Whose Peace? Grappling with Local Ownership in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Local ownership has become a basic tenet of post-conflict peacebuilding strategies sponsored by the International Community. However, research on peacebuilding underlines a gap between policy discourse and actual practice. This paper illustrates the challenges and opportunities posed by the promotion of local ownership by assessing the case of Sierra Leone. This West African country is often labelled as one of the most successful peacebuilding interventions thus far. However, by analysing the interaction between insiders and outsiders during the initial post-conflict phase (1996-2007), this paper concludes that stakeholders perceived differently the meaning and policies associated with the concept of local ownership. In this regard, the country's peacebuilding "success story" should be nuanced in light of the shortcomings and challenges identified. The Sierra Leonean case study provides us with an opportunity to revisit and reflect on the contradictions and limitations of the liberal peacebuilding project with a view to work towards sustainable peace and development.

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The notion of local ownership has become a pivotal mantra in international strategies to deal with conflict. Post-conflict peacebuilding has been in vogue during the last three decades as a set of practices and institutional arrangements attached to international efforts to promote sustainable peace in extremely vulnerable and fragile post-conflict countries. The principle of "local ownership" is perceived by both international and local stakeholders as a critical aspect to ensure the sustainability and legitimacy of peacebuilding reforms. Local ownership is described by international stakeholders as the degree of control that locals have in the design and implementation of post-conflict peacebuilding reforms (Donais, 2009, p. 3). The United Nations (U.N.) tends to differentiate local ownership from national ownership. While the former is understood in a broader sense as state and non-state actors' involvement within a given context, the latter is restricted to the interaction between international actors and state elites (Machold & Donais, 2011). In practice, however, local ownership policies trigger dynamics of tension and confrontation between international and local actors. In this regard, the notion of local ownership remains a contested field in terms of its semantic and operational implications.

This paper delves precisely into some of these contradictions, challenges, and tensions, contributing to critical debates emerging during the last two decades around the so-called "liberal peace project." This project was defined by Newman, Paris, and Richmond (2009) as "the promotion of democracy, market-based economic reforms and a range of other institutions associated with 'modern' states as a driving force for building peace" (p. 3). This analysis distinguishes between international actors (or outsiders) and local actors (or insiders). We refer to external actors as the range of donors, international organizations, consultants, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) that define, plan and support liberal peace strategies while in-country political stakeholders, the local business community, and civil society organizations (CSOs) implement projects funded by the international community.

The first part of this paper will explore the two main challenges faced by local ownership in post-conflict peacebuilding contexts. There are different views about what local ownership actually means in post-conflict peacebuilding. This paper explores numerous practical and structural problems that hamper efforts to promote local ownership beyond rhetorical statements by international peacebuilders and national

administrators. Therefore, firstly we will unpack the notion of local ownership in order to understand the complex interaction between insiders and outsiders in post-conflict situations and explore tensions between external agendas and local ownership in peacebuilding processes.

The second part of the paper will focus on the Sierra Leone case study. The findings draw on semi-structured interviews with local and international stakeholders carried out between 2009 and 2015. A total of 30 interviews were conducted during field work in 2009, 2012, and 2015. Interviewees included government representatives, especially members of the Sierra Leone's People Party (SLPP), who had been in power between 2002 and 2007; local officials and experts involved in the elaboration of the different reforms or post-conflict peacebuilding strategies; representatives of bilateral and multilateral international organizations; and members of the main Sierra Leonean civil society organizations. Two focus groups were also conducted in August 2009 with students of peace and conflict at the University of Sierra Leone (Fourah Bay College).

Post-conflict peacebuilding efforts in Sierra Leone have been considered an example of success (Annan, 2001). Stability was achieved and credible elections held in a country that was dramatically ravaged by war during the 1990s. We will try to assess the relevance of the local ownership notion in the peacebuilding narrative while analyzing how local ownership was promoted by external actors in security sector reform, decentralization policies, and in the establishment of the Special Court. The authors explore mainly but not exclusively the critical historical period which unfolded between the end of hostilities and the end of the second presidential term of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, leading the SLPP government.

Finally, this paper will reflect on the extent to which Sierra Leoneans perceived the international post-conflict intervention in Sierra Leone as legitimate. The Sierra Leonean case shed lights on the achievements as well as the limitations and pending challenges of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm which is now being questioned not only by the critical literature but also by the emergence and growing influence exerted by non-western powerful actors in post-conflict environments, with different agendas, policies, and strategies. The notion of hybridity helps us understand the complex array of interacting and often overlapping discourses, practices, and interests at play in the post-conflict context. Thus, this paper contributes to build knowledge on hybrid post-conflict societies with the aim of helping the academic community, peace practitioners, policy makers, and international donors to develop tools to promote a sustainable peace

agenda that fulfils the needs and interests of the local populations who have endured protracted conflict and remain the main asset that peacebuilders can count on to design and implement successful long-term policies.

Understanding Local Ownership

Local ownership has become a pivotal element of the liberal peacebuilding consensus (Richmond, 2012; Paffenholz, 2015). The promotion of local ownership attempts to address shortcomings concerning the legitimacy and sustainability of the liberal peace project by giving greater emphasis to the role local actors should play in the design and implementation of peacebuilding strategies. By endorsing the local ownership agenda, international donors purposely looked for greater legitimacy and sustainability for their interventions. However, in practice, this encounter between international and local actors has resulted in dynamics characterized by tension, confrontation, or submission leading to changing strategies. In this context, the concept of hybrid peace emerged in the critical literature as an attempt to problematize notions of legitimacy and agency (Mac Ginty, 2010; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2016).

The growing importance of local ownership in the international agenda is driven by two policy objectives. The first one is achieving more efficiency and sustainability over time in peacebuilding activities. International stakeholders state that peacebuilding needs to be rooted in both domestic structures and views. External actors claim that they rely, wherever and whenever possible, on existing institutions and the local context (Sending, 2009a; 2009b). Even though the number of armed conflicts has decreased during the last decades (PRIO 2018; Straus, 2012), some studies underline that several international peacebuilding efforts are ineffective and unsustainable over time because ownership is neglected (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006). The second objective deals with ethics and legitimacy of intervention. The critical literature questions the limitations on state sovereignty that peacebuilding reforms are built upon as an externally driven exercise tightly controlled by outsiders (Donais, 2015; Richmond, 2012). In this regard, the search for efficiency and sustainability, on one hand, and for ethics and legitimacy on the other, has brought the international development community to champion the concept of local ownership.

Nevertheless, the concept is not new. Local ownership and similar concepts such as local participation or local empowerment were widely used by international organizations throughout the 1980s and 1990s. According to Andersen and Sending (2010), the concept of local ownership emanates from the discourse on development

cooperation policies and the crisis of such policies in the 1990s. The term was formally endorsed as a key concept for development aid in 1996, when the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development and Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) called for a comprehensive approach that "respects local ownership of the development process" (OECD DAC, 1996, p. 9). The concept appeared also in U.N. peace operations in 2001 (Annan, 2001). A few years later, the World Bank (2005) also emphasized the idea that developing countries "must be in the driver's seat and set the course" owning and implementing their development strategies. One of the most relevant documents was the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* in 2005, in which major stakeholders emphasized the need to improve results and mutual accountability. In the third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness that took place in Accra in September 2008, stakeholders pointed out the urgent need to make more progress in this field by releasing the Accra Declaration (OECD DAC, 2008, p. 5). They agreed on the Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations.

The Capstone Doctrine on principles and guidelines for U.N. Peacekeeping Operations lists the promotion of national and local ownership as one of the success factors in the operations. It states that "national and local ownership is critical to the successful implementation of a peace process" (United Nations, 2008). According to the U.N. (2010), local ownership is assumed to be "an imperative, an absolute essential, if peacebuilding is to take root" (pp. 9-10). Other actors in the U.N. system involved in peacebuilding focused on the matter. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also developed a series of studies on ownership and technical cooperation. Major bilateral donors and NGOs have followed suit, often attaching ownership to conditionality. The principle has also been endorsed by regional organizations such as the African Union and the European Union (Ejdus & Juncos, 2018).

The growing usage of the concept is not matched by a corresponding depth of analysis in policy statements. Aid agencies have been slow in translating these commitments into practices (Pouligny, 2009). Local ownership is above all a very ambiguous and conflicting concept (Collins & Thiessen, 2019). When we come to post-conflict peacebuilding contexts, this ambiguity becomes even more apparent. Stakeholders openly recognize the need to respect local ownership, but at the same time consider it wishful thinking due to the fragility of the local context (Ejdus, 2018).

The discourse around ownership revolves around fundamental questions of agency: who decides; who controls; who implements; and who evaluates (Donais, 2008). Getting into post-conflict interventions for instance, local ownership implies that "the reform of security policies, institutions and activities in a given country must be designed, managed and implemented by domestic actors rather than external actors" (Nathan, 2008, p. 19). In this sense, the role for outsiders is to support and facilitate local actors in fulfilling their security sector reform ambitions; while donors can foster and encourage local interest in security sector reform, control over the broader process, from inception to implementation, must remain in local hands.

When it comes to post-conflict reconstruction and statebuilding, the meaning of ownership is rarely explicitly and coherently defined. In this sense, the meaning is less important than the way the term ownership is used. Local ownership is a rhetorical concept used in different ways according to the interests and views of the different external and internal actors. According to Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Martin (2018), the United Nations and the European Union have approached local ownership primarily as a matter of engagement with national government elites.

Local ownership can be interpreted in many ways: as consultation; participation; control; accountability; or sovereignty. International actors promote local ownership according to different factors, including the mandate, perceptions, and interests at the headquarters and in the field (Sending, 2010). A degree of local ownership can be achieved at the interplay between a wide range of actors, interests, and contestations. Certainly, plurality and complexity, also within the outsiders' spectrum, is primordial to understand post-conflict peacebuilding scenarios. Understanding power asymmetries, also within the external actors' network, is critical; actors with greater access to power and resources are better placed to impose their views and agendas.

Why is then local ownership so hard to achieve? The literature that analyzes this issue tends to differentiate into two categories: implementation and structural problems. Implementation problems are related with the difficult and complex interaction and micro dynamics between local and external actors. External actors bring in an ambitious and demanding agenda. In a short period of time, post-conflict peacebuilding is supposed to restore military and political stability; increase democratization through elections; encourage economic growth; as well as eradicate poverty and reconciliation, among other things. Local ownership is presented as one of the main terms in the so-called "peacebuilder's contract" between insiders and outsiders (Barnett & Zürcher,

2008). Locals are supposed to lead the design and implementation of reforms, while outsiders should simply behave as facilitators. Thus, they should support but not lead local efforts. The actual praxis in the field is very different and local ownership is often limited by several circumstances. External actors allude to the lack of technical capacity by internal actors to implement reforms. This is coupled with domestic over reliance on external resources, and mutual mistrust between internal and external actors triggering tensions and bitter disputes over fast-paced reforms. These implementation hurdles explain why local ownership remains a hardly achievable goal (see, among others, Autesserre, 2014; Lake, 2017).

The literature has also highlighted structural problems. Beyond implementation challenges, there are elements transcending the local level that make it very difficult or even impossible for local ownership to exist. Authors such as Sending (2010), Donais (2012; 2015), Duffield (2007), and Chandler (2008) challenge the principles of the liberal peace project, particularly its moral high ground and its unattainable aspiration to local autonomy, provided that tighter external control over reforms is considered to be crucial at the same time for the success of post-conflict peacebuilding efforts. Ultimately, local problems are often examined through Western lenses and one-size-fits-all formulas are applied without considering the local context. Therefore, the roots of the problems are cultural and epistemological, underscoring the need to rethink how contexts where we intervene are analyzed.

Thus, there is a wide gap between how local ownership is defined in policy documents and how it is usually interpreted and operationalized in the field. While local actors understand ownership as a right (above all as a right to control externally initiated policies), external actors see ownership as a conditional policy that hinges on the host governments' political will and capacity to implement projects (Sending, 2010). There are two fundamental problems with the latter approach. First of all, liberal peacebuilding operations see local ownership as an instrumental concept, an end subordinated to external agendas. Secondly, local ownership agendas often conceal a very asymmetric relationship of power between donors and host governments, triggering tensions and divisions. Thus, local ownership efforts are often perceived by local actors as a strategy to disguise the actual policies implemented by the liberal peacebuilders (Bojicic-Dzelilovic & Martin, 2018). External actors need to develop a clear understanding of what local ownership entails, since their agendas may

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inadvertently obstruct valuable contributions coming from local actors (Van Leeuwen et al., 2020).

Who Really Owns Peace in Sierra Leone?

Sierra Leone was labelled by U.N. officials as a "laboratory" of post-conflict peacebuilding reforms (United Nations Security Council, 2008). Hundreds of projects, reforms, and initiatives were put in place since the end of the war around the three main reconstruction components: security, democratization, and socioeconomic development (Mateos, 2012). The European Union, the United Kingdom, and the World Bank have been the main donors and thousands of millions of dollars have been invested towards peacebuilding. Four general elections and different local elections have been held since the war ended in 2002. The late U.N. Secretary General, Kofi Annan (2006), in his last address to the U.N. Security Council said Sierra Leone is "one of the success stories of the United Nations." Former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair (2009), also deemed Sierra Leone as an "African's success story" and the British intervention in the country as a "foreign policy success" (VOA News, 2007).

Undeniably, almost two decades of reforms since the conflict ended have contributed to security and political stability in Sierra Leone. Nevertheless, some reports note that socioeconomic conditions for the bulk of the population to date, remain very severe. Tensions between the liberal and the social aspects of the peacebuilding project continue to pose many uncertainties in the future of the country (Salih, 2009). While liberal peacebuilding reforms undoubtedly helped to restore key institutions after the war, international intervention has not significantly contributed to improve living conditions of the population. The socioeconomic impact of the Ebola crisis (2014-2016), and especially the quick collapse of the national health system, put into question the over-optimistic assessments concerning the achievements of the peacebuilding process in the country because "the region was ill prepared for a health crisis of such magnitude" (International Crisis Group 2015, p. *i*).

This ill-preparedness was due to structural factors, both at the domestic and international levels. In addition to widespread corruption inherited from the one-party system, the Structural Adjustment Plans (SAP) had a serious impact on the state's capacity to satisfy the basic needs of Sierra Leoneans. SAP policies were attached to conditionalities that led Sierra Leone to adopt policies that clearly prioritized short-term economic objectives over investments in health and education. For instance, the World Health Organization reported a reduction in the rate of community health workers per

1000 population from 0.11 in 2004 to 0.02 in 2008 (Kentikelenis et al., 2014). The national health system collapsed during the Ebola epidemic as a result of years of neglect by Sierra Leonean governments and international donors (Wilkin & Conteh, 2018). The commodification of health delivery, among other basic services, widened the social divide and beefed up the securitarian response to deal with social discontent (Mateos, 2015).

The Sierra Leone case study helps us to understand how internal and external actors interact in practice. This paper uses three particular reforms that took place in the initial post-conflict phase to discuss some of the limits and contradictions of the principle of local ownership in Sierra Leone: the security sector reform (process aimed at amending governance and the security pillar of a country); the decentralization process (process focused on transferring responsibilities from central government to other levels of governance); and the Sierra Leone Special Court (judicial body set up by the government of Sierra Leone and the United Nations to prosecute persons who bore the greatest responsibility for serious violations of international humanitarian law and Sierra Leonean law committed during the conflict).

The security sector reform was one of the most ambitious peacebuilding strategies undertaken in the country. Even before the end of the armed conflict in 2002, international actors prioritized this pillar which required reforms at various levels (Albrecht & Jackson, 2009). The decentralization process was also conceived as a central strategy to redress long standing institutional practices. The challenge was to give voice to regions and groups that remained marginalized by the central power, especially during the years of the one-party system led by Siaka Stevens (1971-1985). The World Bank played a key role in the design of the decentralization reform. Moreover, the establishment of the Special Court for Sierra Leone was highly controversial. Although officially requested by Tejan Kabbah's government, the creation of the Court responded to international pressures, especially from the United States, to tackle impunity for those who bore the greatest responsibility for the atrocities committed. It was described as the first modern international tribunal to sit in the country where the crimes were perpetrated. Among those who ended up being prosecuted by the court, there were key collaborators of the ruling SLPP party like the former Interior Minister Samuel Hinga Norman who died in custody in 2007. The Special Court had a particularly conflictive relationship with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that pursued restorative justice and considered that

the Court hindered its actions, as well as absorbing a large part of the international resources committed to transitional justice (Sessay et al., 2009).

Local ownership has been a key component of Sierra Leone's post-conflict peacebuilding process. Although key documents such as the Lomé Peace Accord (1999) did not explicitly mention the need to locally own the peace process, this notion has been a constant theme. On one hand, local stakeholders have underlined the relevance of local ownership since the very beginning of the reconstruction process, and even before. For example, James Jonah, who played a key role as Electoral Commission Chairman and Finance Minister in 1996 elections, argued that there was a determined effort to make ownership a reality. In his view, "the international community contributed enormously to the healing of the country, but the local contribution was not only critical, it was decisive in many respects" (Jonah as cited in Thompson 2007, p. 19). Likewise, key players such as ministers, civil society representatives, as well as international actors mentioned that local ownership was a policy priority in interviews, discourses, conferences, and in the daily exchange between local and key external stakeholders. In 2002, the U.K. Government took a far-reaching decision, spearheaded by the U.K. Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, to develop a ten-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which was subsequently agreed with the Government of Sierra Leone. It bound both parties to a series of commitments until 2012 and was a consequence of the alignment of the U.K. government policy agenda with development goals. The principle of "national ownership" was at the core of the MoU (Albrecht & Jackson, 2009).

Assessing the security sector reform in Sierra Leone, Ismail (2008) stressed that "the promotion of local ownership, capacity-building, and identification and support for local reform champions are highlighted as strategies for navigating the political undercurrents and complexities of reform processes" (p. 143). The enhancement of participation and capacity of local actors is thought to promote effectiveness, facilitate more rapid disengagement of donors into support roles, and provide the foundation for sustainability (Ismail, 2008). Despite the strong external presence, the notion of national ownership was firmly embedded in the genesis of the security sector reform, the decentralization process, and the Special Court. Most documents reflected the need to respect ownership to promote sustainability and legitimacy as critical steps for success. However, national or local ownership in a context of complex interaction between internal and external actors was not as simple as it would seem in documents.

Indicators to measure the degree of local ownership of a peacebuilding process by a sovereign country are yet to be developed. This research project makes a qualitative assessment based on stakeholders' perceptions on the degree of ownership that Sierra Leone enjoyed since the beginning of the reconstruction process. An analysis of perceptions allows us to unpack the notion of local ownership and to distinguish significant nuances.

Views by Sierra Leonean stakeholders were not homogenous. Most saw local ownership not as a starting point, but a process. Different actors held very different perceptions about local ownership. In addition, there were different agendas pursued by the peacebuilders. Some of these agendas were not always clearly communicated and this triggered mutual distrust and tensions between national and international stakeholders. Local ownership efforts were often hampered by structural problems. All in all, despite the efforts to promote local ownership, peacebuilding remained primarily a top-bottom and elite-centric process.

Most local stakeholders including the Sierra Leone government and local CSOs felt the international community played to the gallery while referring to local ownership. Rather than being mere facilitators of reforms, outsiders were perceived to be direct engineers of all those processes. This perception, widely shared by most actors interviewed by the lead researcher at the time, was not seen as posing a problem of legitimacy during the first years of post-war reconstruction. This can be explained by the fact that there was a critical lack of resources and local capacities at the time. Implementation challenges were seen as something unavoidable if we consider that the country had almost collapsed during the civil war. Nonetheless, interviewed actors when analyzing local ownership in the security sector reform gave a nuanced picture regarding the design and implementation stages of post-conflict peacebuilding. In the words of Francis Kaili, a research participant, at the time serving as a member of Sierra Leone's Office of National Security (ONS):

> From the initial stage, it was difficult for the government to entirely own the process. The mechanisms we implanted were directly looking at the British model. We noticed that all these things were just transplanted from Britain [...] They were not ideal to the Sierra Leone environment but because they were providing the funds they were dictating the terms to a very large extent. [...] To be honest with you, of course there were consultations going on at that time, but I have seen a lot of confidential correspondences that have going on between the

state actors and the advisers, and they were not healthy. Terms were largely dictated by the advisers...and even in the consultative process, they were most of the times acrimonious and we did not have had this kind of experience in Security Sector Reform, so we had no local capacity in terms of human resources with regard to how managing the process and how to go about it...and that was a problem.

As for the design of reforms, stakeholders felt these were driven by donors and assumed by the Sierra Leonean government. Although there was negotiation on the content and parameters of the reforms, local political actors recognized that acceptance of reforms and their attached conditionalities were imposed due to dependence on resources and lack of local capacity to carry out reforms that required advanced technical skills. At the same time, local actors explained that they were left with a very narrow margin by their international counterparts to adjust policies and programs sponsored by the International Community to the local context. For their part, donors believe that local actors were able to participate somehow in the design process even though reforms were essentially coordinated and directed by external actors due to lack of local capacity. Concerning implementation, most reforms were essentially controlled by external actors. The international community set the pace of the reforms through conditionality mechanisms to scrutinize the government's management capacity. Whilst local actors who participated in this research project recognized that external actors gradually enabled local authorities to make decisions over how to implement policies, the former continued to monitor implementation of reforms in a way that local actors felt did not serve their goals.

When we analyze the different reforms, the level of local ownership in the security sector reform and in the decentralization process (especially in the implementation phase) was much higher than in the Special Court. In fact, most local actors, especially CSOs, and even senior international stakeholders felt that the Special Court was an exogenous experiment that was neither fully understood nor valued in the country as a step towards reconciliation. A research participant, an SLPP member of the Sierra Leonean government, at the time gave voice to the administration's resistance to the establishment of a Special Court in the country in the following terms:

> We were forced to sign a draft of the agreement for the Special Court which came from New York. And then, some of the elements were negotiated but there was a lot of tension at the time and then the Special Court agreement came into

place. [...] Even the Special Court had more jurisdiction than the Supreme Court itself, you know? The Constitution of Sierra Leone did not allow for that, the Constitution of Sierra Leone places the Supreme Court above any other court.

Stakeholders conceived local ownership differently. Ismail (2008) defines participation as symbolic, active, and effectual. Symbolic participation refers to the representational and identity value that comes with the involvement of local actors in reform processes. Active participation relates to the process of contributing to, and organizing, events, debates, and policymaking. Effective participation consolidates both aspects by showcasing how the outcomes of reforms (such as consultations, defense reviews, threat assessments, or strategic doctrines) reflect the views, sensibilities, and needs of local actors. These three elements combined give reform processes de jure and de facto legitimacy, foster the desire for change within local actors, and set the peacebuilding agenda on a path towards sustainability. Thus, participation is a series of events but also a goal, a process, and an outcome of reforms.

Although there are subtle differences among these three observed reforms, we can distinguish five types of actors that in one way or another participated in the process of design and implementation: governmental policy makers who were in charge of implementing policies and usually belonged to the ruling party; local technical agents who helped outsiders to implement reforms (they were not always ruling party members or most times were called in from abroad to take on a position); key CSOs in the country; local communities, i.e., the direct recipients of reforms; external actors from INGOs to bilateral and multilateral donors. When interviewed, these five categories of actors clearly showed different perceptions of the process. It is important to highlight that there was not a consistent view about local ownership and the perception of agency. Actors developed and constructed different perceptions according to their role in the local peacebuilding scenario. While a few civil society organizations actors felt very positive about their degree of involvement in peacebuilding reforms, most considered that at the end of the day they were neither properly consulted nor invited to most meetings where these reforms were discussed and planned.

Local ownership efforts in the post-conflict phase had a limited impact in terms of the range of stakeholders that were actively involved. While local political elites were engaged in some way in the design and implementation of reforms, it seems clear that other local actors, especially CSOs and local communities, were often left out of consultation processes. While some CSOs recognized that at certain times they were

consulted in the design and implementation phases, they firmly considered that most of the reforms had been set up already and there was little willingness to take their input into account. Likewise, and as noted earlier, local communities were informed about the implications and outcomes of the different reforms but were rarely consulted before the design of the reform. As research participant Kadi Jumu, former member of the international organization Christian Aid, pointed out:

> [...] the big problem here is that before any project initiation or before any intervention, the communities are hardly consulted, and then, when it is implemented they want the community's involvement [...] They come and then they just announce that they would do the project here and they do it [...] they don't go and work with the communities and find the problem.

Security sector reform seems to be a special case since different actors admitted that some of their notions of security and justice were incorporated.

In sum, most reforms were not really rooted in local views and dynamics. International actors did not make enough room for local civil society to meaningfully contribute to the process of social change. As the Sierra Leone National Recovery Strategy warned in 2003, peacebuilding strategies did not rely on a bottom-up approach, deemed crucial to build new foundations for local governance (Thompson, 2007). This was echoed by students who participated in focus group discussions at the University of Sierra Leone (Fourah Bay College):

> In most of these cases, they just designed these programs, go down to the people and the people just have to accept whatsoever had been decided. As an example, in a certain village the people wanted a warehouse where they could store their own products, but when the organization went there they thought they should build toilets for the people. After building these toilets facilities, instead of using them for the intended purpose, they were using the toilets to store materials.

Local ownership in Sierra Leone suffered from another practical problem: mounting mutual mistrust. At the beginning, when President Tejan Kabbah (1996-2007) came to power in 1996, the new leadership, its advisers, and donors shared views on what needed to be done. Nevertheless, perceptions of poor results and corruption scandals eventually led to a very tense relationship between both sides. Donors became increasingly frustrated by slow progress on governance issues, particularly on tackling corruption, public financial management, and service delivery. Donors tried a range of methods to accelerate progress including private diplomacy, public statements, and

conditional aid. Donor influence on the country was extensive (Cooper, 2006): combining the use of old fashioned conditionalities with newer post-conditionality forms of influence through direct involvement in government, such as the integration of external advisers in the decision-making structures of many ministries.

For its part, the Sierra Leonean government felt that donors were imposing their own agenda of priorities with special emphasis on institution building while, from 2002 onward, the former focused on strengthening basic services which they considered strategically crucial in order to remain in power. Governmental actors felt pressurized to obtain quick results. Growing mutual suspicion was even captured by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) reports:

> [...] a fundamental problem found in talking to a range of stakeholders and Sierra Leoneans, was a lack of confidence and trust between the two parties on occasions. On the one hand, it was suggested that the government and NGOs lacked competence and energy, and on the other hand, that the U.K. did not take into account local considerations or rely on or trust Sierra Leoneans sufficiently to take the lead. (DFID as cited in Thompson, 2007, p. 28)

Mounting tension and mutual mistrust resulted in strong arguments between donors and the government. For instance, the U.N. expressed concern about rampant corruption and mismanagement of public resources (The signs are rusting, 2006). A few months before the 2007 general elections took place, donors withdrew international aid to the government in order to avoid a potential misuse of these resources. The tipping point of this crisis was reached in the aftermath of the first round of the 2007 presidential election when SLPP officials insinuated that the U.N. was trying to rig the process. *Unity*, a pro-governmental newspaper, contributed to it by releasing an article to show "the average Sierra Leonean how vicious the international community could be when they are pursuing an agenda of having puppet regimes in post conflict countries or emerging democracies like Sierra Leone." This piece was the first in a series that "aimed at exposing the international community's role in undermining the SLPP government" (*Unity*, 2007).

For Barnett and Zürcher (2008), this reality highlights a very complex strategic interaction between insiders and outsiders that can only be fully understood by examining "what actors want, the environment in which they strive to further those interests, and the outcomes of this interaction" (p. 29). External actors are trying to achieve their strategic goals based on the liberal peace principles whilst local political

elites try to resist donors' pressures for the sake of regime survival (Ferguson, 1990). In this context, many different dynamics emerge. On one hand, the peacebuilding program can be the outcome of cooperation between local elites and donors. To the contrary, the program may reflect the desire of peacebuilders for stability and local elites' will to ensure that reforms do not threaten their power base. In some cases, the state and local elites can redirect the distribution of assistance so that it is fully consistent with their interests. Last but not least, peacebuilding can also be conflictive when international or domestic actors resort to coercive tools to achieve their objectives (Barnett & Zürcher, 2008).

In the case of Sierra Leone, these four types of interactions took place at the same time. Peacebuilding became progressively less about cooperation and more conflictive as the peacebuilding agenda was co-opted and captured by the local elites. Nevertheless, this strategic interaction cannot be considered as symmetric or balanced. There was a deeply unequal relationship between both parties due to the implementation challenges highlighted above: Whereas outsiders were considered as capable and full of resources, insiders were considered as non-capable and lacking resources. As Solomon Berewa, former SLPP's Vice-president at that time stressed out:

> The donors were all one sided, they set the benchmarks; if you do not get them they do not put money for reforms. So, that created tension everywhere in the country. The donors set benchmarks, you had to respect these benchmarks and of course we cannot give you support or capacity for reform. So, this was a huge tension around the local institutions, that was a dilemma, do they have enough capacity to carry on? Are they going to push the people to their limit? Are they going to meet the benchmarks or not? And how would the program will continue? [sic]

In this unbalanced situation, there was an evident hierarchy of priorities. In this sense, donors' priorities and their need for quick results might have put a strain on their relations with local stakeholders. Kabbah's SLPP Government was no longer considered, using the concept coined by Duffield (2007), the right type of interlocutor to implement the liberal peace agenda.

The SLPP government accepted the terms and conditions of the peacebuilder's contract. Security, democratization, and socioeconomic development were all targets that SLPP government deemed paramount to the future of the country. In this sense, SLPP's aspirations were apparently liberal too. President Tejan Kabbah who had

professional experience working for international organizations, had been familiarized with peacebuilding discourses and methods. However, there were different political priorities that clashed and generated a certain degree of tension. The liberal agenda was not really about understanding the local specificities.

Furthermore, local ownership was to a great extent limited to wishful thinking. Actively promoting it, especially in the first stages, would have posed difficult dilemmas to resolve by international stakeholders but also local actors, who were both very worried about the security and the stabilization of the country. In this sense, the notion of local ownership was very problematic because from the donors' perspective the ownership of reforms could only be transferred gradually to local actors without compromising the overall success of the core short-term projects being implemented. The rhetorical use of the concept, however, was very instrumental in terms of promoting internal legitimacy to external partners. All in all, as Chandler (2010) contends, this reveals the narrow aspirations of the liberal peace, which in practice accepts to give up his transformational potential to become an instrument of regulation of fragile states and unstable spaces, something that Duffield (2007) has conceptualized as the securitization of policymaking.

While local ownership was not fully achieved, were some of its expected positive outcomes such as greater efficiency, sustainability, and legitimacy, taken into account? As we have noted, legitimacy was gradually worsening as local political elites perceived that outsiders were pressuring and discrediting them. The SLPP was not the right type of interlocutor anymore. The donors and most external actors were no longer trusted partners for the SLPP and some sectors of the population. Nonetheless, peacebuilding did not really suffer a crisis of legitimacy. Most Sierra Leoneans agreed with the need to carry out reforms in the political and economic realms in the post-conflict phase. This was reflected in the data analyzed by the Afrobarometer in its fifth round (2011/2013), noting that 53% of respondents of the survey felt the country was going in the right direction.

However, it is worth noting that legitimacy is narrowly linked to sustainability. Outstanding progress in stabilization contrasts with dire socioeconomic conditions that the bulk of the population faces on daily basis. Sierra Leone consolidated a virtual peace which poses many challenges and future uncertainties to the country (Richmond, 2008). According to Taylor, this virtual peace is "generally satisfactory to donors and external actors, and also to the connected domestic elites, but not broadly sustainable nor able to

enjoy [internal] hegemonic support" (2007, p. 553). The Ebola epidemic in 2014 and 2015 brought out the limited institutional capacity to manage the crisis while corruption is rampant (M'cleod & Ganson, 2018). In 2019, Sierra Leone ranked 181 out of 189 countries listed in the Human Development Index with a life expectancy of 52.2 years (UNDP, 2019).

Conclusions

The literature that questions the liberal peace paradigm underscores both the need to indigenize peacebuilding and understand it not as a simple process but as a complex space of interaction. Regarding the issue of indigenization, many authors have emphasized the naive approach of liberal peacebuilding by considering local post-war spaces as a *tabula rasa* or a vacuum that international partners must fill with exogenous reforms (Cramer, 2006). In this sense, peacebuilders should not focus on setting up the institutional pillars of a liberal democratic state as quickly as possible in the aftermath of conflict but to ensure that these pillars rest upon solid foundations; are adjusted to local conditions; and developed in ways that are supportive of the broader goals of sustainable peace (Donais, 2012). As Heathershaw and Lambach (2008) suggest, post-conflict peacebuilding is not a simple process of transition from war to peace, but rather a power struggle in which sovereignty is constantly contested and negotiated among global elite and local actors. This complex approach will enable us to better understand how local ownership becomes an instrumental concept in the hands of different actors, and how peacebuilding becomes a conflictive space where multiple agendas clash and create uncertain scenarios. International actors have rediscovered the explanatory potential of hybridity in contexts such as Sierra Leone, characterized by long-term dynamics that involve social negotiation; co-option; resistance; domination; assimilation; and co-existence between external and domestic actors (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2016).

Stability, democracy, and socioeconomic developments were shared goals of national authorities and international actors. However, donors did not include local views on the process. Thus, a hierarchical, top-down form of local ownership was promoted, in which internal political forces were expected both to uncritically adopt and to actively implement an external blueprint for post-conflict transformation. In this sense, the lack of mutual empathy and donors' inflexible stances resulted in political clashes between the donor community and host governments.

Rather than a point of departure, local ownership was conceptualized as a destination, a declaration of good intentions to disguise what in fact was a strong external control of certain stages of the reconstruction process. Different actors perceived local ownership in different ways: While some saw themselves as taking part in the design and implementation of different reforms, others felt they only had a symbolic participation. Local ownership was a top-down and elite-centric process since CSOs and local community participation was rather poor. On the other hand, the public discourse on the need to promote local ownership masked a tense and unequal relationship between the local government and donors, which was gradually built on mutual distrust due to the existence of different agendas, political priorities, and cultural perspectives. Finally, if local ownership was supposed to contribute to bring more legitimacy and sustainability to post-conflict peacebuilding processes, none of these goals were actually achieved. In the long run, donor legitimacy was questioned by the post-conflict SLPP government at the end of its mandate, and fragile sustainability—what we have called virtual peace—remained a core challenge to the success of peacebuilding efforts in the country.

The Sierra Leonean case study provides us with an opportunity to revisit and reflect on the contradictions, limitations, and tensions triggered by the liberal peacebuilding project. Further research is required to gain in-depth understanding as to whether it is possible to overcome the circular theoretical debate around local versus external peacebuilders, negative versus positive forms of hybrid peace, in order to revitalize the notion of local ownership, beyond its rhetorical use, to promote peacebuilding from below. In this sense, the relationship between the donor community and aid recipients in post-conflict countries should be reassessed while exposing the actual asymmetry of power between international and domestic actors along with its consequences in terms of decision-making processes, agenda setting, and strategic priorities. In the end, a lingering question is whether a peacebuilding project funded by the international community could ever be completely locally owned and to what extent the peacebuilding priorities of the donor community could ever merge with those of aid recipients.

In recent years, the critical literature has problematized the notion of peacebuilding identity as a fixed binary representation of the external versus the internal (Kappler, 2015). Along the same vein, Mac Ginty (2015) encouraged us to adopt a flexible approach to interpret what constitutes the local beyond traditional notions of

territoriality. While local and international peacebuilders will continue to grapple with tensions and contradictions between internal and external agendas, a critical view of these terms provides us with an opportunity to overcome rigid and self-limiting understandings by looking at socio-political realities as a tight net of dynamic activities and relationships in which internal and external players interact and pursue their agendas. Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that local ownership discourses may serve the purpose of concealing where the real power lies. As Van Leeuwen et al. (2020) underlined in their recent work on local peace committees in Burundi and eastern DR Congo, "while the local turn may potentially grant local stakeholders a louder voice in agenda setting, localizing peacebuilding does not by itself result in emancipation" (p. 298). The debate over local ownership in peacebuilding will linger on, for as long as relations between local actors, and between them and donors remain asymmetric.

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