

## Country case study: Liberia

### Brief history and context

A Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2003 ended a period of devastating violence that Liberia suffered during two civil wars, which lasted for almost 15 years, killed approximately 300,000 people, displaced over 1 million Liberians and damaged 85 per cent of the nation's private and public infrastructure. Since then, this small West African country of 4 million people has been in a fragile phase of post-conflict reconstruction. Liberian peace has survived two general and presidential elections; in 2005 Harvard-educated economist and politician, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, became the first female president in Africa; she was re-elected in 2011.

THRP inclusivity  
workshop in Monrovia.



There has been a United Nations presence in Liberia since 2003, in the form of a peacekeeping mission (UN Mission in Liberia), as well as a UN Country Team. Liberia was placed on the agenda of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) at the request of both the Liberian government and the Security Council in 2010. The government, with support from the PBC, has established three areas of mutual commitment that are considered peacebuilding priorities – rule of law, security sector reform and national reconciliation – and currently receives funding from the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) for various projects within these areas.

Liberia is a member of the group of fragile and conflict-affected states known as the g7+, formed in 2010 with the intention to share experiences and to promote the voices of fragile states in international policy discussions. They have signed on to and are a pilot country for the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (the “New Deal”) and its five identified Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSGs) as agreed at the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding forum for political dialogue. As part of this process they have completed one of the first steps of a fragility self-assessment and have launched a New Deal Dashboard in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The Dashboard is an online tool that will be used to track peacebuilding activities across Liberia that have been funded by international donors<sup>1</sup>.

## Partner organisation and study methodology

The Inclusive peacebuilding study in Liberia was undertaken by the Lutheran Church Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program (THRP)<sup>2</sup>. THRP seeks to contribute to peacebuilding processes in Liberia by strengthening communities and civic structures and by conducting activities on healing, peacebuilding and reconciliation.



The study was conducted in June–September 2014. The process included 20 key informant interviews, 20 focus group discussions, two national-level stakeholder workshops and several informal consultations across the regions in Bomi, Bong, Bassa and Montserrado counties. Participants interviewed include civil society organisations, groups and networks for differently abled persons, youth, women, farmers, NGOs, UN, government institutions, traditional, religious and diverse citizens groups and individuals.

## **Main inclusivity issues raised in the study**

Inclusive peacebuilding is a concept that is weakly applied in practice in Liberia. Community ownership is often weak and local peacebuilding initiatives are still mostly implemented directly by ‘outsider’ civil society organisations. Capacity and funding constraints work to the disadvantage of local communities, and the traditional community structures that could be capitalised on often remain unused.

### *Lack of local ownership*

Local people generally want to be involved in peacebuilding processes. Asked about their conceptual understanding of peacebuilding, a majority of respondents were of the view that peacebuilding should be a collective effort by state and non-state actors, including the business sector and international partners, and that local people from various positions in the community need to be included. Local ownership is considered an essential part of national ownership, in the sense that community members should take responsibility for carrying out peacebuilding initiatives on behalf of their communities, with the support of outsiders.

However, such local ownership appears to be vastly lacking. In the experience of many local stakeholders, projects – even at the community level – are planned and implemented without substantive local involvement and are thus perceived locally as outsider initiatives. This diminishes the motivation and sense of responsibility at the local level and impedes local peacebuilding initiatives. Community perspectives seem to be lacking in the decision-making around peacebuilding initiatives, partly because there is no national platform or coordination mechanism that links national civil society structures to local ones that more accurately reflect opinions on the ground.

### *Capacity and funding constraints at the community level*

The lack of local involvement and ownership in peacebuilding efforts is also linked to capacity constraints and limited funding at the local level. International and national NGOs tend to have greater access to trained staff and consultants for peacebuilding implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, the top-down approach of such NGOs fails to allow for capacity transfer to the communities and contributes to the capacity gaps between community members and NGO workers. There are no clearly defined structures and mechanisms in place in most communities that ensure recruitment and capacity building of local stakeholders. Community members emphasise the importance of mobilising and facilitating for local actors to become more active, building organisational development skills and training in monitoring and evaluation.

The capacity shortage can be linked to the lack of funding of community-based initiatives. Many local groups depend on funding from international donors and the government. However, the current trend of international donor funding being distributed through governmental and national NGO systems makes it hard for local groups to access funds. Local organisations' capacity constraints, including lack of networks and technical competence, contribute to their problems in accessing donor funding. Community-based organisations are familiar with the experience of being blocked from accessing such funding by the presence of middle-layer NGOs, who in turn do little to transfer knowledge to local organisations. Competition for funds to implement peacebuilding programmes is still high amongst peacebuilding groups in the country, which hampers collaboration. This suggests that focus should be placed on strengthening cooperation and collaboration between the government, NGOs and local community actors.

### *Traditional community structures for peacebuilding*

There are also concerns among local stakeholders regarding broken and dormant community structures, which helped community conflict resolution, mediation and development prior to the civil wars in Liberia. For example, the 'palava hut' has traditionally been used to mediate conflicts and to engage in dialogue on issues related to peacebuilding and community development. Another useful traditional structure is the 'koo' system, which encourages community members to come together in groups to work cooperatively to improve their individual and collective undertakings. This system is also used for mediating conflicts and to foster reconciliation in the community.

Presentation during THRP  
inclusivity workshop.





These relevant community structures are currently dormant and efforts to reactivate them are minimal or non-existent in most communities studied. Such structures have potential to play an important role in mediating inter/intra communal/ethnic conflicts and in creating space for constructive dialogue and reconciliation at the community level. In addition, they should be recognised and used for the purpose of emphasising the positive aspects of existing cultural and traditional values and practices, on key areas such as human rights and peaceful coexistence.

March against sexual and gender-based violence in Tubmanburg, Bomi County.

### *Reconciliation is prioritised only on paper*

The slow progress of the reconciliation programme designed by Liberian government is another common concern. The need for reconciliation between perpetrators and victims in Liberia's civil war is still a major issue in the peace process. The Liberian government has emphasised reconciliation as a key pillar for the transformation of Liberian society, but efforts to foster national reconciliation amongst citizens are still minimal. The country's main instrument for promoting national reconciliation and transformation, the National Reconciliation Roadmap (NRM), continues to suffer setbacks due to lack of political will and exclusion of civil society. For example, key aspects of the implementation of the NRM, including restoration of traditional peacemaking structures such as the 'palava hut', have not been put into effect.

The government of Liberia wants to lead the process, whereas civil society members interviewed consider the implementation of the NRM to be above all the responsibility of civil society. Many members of civil society feel they are better positioned to serve as lead players in the implementation of the NRM, since ordinary Liberians lack confidence in the government's handling of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which remain unaddressed five years after the report was published<sup>3</sup>. Civil society actors could serve as mediators between the government and other stakeholders in the reconciliation process, as well as galvanise diverse voices. This suggests that the government of Liberia and civil society actors should come together and work out a common agenda for the implementation of this important pillar in Liberia's transformation agenda.

### *Personal security concerns*

The efforts to restore the security sector in post-war Liberia still face considerable challenges. According to this study, citizens are acutely worried about their security as the United Nations peacekeeping operation scales down its presence in Liberia. The limited numbers of security personnel assigned in the communities in the midst of numerous crimes and abuses is a cause of great concern. This contributes to fear and anxiety among citizens. The uncertainties related to personal security in communities contribute to lack of initiatives and leave citizens hopeless about the peace process. Strengthening local structures to complement the limited security personnel in these communities could help build a sense of security among residents.

THRP psychosocial session with kids during the Ebola crisis in 2014.



## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following to the government of Liberia, international partners and NGOs involved in peacebuilding efforts:

### Ensure involvement of local stakeholders and community

**ownership:** Donors supporting local peacebuilding initiatives should set funding criteria, that implementing partners make clear commitments to and show evidence of community participation in the identification and planning of local peacebuilding initiatives. The government of Liberia and international partners should participate critically and monitor NGOs implementing local peacebuilding initiatives, to ensure they are significantly involved in mobilising communities to take ownership of local peacebuilding.

**Transfer of capacities to local people:** To enable local ownership and community participation, NGOs should include the transfer of skills and capacities to local people through training and other capacity-building initiatives. The Liberian government along with international partners should ensure that peacebuilding efforts in local communities are accompanied by the setting up of appropriate and community-friendly capacity-building structures responsive to expressed needs. Local groups should also be trained in how to fundraise to implement their own local peacebuilding initiatives.

### Traditional community structures for peacebuilding and reconciliation:

International actors supporting local peacebuilding initiatives should undertake an assessment of traditional community structures, such as the ‘palava hut’ and the ‘koo’ systems, which are still relevant to peacebuilding, conflict mediation and reconciliation, and ensure that these are recognised and strengthened to complement ongoing peacebuilding efforts at the community level. NGOs and community-based organisations should consider channelling their peacebuilding efforts through such structures to ensure that local communities take control of their peacebuilding processes. There should also be strong collaboration between local peacebuilding structures and organisations implementing other peacebuilding initiatives at the local level.

**Personal security concerns:** The government of Liberia and its international partners must continue to strengthen and professionalise the security sector, especially the Liberia National Police so that they can effectively address the main security threats at the community level. This may include increasing accountability and transparency in all components of the security sector and the implementation of existing operation guidelines, as well as increasing the number of security personnel assigned in remote, fragile or border areas.

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the New Deal and the International Dialogue, see [www.pbsdialogue.org/en/](http://www.pbsdialogue.org/en/)  
<sup>2</sup> [www.lcl-thrp.com](http://www.lcl-thrp.com)

<sup>3</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRC) was enacted in May 2005 by the National Transitional Legislative Assembly and concluded in 2010 through a final report. The report implicated several government officials in war crimes. It is available at [www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final-report](http://www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final-report)