticisation; Sierra Leone

Introduction

Any form of conflict, be it a (civil) war, rebellion, revolt, insurgency or civil uprising with the aim of destabilising persisting power structures, builds on the hopes of manifesting socio-political change – in whatsoever type or shape. Ensuing peace building, and consequently also development, processes are, essentially, concerned about affecting the social, structural, political, economic and/or cultural order of a society. These are undoubtedly highly complex and lengthy processes interwoven in a web of historical, cultural and geographic characteristics and events. Moreover, instituting socio-political change is ideally

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nurtured by a legitimising force – the people – by means of peaceful public contestation, deliberation and debate. This in turn presupposes granting all societal segments political agency and voice. Seen from this admittedly liberal perspective, peace building and development are highly socio-political, albeit context-specific processes impinging upon the political culture of a society as a whole. But what if politics, understood hereafter as exerting influence, agency and opposition, are removed from a conflict-, peace-building and/or development-affected civil sphere? In the simplest terms people *per se* do not have the opportunity to articulate their wants and needs. They lack control over their own futures, destinies and lives.

This article seeks to critically examine how Sierra Leone's civil sphere became a subject of (re-)construction during the country's peace-building and development phase, how this affected the country's civil society landscape or, more broadly, the civil sphere.¹ In doing so, it identifies and assesses a striking paradox that occurred during the period from 2002 to 2013: even though liberal peace-building and development efforts supported the (re-)creation of an active, vibrant and independent civil society, unexpectedly this rising support has not strengthened Sierra Leone's civil society landscape based on that liberal intellectual tradition and idea(l). On the contrary, during field research and interviews conducted from 2010 to 2014, Sierra Leone's civil society was predominantly described as fragmented, lacking in power, influenced by the government, tribalised, dormant or weak.² Nevertheless, the country's civil sphere was repeatedly portrayed as being removed from any form of political influence. Field research further revealed that civil society in Sierra Leone struggles with a top-down mentality among civil society organisations (CSOs) themselves and regionalism expressed in a salient urban–rural divide. In short, after more than a decade of what is generally praised as a successful peace-building process,³ Sierra Leone's civil society landscape appears to be by and large depoliticised. Surprisingly the depoliticisation of Sierra Leone's civil sphere has not been the subject of careful deliberation or assessment by academics, practitioners or international and national policy makers. By filling this void, this article will assess the issue as follows. The first section broadly recapitulates how the interplay of civil society, peace building and development is currently approached in practice and scholarship. It briefly points to different strands of literature and how the concept of civil society is applied and utilised in non-Western post-conflict contexts. Notably, the issue of depoliticisation remains a hitherto marginalised theme. The ensuing part therefore engages in a succinct discussion on the concept of depoliticisation and outlines how it will be approached and understood in the remainder of the article. The empirical sections then assess why notable efforts to strengthen Sierra Leone's civil society landscape based on liberal idea(l)s in the main did not manifest in enhancing democratic ownership, proactive participation or advocacy stemming from the civil sphere.

Civil society in peace-building and development theory and practice

Over the past three decades scholarship, practice, policy making and programming have been challenged by different approaches to peace building and development and their respective theoretical frameworks.⁴ The normative as well

as evidence-based debates revolving around ideal types or revisionist approaches towards peace building and development are as longstanding as they are numerous – ranging from liberal to post-liberal, local, communal, emancipatory, hybrid, multicultural or social peace building, to name but a few.⁵ Strikingly, when it comes to the role or potential of civil society in peace-building and development processes, practitioners, as well as (critical) scholars from different schools of thought, usually agree on one core argument: strengthening, supporting and involving local civil society actors, or more broadly the civil sphere, has emerged as *the* legitimising toolkit for external and local efforts to engage with post-conflict countries, build peace and foster development. In particular after the end of the Cold War and during the 1990s the creation and consolidation of CSOs surfaced as a central part of strategies for development and peace. Prescriptions and slogans like ‘fostering civil society initiatives’ or ‘enhancing civil society participation’ have arisen as key ingredients in the language of peace-building agendas, priority plans and strategies.⁶ The promise and construction of a vibrant and democracy-committed civil society in post-conflict environments came to be seen as a key component of democratisation, peace-building and development processes. Civil society simply emerged as ‘one of those things (like development, education, or the environment) that no reasonable person can be against. The only question to be asked of civil society today seems to be: How do we get more of it?’⁷

Indeed, since the landmark 1992 UN document *An Agenda for Peace*, there has been a ‘steady increase in the deployment of localism in the discourse and practice of the liberal peace, together with actions by local communities to harness, exploit, subvert and negotiate the internationally driven aspects of the local turn’.⁸ Recent initiatives such as the *New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States* emphasise that ‘an engaged public and civil society, which constructively monitors decision-making, is important to ensure accountability’.⁹ The *New Deal’s* outcome document further emphasises the need for capacity building of civil society and promotes a country-owned vision and plan in close consultation with civil society actors.¹⁰

At the same time the number, involvement and activities of international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) and local CSOs have also augmented across the developing world. The figures speak for themselves. There has been a rapid increase in funds from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD) countries via CSOs. While in 1985–86 funding provided to CSOs amounted to US\$3.1 billion per year, it increased to \$6.7 billion in 1999 and \$7.1 billion in 2001.¹¹ In comparison, the UK Department for International Development (DfID) reports that, in May 2013, it spent at least £694 million through CSOs in the period 2011–12, of which £327 million were used by CSOs in DfID’s country offices and £367 were channelled through the headquarters. In total £154 million went to Africa, £102 million to South Asia and the remaining £71 million went to other countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Libya and Yemen.¹² Likewise the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) has established a relationship with over 30,000 CSOs worldwide,¹³ while the World Bank reports to have increasingly involved CSOs in the formulation of Country Assistance Strategies (CAS) and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs).¹⁴

The above trends were accompanied, if not to an extent fostered, by a rich body of academic research examining the (re-)construction, role and functions of local civil societies (and organisations) in building a deeply embedded peace into a society as a whole.¹⁵ Critical voices of the liberal peace-building and development agenda have continuously shed light on issues of societal exclusion, local resistance, marginalisation, structural barriers and unequal power relations (at the local, regional and international levels).¹⁶ It is repeatedly argued that peace-building and development assistance has to be more context-specific and culturally sensitive in engaging with and supporting post-conflict civil societies. However, since local practices may interfere with the ethics of liberal and universal idea(l)s (such as human rights), scholars also caution against over-romanticising the potential of local (civil) societies and encourage awareness of potential peace spoilers within the civil sphere.¹⁷ This further led to the ethical dilemma of *who* actually is to determine the good and bad parts of civil society? In the quest for answers, repeated calls for emancipatory, culturally attuned, transformative or even social peace-building and development practices rarely offer alternative options to liberal agendas in fragile states.¹⁸ Rather, they are much more an extension of liberal values and idea(l)s.¹⁹ What is more, whereas current critical discourse states the need to give voice to alternative, oppressed actors, most peace-building literature neither analyses these alternative voices nor examines how and where they are socially engineered.²⁰ In other words, the socio-historical and therefore also socio-political rationalities of peace-building and development processes are frequently overlooked. This is unfortunate, as precisely these voices, and the ways in which they are socially manufactured over history and time, may open up new vistas in peace-building and development theory and practice.

In addition, civil society, as an intellectual construct of 18th- and 19th-century capitalist Western society, has never really matched the realities of social and political life in fragile states outside the Occidental world. There is very little critique of, or thorough reflection upon, the consequences of importing and appropriating a liberal notion of civil society to non-Western post-conflict regions.²¹ In particular, accounts of the role, functions, potentials or activities of civil society in peace-building processes seem frequently to be detached from a considerable body of (predominantly postcolonial) literature that questions the usefulness of a Eurocentric deployment of civil society in non-Western environments.²² Occidental conceptualisations commonly embrace civil society as independent from the state, political, private and economic spheres but in close interaction with them, as well as a domain of social life in which public opinion can be formed. However, as argued elsewhere, in the sub-Saharan African region civil society has to be contextualised to local realities to really hold a key to explaining and addressing more effectively the long-term needs of a conflict-shattered society.²³ This implies giving firm consideration of factors such as the legacy of the slave trade and colonialism, urban versus rural areas, local versus elite ownership, neo-patrimonial networks and chiefdom systems, direct and indirect (customary) rule and law, and the political culture and cultural identities of a society, among other things.²⁴

Nonetheless, externally steered efforts to bring about peace, democratisation and development in the region seldom contemplate the colonial legacy of

century-long oppression when it comes to the (re)-construction and formation of local civil spheres. As a result, civil society is predominantly embraced as a promised agenda for change, as opposed to examining its actual socio-historical configuration and formation.²⁵ In short, despite the widespread critique of how local (civil) societies lack agency and voice during liberal transitions from conflict to peace, the local context of civil society as well as an understanding of it on its own terms remains an under-researched terrain. Accordingly we are left with a considerable shortage of studies examining how local political culture, agency and voice within the civil sphere are *de facto* socially engineered beyond the rhetoric of liberal or post-liberal peace-building and development paradigms. With these critical reflections in mind, this article examines why, in the course of Sierra Leone's peace-building and development processes, societal segments not only lack agency and voice but are also at risk of being removed from political influence or decision-making processes. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to clarify how the term 'depoliticisation' will be conceptually applied and used.

Peace building and the dilemma of depoliticising civil society

Supporting civil society actors in the attempt to foster peace, democratisation and development inevitably leads to the construction of a particular kind of social order, organised around the individual and his or her own rights.²⁶ This, in turn, affects the political culture of a society which, depending on a country's socio-economic and historical context, might or might not have led to conflict in the first place. From a liberal perspective post-conflict state-society relations ideally would not only overcome such possible socio-political, historical or economic tensions but also lead to the formation of an active civil society that can effectively deal with and be a watchdog for the peace-building and development process of a conflict-ravaged country. But what if, in the aftermath of a conflict and despite the growing support for civil society landscapes, liberal idea(l)s of a vibrant, politically independent and engaging civil society simply do not unfold? To begin with, and because of a severe scarcity of definitions in the peace-building and development literature on what depoliticisation might actually mean and entail, I understand the concept as

a process that removes specific actors (civil society or, more broadly the civil sphere) gradually from any form of political influence. As a consequence, processes of political deprivation affect the political nature and culture of a society while at the same time the political culture of a society can also influence the degree of political activism or willingness to advocate for a need or cause. Depoliticisation can also reflect or even cause political neutralisation expressed in the sheer lack of interest in politics. Whereas liberalism would recognise a political civil sphere as independent from the state, a depoliticised civil sphere would no longer be an independent and legitimizing watchdog of or advocate for specific governmental actions and policies. Instead, actors are prone to being instrumentalised by the state or other external players to serve a government's agenda and political aims.

Put simply, a depoliticised civil society encompasses both neutralisation (or apolitical attitudes) and political capture. The latter can also refer to processes

of instrumentalisation, either by external actors or through local dynamics of neo-patrimonialism and clientelism. Some critics would perhaps now allege that the dynamics inherent in neo-patrimonialism or clientelism are as depoliticising as they are sheer manifestations of local, context-specific or non-Western politics.²⁷ The counter-argument presented here is two-fold. First, there is consensus in the literature that variations of instrumentalisation, neo-patrimonialism and patron–clientelism occur in Western political cultures in the same way that they take place in the sub-Saharan African context.²⁸ Hence, they are not distinctive to sub-Saharan African countries alone. Echoing the African scholar Lumumba-Kasongo, there is a need to surmount assumptions that African (civil) societies will not appreciate politics based on normative idea(l)s of participatory democratic rule. Rather, the centre of critique should be how processes of creating rules, norms and institutionalisation are being hijacked by political elites.²⁹ Second, and building on this point, instrumentalisation, neo-patrimonialism and patron–clientelism, in whatever form or context, are exclusionary in nature. Whereas a small segment of a society is empowered (or captured) by political elites, the majority of the population (or civil sphere) is deprived of any form of agency, voice or opposition as a result of hierarchical and opportunistic power structures.

Thus far only a few scholars have implicitly or explicitly hinted at the depoliticisation effects occurring during several stages of peace-building and development endeavours.³⁰ The most common line of reasoning highlights the way that civil society actors are manoeuvred, if not instrumentalised, into activities and areas in which they undertake duties that complement or carry out functions that the government is too weak, incapable or unwilling to perform. Instead of affecting political decision-making processes about peace-building and development-related issues affecting the future of a country, it is repeatedly argued that civil society mainly has a humanitarian influence.³¹ In part this trend can be also observed in the Sierra Leonean case. The ensuing section will illustrate how, even if local CSOs benefit from funding schemes targeting advocacy work or human rights, their activities rather tend to train or educate the local population as opposed to challenging local politics, behaviour and traditions that stand in stark contradiction to universal human rights. In common with many other post-conflict societies around the world, liberal attempts to support and strengthen local civil society landscapes have become a vicious circle of aid dependency, severely affecting the establishment of a public social welfare system and shifting responsibility towards the global and local civil sphere. The fight against Ebola since spring 2014 in West Africa serves as a dreadful prime example, with public health care systems in the region least equipped to deal with it. Instead local governments rely heavily on the help of global civil society actors (eg Médecins Sans Frontières) or Western donors.³²

At the time of writing there were only two notable contributions with a specific focus on the recreation of civil society in the peace-building process of Sierra Leone.³³ In the broadest sense both authors share the abovementioned consensus in the literature: they mainly locate the causes of depoliticising societal transformations from below in external interventionism alone. While drawing on their valuable insights and findings, it will be argued that the Sierra Leonean case reveals the need to further expand this causal explanation and

approach. The ensuing empirical section will introduce two additional dynamics, distinct from external interventionism, that tend to be frequently overlooked when it comes to assess why in peace-building and development processes civil societies often lack political agency and voice.

Peace building and the depoliticisation of civil society in Sierra Leone (2002–13)

This analysis draws on qualitative and quantitative data, which was gathered by the author in 2010–14. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews with 41 CSOs (of which two were INGOs run by locals), five Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and local grassroots associations, eight youth and street clubs, two communities, three Sierra Leonean scholars in the fields of political science, history and peace and conflict studies, two government officials, and one female Paramount Chief, as well as numerous informal conversations with ordinary Sierra Leoneans from the civil sphere. Given that some interviewees requested anonymity, the identity of CSOs and interviewees will not be disclosed. All interviews were semi-structured but revolved around the same set of questions during both field research stays. In addition an extensive mapping analysis was compiled at the beginning of 2011 and regularly updated until March 2014. This not only informs the figures displayed below but also serves as a quantitative tool to compare the representation and agenda setting of local versus international CSOs in the ongoing peace-building and development process. The mapping encompasses in total 358 registered CSOs of which 213 are local CSOs and 145 INGOs.³⁴

In Sierra Leone, as in many other post-conflict countries, the construction of a strong and vibrant civil society in post-conflict environments came to be seen as an important component of the democratisation, peace-building and development process of the country. CSOs, CBOs and informal or home-grown youth clubs and associations mushroomed during the civil war (1991–2002).³⁵ Since the end of the conflict there has been a rapid increase in funds for local civil society actors. In 2006 CSOs and INGOs received, in total, 26% of non- and actual Official Development Assistance (ODA) to carry out activities in Sierra Leone.³⁶ Moreover, in 2005 DfID set up a flagship project called Enhancing the Interface between Civil Society and the State to improve Poor People's Life (ENCISS). During its first five years of existence (2005–10) it cost the British government almost £8.5 million, with a commitment of a further £4.5 million between 2011 and 2013.³⁷ In addition, all three consecutive PRSPs drafted by the government in conjunction with the World Bank and IMF recognised the importance of civil society in Sierra Leone's peace-building and development process. At the same time CSOs felt that access to funding for civil society activities and actors was much easier in the years shortly after the war than now.

That said, one of the most striking findings during both periods of field research was that, after more than 10 years of peace-building and development assistance – accompanied by strong rhetoric and significant funding to support local civil society actors – a large majority of interviewees depicted Sierra Leone's civil society landscape as very lively and vibrant during and shortly

after the conflict, yet described how it became gradually dormant and politically inactive later on. When posed the question, 'How would you describe civil society in Sierra Leone?', by and large Sierra Leone's civil society was described as depoliticised. Some of the most salient answers in this regard are summarised in Table 1. Ironically the majority of CSOs complaining about the lack of an active and vibrant civil society were themselves frequently close to political parties and/or local chiefs, as well as being heavily dependent on the generosity and agenda-setting of their donors. Only a minority of interviewees gave critical yet far more moderate answers.

Interviews with Sierra Leonean academics generally described Sierra Leone's civil sphere as characterised by tribalism and political party loyalty, with no independent press. Civil society, in one lecturer's view, was 'toothless' and lacked 'a proactive focus' and initiatives.³⁸ Respondents often located the turning point when CSOs appear to have changed in character as the time after the 2007 elections. As one Sierra Leone scholar observes:

With the change of government in 2007 civil society has taken a back row. For instance previously politically active organisations took a back seat. They focus now more on the reform of the chieftom system and don't give prominence to issues such as corruption or issues of service delivery. They should challenge the government more. Also, a lot of local CSOs have started to align themselves with the government; even women's groups that used to be very active are now taking a back seat.³⁹

This observation also extends to Sierra Leone's pre-war student movements and lively political activism, which took place and shaped the university culture as well as the political climate and environment over decades before the country's civil war. Forah Bay College, once the country's intellectual and political vanguard and *de facto* opposition to Siaka Stevens' one-party state (1971–85)

Table 1. 'How would you describe civil society in Sierra Leone?'

'Civil society in Sierra Leone is influenced by the government. In general civil society is not too powerful. Civil society is supposed to be an opposition to the government, but actually, it is not.'
'Some CSOs are simply a mouthpiece of the government. They take on sides and are highly political [meant as allied with one of the two main political parties].' 'In some meetings the government jokingly refers to civil society as "evil" society, when CSOs make people aware of their rights and challenge authorities.'
'Only a few organisations are vibrant and strong. The majority needs to have a clearer focus, direction, credibility and accountability.'
'People only make noise for their own agenda but not for other issues, given the bad economic situation of the country. Project proposals often differ from the truth and represent a different picture to justify proposals.'
'There is a tendency of CSOs in taking sides. CSOs only exercise politics if it fits their interest. Sixty per cent of CSOs only talk. Forty per cent of all CSOs act on their own interest. A lot of CSOs are dormant by now. Sierra Leone has many briefcase CSOs. There is a lot of corruption going on.'
Some are playing the music of the government, those can't be seen as civil society. When they go on radio they call themselves a niche, but they are not. Some of them praise officially the government on the radio.'
'That is a difficult question. It is difficult to distinguish between civil society and state actors in Sierra Leone. A good number of CSOs are too close to the state actors, there are a few vibrant ones but there are the ones that are absorbed in politics.'

during his rule has become silent during the country's peace-building and development phase since 2002. For Gardner the university itself has slid into apparently irreversible decline in that 'material conditions have atrophied almost continuously since the civil war ended in 2002, and campus accommodation is now uninhabitable to the extent that even students from the farthest provinces are denied lodgings'.⁴⁰

Political party loyalism, tribalism and ethnicism have eaten deeply into student life. A Sierra Leonean scholar was asked what in his view caused this recent development of an inactive, if not dormant and depoliticised civil society, be this among CSOs, students or more generally in the public sphere.⁴¹ In reply he argued:

If you have a liberal regime that is open to criticism civil society can flourish. Otherwise, it tends to be passive. In Sierra Leone the newspapers are champions for the government. In the last two years or so they became the mouthpiece of the government.

The current vanishing freedom and impartiality of the press was not only reconfirmed in interviews but also during several informal conversations. Further, on 21 October 2013 Reuters reported that the Sierra Leone editor of the *Independent Observer* and a local journalist had been arrested by the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLP) for publishing an article which compared President Ernest Bai Koroma to a rat. The event stirred many concerns over press freedom in the country.⁴² Almost simultaneously, the latest Freedom House study (2014) held that Sierra Leone's status had declined from 'Free' (in 2012) to 'Partly Free' (in 2014) as a result of persistent problems with corruption and lack of transparency.⁴³

In addition, several CSOs pointed to the fact that some individuals use the status of their organisation as a stepping-stone to enter state politics or benefit from governmental support in one way or another. A recent study conducted by Oxfam, *Civil Society Engagement with Political Parties during Elections*, reached out to political parties in Sierra Leone in order to gather their views on the activities and work of local CSOs. According to the report, political parties were concerned about the existence of numerous so-called 'briefcase CSOs'. One interviewee claimed that many CSOs also changed their address or disappeared, as there was no structured funding. Interviewees further reasoned that increased donor support implicitly encouraged locals to found a CBO or CSO for no other purpose than income generation.⁴⁴

In light of the above it is thus worth asking what has happened to Sierra Leone's civil society, in particular during the later stages of the peace-building process. Concretely, why is Sierra Leone's civil society at risk of being gradually depoliticised?

Instrumentalisation of civil society in peace-building and development processes

In the scope of both periods of field research the majority of interviewees underscored that, during the conflict, CSOs emerged as (humanitarian) actors who complemented services the government was either too weak or unwilling to provide. According to one interviewee, 'While the CSO landscape exploded during

that time, most organisations did not realise that this was to be a constant commitment'.⁴⁵ In this regard all CSOs were posed the question 'Do you think that your organisation covers areas that should be tackled by the government or even the international community? If so, what areas; if not – why?' Almost all CSOs answered the question in the affirmative. In the main areas that should be tackled by the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) included: healthcare services, water and sanitation, support for disadvantaged women, education (children and adult), training, workshops and sensitisation programmes for chiefs and communities, community development, and agriculture.

In order to get a much clearer picture of the magnitude and variety of the activities local and international CSOs were engaging in, the author conducted a mapping of registered CSOs and INGOs according to their activities. The mapping identified 358 formally registered civil society organisations in Sierra Leone as of March 2014, of which 213 were local CSOs and 145 INGOs. The results are presented in Figure 1.

Taking into account Sierra Leone's low Human Development Index rank (183 out of 187 in 2013), it does not come as a surprise that communal, human and social development appears to be the largest engagement area. The wide spectrum of activities generally includes water supply, nutrition programmes, healthcare, education, rehabilitation plans and stimulating local forms of businesses and employment generation. Notably interviews with local CSOs working on human rights-related issues brought to light that, by and large, their activities more closely resembled service provision (human rights training or legal assistance) than advocacy or confronting authorities with human rights violations. Similarly, it was further emphasised that Sierra Leone's Unions are very weak and lack the capacity to lobby for their concerns. The author's findings correspond well with the aforementioned Oxfam study from 2013, which identified

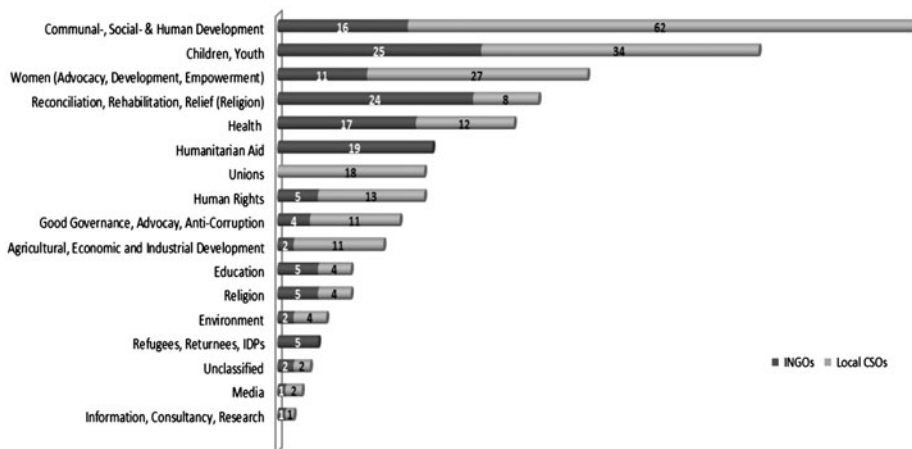


Figure 1. Local CSOs and INGOs mapping per activity, as at March 2014.

Sources: Data for the mapping analysis was retrieved and compiled from United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Support Office Sierra Leone; United Nations Office of the Special Advisor on Africa; Global Hand, *Directory of Development Organisations in Sierra Leone* Vol. I.B. Africa Edition, 2010; and Accountability Alert Sierra Leone.

several striking challenges for CSOs in trying to influence political parties in Sierra Leone. These are:

- fragmentation among CSOs such that they have an inconsistent voice on issues;
- poor engagement skills, which limit their persuasiveness;
- lack of innovation;
- insufficient human and financial resources to maintain engagement after elections.⁴⁶

Correspondingly Cormack-Hale critiques past and ongoing efforts to rebuild Sierra Leone's civil society landscape as problematic, since democratisation and development objectives actually 'undermine the overarching policy objective of rebuilding and strengthening the failed state'.⁴⁷ In her view, this has led to a counterproductive phenomenon in Sierra Leone: strengthening CSOs did not lead to corresponding increases in state capacity. Cubitt, too, contends that external policy interventions targeting Sierra Leone's civil society distorted democracy and removed accountability from the local sphere.⁴⁸ In principle, this article agrees with the general criticism that externally led peace-building and development interventions instrumentalised Sierra Leone's civil sphere. Clearly CSOs emerged as a safety net to deal with the casualties of a liberal peace-building and development course. Yet one has to be careful not to over simplify the causes of depoliticisation. First, it remains frequently disregarded that local civil society actors also manoeuvred themselves into a position to supply services that the GoSL has thus far lacked the capacity and/or political will to provide. Without denying the philanthropic intent and extremely important work of these organisations, working or founding a CSO is certainly an opportunity for income generation, as well as a means of acquiring local prestige. As noted earlier, the existence of numerous briefcase CSOs, as well as notorious corruption within CSOs, elucidates how ostensible civil actors instrumentalised their own country's mushrooming civil society landscape to make ends meet.

Second, recalling earlier discussions on the conceptualisation and usage of civil society in the sub-Saharan African context, the socio-historical dynamics of a society should not be dismissed. The country's political culture, in the shadows of a hitherto bifurcated state,⁴⁹ remains an overlooked entry point in the attempt to understand why civil society takes on a different political dimension in the context of non-Western states.

Cultural particularism, political culture and the bifurcated state

Sierra Leone's history of state formation, the decade-long civil war and the ensuing peace-building and development efforts shaped the country's civil sphere and social fabrics in seemingly ambiguous ways. Compared to societies in the West, Sierra Leone is a country full of socially entangled dualisms grounded in the intersections of primordial and civic everyday actions, realities and spheres. Despite (external) efforts to liberalise societal structures and local politics, primordial and civic juxtapositions linger within the civil sphere to this day. Numerous examples help to better illustrate this point: official law is still challenged by the uncertain and *illiberal* nature of widely practised and accepted

customary law. Chiefs are struggling with the power given to local councillors, while local councillors may feel a certain loyalty towards their chiefs. Gender equality campaigns are frequently run by women who belong to secret societies favouring the practice of female genital mutilation. Hospitals and medical INGOs operate next to traditional medicine men. Youth complain about inter-generational power imbalances and patriarchal societal structures while showering community elders with deference and respect. Before the war thousands of civilians successfully demonstrated for the reinstatement of a multiparty system, whereas today Sierra Leone's political parties hardly differ in their ideological viewpoints and beliefs. Liberal values such as democracy and good governance are praised, even though clientelism, neo-patrimonialism and patronage are tolerated and continue to exist. CSOs complaining about the lack of an active and vibrant civil society are themselves frequently close to political parties and/or local chiefs, as well as being heavily dependent on the generosity and agenda-setting of their donors. Above all, externally led efforts to strengthen and empower local civil society actors by means of a liberal agenda have inadvertently bolstered societal arrangements reflecting primordial features of tribalism, ethnicity and regionalism.

In other words, the characteristics of any civil sphere are deeply rooted within the history of state formation. In the Sierra Leonean case the British colonial administrative method of indirect rule (1800–1961) reconfigured local political hierarchies through capitalist and governmental penetration, but many local features and political and social practices remained, including chieftaincy (though distorted or misused by the British), spiritual beliefs, judicial and land practices and secret societies.⁵⁰ Although democratic institutions have more-or-less successfully been established since the end of the war, the country's civil sphere remains largely embedded in neo-patrimonial and/or religious networks and tribalism. Sierra Leone's civil sphere is characterised by a salient socially and culturally embedded consensus about the duty to shower community elders and chiefs with loyalty and respect – even though their actions may not be to the benefit of all.

Some interviewees spoke of the urgent need to reform the chieftaincy system to make it more responsive to social and economic realities at the grassroots level but still referred to it as a cultural outfit that needs to be maintained. Then again, the widespread acceptance of patronage, clientelism and big men mentalities rests upon a societal logic that interlinks social, political and economic spheres much more tightly than in Western societies. Independent actions or decisions by community members would certainly risk social exclusion, enormous tensions and, in the worst case, being expelled from communal life. Social networks are crucial to everything from employment opportunities to ritual initiations to individual identity. 'People do not have relations they are relations'.⁵¹ Consequently the individual as an autonomous social actor is challenged by a political tradition of the collective as the true ethical and moral entity. It is important to emphasise at this point, however, that this observation should not be misinterpreted as suggesting that Sierra Leone's civil sphere lacks the determination for emancipation and transformation from below. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. Sierra Leoneans are presently in the midst of renegotiating societal intersections of the primordial and civil sphere and, consequently,

the nature and characteristics of state–society relations and communal life. The mushrooming of CSOs and CBOs during the conflict led to an interesting ancillary effect: an increasing intersection of a primordial (traditional) and civic (based on Western liberalism) public within the civil sphere. How values and norms that constitute a liberal civil society are going to be socially entrenched in the long haul should be task of the Sierra Leonean civil sphere and not the Western researcher and practitioner, however. Yet, as the Sierra Leonean case unmistakably shows, such an organic progression cannot take root if the average Sierra Leonean is deprived of basic physiological needs.

Voices from the civil sphere: education to foster social transformation

Societal transformation stemming from the grassroots level in any form can only take root if certain basic needs are met. Despite considerable support from the international community, Sierra Leone remains among the poorest places on earth. Even with economic growth, overall poverty reduction has had only marginal success. Current life expectancy is low, almost half of the population is illiterate, child mortality rates are high and every fifth woman dies from preventable complications during birth or pregnancy – to list only a few of Sierra Leone's present development dilemmas. The country's high dependence on aid, arguably one of the legacies of century-long slave trade and colonial rule, impedes self-sufficient development in various areas and aspects of everyday life. This clearly also hampers grassroots agency and voice. During a discussion about Sierra Leone's problems of food shortages in the rural areas, one CSO director stated, 'Peace is food. You cannot have peace when you are hungry.'⁵² The principles of fundamental human needs were famously defined by Maslow.⁵³ Thus, if basic needs such as food, shelter and security are not taken care of, a population will be tremendously weakened in striving for self-actualisation and empowerment. As one interviewee noted about the challenges encountered in doing advocacy work, 'Before you even start talking, people ask you already: what do you have for me?'⁵⁴ Especially in Freetown, the same person noted, civil society actors encounter the difficulty that people neither have the time nor the leisure to 'listen to your talk'. Their first priority is to make an income in whatever way they can. Needless to say, CSOs often provide incentives (eg food and beverages) before they even start with their work. Widespread poverty affects political activism, if not mobilisation strategies for a particular cause, in several respects.

In an attempt to get a much clearer impression about people's everyday concerns and needs, the field research took inspiration from the World Bank's trilogy, *Voices of the Poor*. The aim was to give voice to locals and gain more knowledge about the priorities of ordinary Sierra Leoneans (the civil sphere) during the peace-building and development phase in their country. In this attempt all interviewees were asked: 'If you had three wishes for the future of your country, what would they be?' Their answers are summarised in Figure 2. Of course, they are not representative of Sierra Leone as a whole. Rather, Figure 2 epitomises the voices of 179 respondents, which include not only people from CSOs, CBOs and associations but also group interviews with home-grown youth clubs, communities or individuals the author approached and



Figure 2. 'Wish list' of all interviewees in Sierra Leone, 2011–12.

spoke to in the street. The random sampling notwithstanding, responses reflect the findings of a countrywide opinion poll conducted by the Freetown-based CEDSA in 2009, which also ranked education as top.

Figure 2 leads to one central observation, namely that the first three priorities (education, democracy and good governance, and youth empowerment and employment generation) embrace areas of fundamental social change. In other words, they all lean towards transformative peace-building and development paradigms.⁵⁵ This is particularly interesting as the root causes of Sierra Leone's structural violence are, among other factors, manifested in the unequal relationship between the grassroots population and a privileged few. In conjunction with CEDSA's opinion poll, Figure 2 illustrates how ordinary Sierra Leoneans would like to seek autonomy and self-sufficiency to equalise those power relationships. In so doing, the majority of respondents listed education as their top wish. The importance placed on education was not only prevalent during several interviews, but also in the scope of many informal conversations throughout both research stays. An OECD report on civil society and international development rightly states that 'lack of education stops a great majority of Africans from being citizens in their own right'.⁵⁶ Schools are indeed the birthplace for a (civil) society to flourish in, enabling people at the individual and collective level to articulate and advocate their concerns and needs. In interviews with youth clubs education was usually perceived as being empowered to 'be' or 'become somebody', as was vocational training. The clear wish to have a certain control over one's own life and future was a recurring theme during focus group discussions and interviews with youth clubs and communities. Yet, for most young people in Sierra Leone, such control, as well as freedom of choice, was a privilege they may never have. At the time of writing, only 43.3% of all Sierra Leoneans are reported to be literate.⁵⁷ By and large the GoSL's response, but also that of the international community, towards the country's public educational systems has been disappointing. Although there has been a rapid growth in the number of children who complete primary school since the end of the war, there are still deep inefficiencies in the quality of education.

Conclusion and further implications

The aim of this article was to set forth the argument that a society cannot be reconstructed, or strengthened, based on an externally introduced idea(l) but instead through building upon the historically, culturally and socioeconomically embedded characteristics that are already part of existing societal experiences. After more than 10 years of peace-building and on-going development efforts based on a liberal agenda, Sierra Leone's civil society landscape operates much more as a subsystem of state politics rather than independently challenging governance and political decision making from the outside. In this regard three distinct yet interrelated phenomena were identified in order to explain why processes of depoliticisation during Sierra Leone's peace-building process occurred. These include the instrumentalisation of the country's civil society landscape, the legacies of colonial rule and socially entrenched forms of neo-patrimonialism, as well as abject poverty and a lack of education.

The absence of political influence can be dangerous in two ways. It not only fosters sentiments of frustration and anger but, in the long term, can even trigger new forms of conflict, resistance or violent unrest. However, it must be emphasised that the above-discussed phenomenon of depoliticisation should not distract from the tremendous efforts of Sierra Leonean civil society actors to build peace and contribute to the country's developmental process. Nor was the intention to argue that Sierra Leone's civil sphere remains depoliticised or that local processes of re-politicisation of whatever type and form may not occur. Rather, the aim was to highlight why processes of depoliticisation occur during peace building and development and, above all, why ordinary people lack agency and voice. In this regard there are at least two implications for future research to be drawn from the Sierra Leonean experience. First, more research is necessary on civil society actors and service delivery in fragile states. Are there clear interlinkages between a growing civil society landscape (including INGOs) and the retreat of the state and to what new forms of governance will this lead? Second, Sierra Leone's history of state formation, the decade long civil war and the ensuing peace-building and development efforts shaped the country's civil sphere and social fabrics in seemingly ambiguous ways. Compared to societies in the West, it is a country full of socially entangled dualisms grounded in the intersections of primordial everyday actions, realities and spheres. When it comes to the sub-Saharan African region there is a clear shortage of research on whether and how such processes of societal renegotiation take place and take hold. A careful observation of such processes of renegotiation would allow us to get a much better understanding of whether and how externally introduced liberal values and norms are socially and politically entrenched and reproduced over the long haul.

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Notes

1. For the purposes of this article the concepts of ‘civil society’ and ‘civil sphere’ are used interchangeably. A critical discussion on the appropriation of both terms to the sub-Saharan African region can be found in Datzberger, “Civil Society in sub-Saharan African Post-conflict States.”
2. More details about how qualitative and quantitative data were collected over the past four years are provided in the empirical section.
3. UN News Centre, “Sierra Leone is a Success Story built on Steady Progress.” New York, March 26, 2014.
4. Jantzi and Jantzi, “Development Paradigms.”
5. See, for instance, Lidén, “Building Peace”; Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*; and Mac Ginty and Richmond, “The Local Turn in Peace Building.”
6. Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness, “Istanbul Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness”, <http://cso-effectiveness.org/istanbul-principles,067>, accessed September 1, 2014.
7. Ferguson, *Global Shadows*.
8. Mac Ginty and Richmond, “The Local Turn in Peace Building.”
9. *The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States* was endorsed during the 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, Korea (November 29 – December 1 2011). For more information see: <http://www.newdeal4peace.org>.
10. Ibid.
11. Debiel and Sticht, *Towards a New Profile?*
12. ICAI, *DFID’s Support for Civil Society Organisations*.
13. See <http://www.un.org/en/civilsociety/>, accessed January 4, 2015.
14. World Bank, *Civil Society Background 2014*. <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,contentMDK:20093161~menuPK:220423~pagePK:220503~piPK:220476~theSitePK:228717,00.html>.
15. See, for instance, Paffenholz, *Civil society & Peacebuilding*.
16. See, for instance, Richmond, “A Post-liberal Peace”; Nadarajah and Rampton, “The Limits of Hybridity”; and Wennmann, *Aid Effectiveness*.
17. Mac Ginty, “Gilding the Lily?”; and Narten, “Dilemmas of Promoting Local Ownership.”
18. This point was also put forward by Paffenholz, *Civil Society & Peacebuilding*, 55.
19. Paris, “Saving Liberal Peacebuilding.”
20. Paffenholz, *Civil Society & Peacebuilding*, 56.
21. Datzberger, “Civil Society in sub-Saharan African Post-conflict States”; Lewis *Civil Society in Non-Western Contexts*; and Williams and Young, “Civil Society and the Liberal Project.”
22. See, for instance, Chabal and Daloz, *Africa Works*; Chatterjee *The Politics of the Governed*; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Civil Society and the Political Imagination*; Ferguson, *Global Shadows*; Harbeson et al., *Civil Society and the State in Africa*; Kaviraj and Khilnani, *Civil Society*; Lewis, *Civil Society in Non-Western Contexts*; and Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*.
23. Datzberger, “Civil Society in sub-Saharan African post-conflict States.”
24. Ibid.
25. Cf. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 19.
26. Barkawi and Laffey, *Democracy, Liberalism, and War*.
27. As for instance argued by Chabal and Daloz, *Africa Works*.
28. See, for instance, Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*; and Güneş-Ayata and Roniger, *Democracy, Clientelism and Civil Society*.
29. Lumumba-Kasongo, *Liberal Democracy and its Critics*.
30. Goetschel and Haggmann, “Civilian Peacebuilding”; Holmén, *Snakes in Paradise*; Howell and Pearce, *Civil Society and Development*; and Verkoren and van Leeuwen, “Complexities and Challenges for Civil Society Building.”
31. Jaeger, “Global Civil Society.”
32. Denney, “Ebola cannot easily be cured but West Africa Crisis may have been Preventable.” *Guardian*, July 8, 2014.

33. Cubitt, "Constructing Civil Society"; and Cormack-Hale "Partners or Adversaries?"
34. Because of the unpredictable nature inherent in both the institutional life of INGOs and CSOs and their funding allocations from donors, it is acknowledged that the mapping is not fully complete and is therefore subject to change.
35. In many interviews the wartime period was described as the key moment for CSOs and civil movements to arise. Apart from numerous local civilian initiatives to negotiate peace at grassroots level, to report human rights abuses or to provide humanitarian assistance and relief, Sierra Leone's broader civil sphere also mustered a will of steel to bring the conflict to an end. One of the most prominent examples includes the May 2000 demonstrations outside RUF rebel leader Foday Sankoh's house, in which about 30,000 people participated.
36. Cormack-Hale, "Partners or Adversaries?," 141–142.
37. Cubitt, "Constructing Civil Society," 101.
38. Interview, lecturer, Fourah Bay College, Freetown, August 15, 2012.
39. Interview, Head of Department, Fourah Bay College, Freetown, August 18, 2012.
40. Gardner, "Fourah Bay College: The Decline of Sierra Leone's Oxford in the Bush." February 18, 2014, in blog by Mats Utas. <https://matsutas.wordpress.com/2014/02/18/fourah-bay-college-the-decline-of-sierra-leones-oxford-in-the-bush-by-tom-gardner/>, accessed June 10, 2015.
41. Interview, Head of Department, Fourah Bay College.
42. "Sierra Leone Editor arrested for comparing President to Rat." Reuters, October 21, 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/21/us-leone-rat-idUSBRE99K0QN20131021>.
43. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2014#.UyQ12ZyluQE>, accessed November 15, 2014.
44. Oxfam, *Civil Society Engagement*.
45. Interview, director, Freetown, July 8, 2011.
46. Oxfam, *Civil Society Engagement*.
47. Cormack-Hale, 150.
48. Cubitt, 107.
49. Cf. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*; and Ekeh "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa."
50. Harris, *Sierra Leone*.
51. Piot, *Remotely Global*.
52. Interview, director, Freetown, July 4, 2011.
53. Maslow, "Theory of Human Motivation."
54. Interview, director, Freetown, July 31, 2012.
55. Jantzi and Jantzi, "Development Paradigms."
56. OECD, *Civil Society and International Development*.
57. UNDP, *Human Development Reports: Sierra Leone*. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SLE>, accessed April 16, 2015.

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