

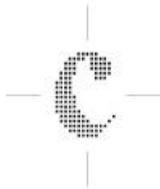
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## **Working Paper 20**

Sierra Leone: The Political Economy  
of Internal Conflict

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# Table of Contents

<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>II. A Brief Narrative of State Decay</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>III. The Sources of Conflict in Sierra Leone</b>	<b>9</b>
3.1. The Problematic Structure of Sierra Leone Statehood	9
3.2. The Political Economy of the Shadow State	11
3.3. The Political Sociology of Alienated Youth	14
3.4. The Regional Politics of Insurgency	15
<b>IV. The Sources of Extractable Surplus</b>	<b>17</b>
4.1. Diamonds	17
4.2. Aid and Other External Resources	19
4.2.1. <i>Official External Assistance to the SL Government</i>	19
4.2.2. <i>Arms and Ammunition brought in through Official Channels</i>	19
4.2.3. <i>External Aid to the RUF and Other Unauthorised Combatants</i>	20
4.2.4. <i>Diversion of Resources through NGOs</i>	20
4.2.5. <i>Remittances</i>	20
4.3. Loot and the Rural Economy of Insurgency	21
4.4. Narcotics	21
4.5. Other Actual and Potential Income Streams	22
<b>V. Agendas for External Military, Political and Economic Engagement</b>	<b>25</b>
5.1. Creating a Viable Structure of Coercion	26
5.2. Re-establishing a Legitimate Political Authority	27
5.3. Restoring the Economy	28
5.4. Controlling the External Environment	29
<b>VI. The Limitations of Resource Management</b>	<b>31</b>
6.1. Diamonds	31
6.2. Aid	32
6.3. Loot	33
6.4. Narcotics	33
6.5. Others	34
<b>VII. Conclusion</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Select Bibliography</b>	<b>37</b>



## **I. Introduction**

This report provides a brief overview of events in Sierra Leone since independence, attempting in particular to identify the driving forces behind the violent conflict that has characterised the country over the last decade. Recognising that this is the first phase of research of a two-phase project, the report attempts to provide a scan of the most important literature available on the subject as well as identifying critical areas where more information is required.

The narrative begins with an overview of state decline and decay in Sierra Leone and then traces the major sources of conflict in the country. Having done so, the report aims - and in this respect often is obliged to point out areas where more primary research is required - to record the major sources of extractable surplus, such as diamonds, and link them to the ongoing conflicts. Having done so some attempt is made to discuss prospective agendas for external military, political or economic engagement. The report concludes by examining the limitations of attempting to manage resources in an attempt to undercut some of the driving forces of the conflict. A short select bibliography has been attached.



## II. A Brief Narrative of State Decay

Sierra Leone is a former British colony, close to the extreme westerly point of Africa. It is small, with a total area of some 72,000 sq.km., and roughly hexagonal. Its population, about 2m at independence in 1961, had grown to 3.7m by the time of the most recent census in 1985, and was estimated at 4.5m in 1995. Political upheavals, including conflict-related deaths and massive involuntary population movement, make it impossible to provide accurate figures.

At independence, Sierra Leone had an apparently stable political system, dominated by two major parties, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) which gained most of its support from the south of the country, and the All People's Congress (APC) which gained most of its support from the north. The first Prime Minister, Milton Margai of the SLPP, died in 1964 and was succeeded by his brother Albert Margai. The closely contested election of 1967 was won by the opposition APC, led by Siaka Stevens, but his victory was aborted by a military *coup d'état*, which led to the short-lived military regime of the National Reformation Council (NRC). This was ousted by a mutiny within the military in 1968, leading to the installation of Stevens, who ruled (first as Prime Minister, then as President) until his retirement in 1985. Stevens' handpicked successor, army commander Joseph Momoh, then took over as President, and ruled amidst conditions of intensifying economic crisis and political upheaval until his overthrow in April 1992.

Accounts of the formal collapse of the Sierra Leonean state generally date it from 23 March 1991, when a small Revolutionary United Front (RUF) force, including Liberians and Burkinabes, attacked a village in eastern Sierra Leone from Liberia. A Sierra Leone army (RSLMF) force was sent to the area, where it was aided by ULIMO, a Liberian movement opposed to Taylor's NPFL. By the end of the year, the initial incursion appeared to have been contained, if not entirely defeated. The experience of warfare, however, and the sense that they were inadequately supported by a corrupt government in Freetown, induced a group of junior officers from the front to overthrow the regime of President Momoh, installing in its place the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), led by Captain Valentine Strasser. This failed to halt the war, and indeed exacerbated it. An increase in the size of the RSLMF proved counterproductive, as ill-trained troops were sent to the front, where they were widely suspected of collusion with the RUF, and engagement in diamond smuggling and atrocities against the civilian population. The term 'sobels' (soldiers by day, rebels by night) came into currency, and by early 1995 the RUF were operating dangerously close to Freetown. Strasser turned for support to private military companies, but the first such organisation, Gurkha Security Guards, stumbled into an RUF ambush and its commander was killed. The NPRC then recruited the South African company Executive Outcomes (EO), as part of a complex deal involving a diamond-mining company that would, in effect, pay for the costs of the operation from the profit made from bringing the mining area under government control.

As a military operation, Executive Outcomes was remarkably successful. The first contingent arrived in May 1995, and by the end of the year had established a position of military superiority, including control of all the major diamond areas and securing the capital. They were aided by a local militia, the *Kamajor*, which was formed to protect local communities in the main area of RUF

operations, and forced the RUF into peace negotiations, which opened in Abidjan late in 1995. Meanwhile, Strasser – like Momoh before him – came under increasing international pressure to hold multi-party elections, which took place in February/March 1996, despite Strasser himself being ousted in a palace coup a month beforehand by his deputy, Captain Julius Maada Bio. The elections went ahead, and were won by Ahmed Tejan Kabbah of the SLPP (the historic party of southern Sierra Leone, revived for the occasion) as president, while the SLPP became the largest single party in the 80-member parliament.

The apparent solution produced on the military front by EO, and on the political front by Kabbah's election, proved to be short-lived. The attempt to turn these advantages into a political settlement led to the Abidjan accord in November 1996, under which EO was to withdraw, while the RUF turned itself into a legitimate political party. EO's departure in January 1997, precipitated in any event by arguments over its funding and by the resentments that it aroused from the official military, left the Kabbah government dangerously exposed, despite the signing of a defence pact with Nigeria, under which Nigerian troops arrived in February. The RUF's commitment to the Abidjan accord proved completely worthless, and what was left of the RSLMF had no commitment to the new regime. In May 1997, Kabbah was overthrown in a coup launched by a corporal and took refuge in Guinea, while Freetown was subjected to its first major looting, at the hands of the army and unemployed youths. It soon became clear that the new military regime was closely associated with the RUF, against which it had nominally been fighting. It was eventually ousted by Nigerian troops in February 1998, after the collapse amid unwelcome international publicity of an attempt to recruit another private military company, Sandline, to do the job. President Kabbah returned from Guinea in March 1998.

Once more, the respite was only temporary. Despite attempts by the Kabbah government to reconstruct the security sector, and the presence of a largely Nigerian West African force (known as ECOMOG) amounting to 12,000-15,000 men, the RUF seized Freetown in January 1999. More than 1,200 Nigerian soldiers were killed, many of them after supposedly retrained RSLMF troops turned their weapons on their allies, and the remainder, accompanied by what was left of the government, retreated to camps outside the town. An ECOMOG counterattack forced the RUF out of the town, at a heavy cost in life and damage, but it retained control of most of the rest of the country. This time, the 'peace settlement' took a different form. The standing of the RUF had dramatically strengthened, while the Kabbah regime had lost most of its international protection. In July 1999, an agreement was signed at Lomé in Togo, under which the RUF was incorporated into a coalition government, and its leader, Foday Sankoh, was pardoned and became vice-president, with responsibility for the country's mineral resources. A United Nations peacekeeping force (UNAMSIL) was brought in to supervise the demilitarisation process that was due to follow.

Predictably, nothing of the kind took place. Although a new Council of Ministers was installed, under the Lomé agreement, in November 1999, the settlement lasted only until May 2000 when – on the day after ECOMOG handed over its peacekeeping duties to UNAMSIL – RUF forces seized as hostages the UN troops who had been intended to supervise their disarmament. On this occasion British troops, nominally sent in to rescue British citizens, stayed to stabilise the security situation, and to embark (once again) on the task of retraining the Sierra Leone army. UNAMSIL was nominally strengthened, though its authority had been fatally flawed, and attempts to rein in the RUF by bringing pressure on its main external backer, Charles Taylor in Liberia, had little impact. Meanwhile, as the conflict flowed across the frontier into Guinea, another failed state was in the making.

### III. The Sources of Conflict in Sierra Leone

Even though the political economy of conflict in Sierra Leone is a critical ingredient in the country's problems, these cannot be understood solely in economic terms. The conflict is deeply rooted in Sierra Leone statehood and society, and its economic elements draw on and interact with the broader structural situation. This situation likewise deeply affects the strategies available to outside actors, through which to seek any improvement in the desperate position of the country and most of its people. The following section seeks to summarise the sources of conflict – and equally the ways in which analysts have sought to understand and explain it – under four main headings.

#### 3.1. The Problematic Structure of Sierra Leone Statehood

Sierra Leone was by no means an obvious candidate for state collapse. Founded as a British colony in 1787, it experienced an exceptionally long period of colonial administration, even though it only assumed its present territorial form with the extension of British rule into the hinterland in 1896. It is small (ranking thirty-second in area among African states), has a manageable population of some 4.5 million (1995 estimate), and is close in shape to a regular hexagon; Herbst classifies it among African states with a favourable political geography, in terms of the distribution of its population, resources, and communications.<sup>1</sup> It presents few of the inherent problems of governance that bedevil massive territories with very poor communications such as Angola, Congo or Sudan. It may also be regarded as having had a favourable social endowment. A longstanding commitment to Western education (Fourah Bay College, founded in 1828, is the oldest university-level institution in sub-Saharan Africa) resulted in the creation of a substantial cadre of indigenous lawyers, academics, administrators and other professionals, concentrated though this was among descendants of the liberated African population of the capital, Freetown, who are known as Creoles. In ethnic terms, two major groups (Mende in the south of the country, Temne in the north) each accounted for some 30% of the total population, and formed the core of the two main political parties, but had to build alliances with smaller groups in order to gain majority electoral support. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) emerged as the standard-bearer of a broadly southern grouping, while the All Peoples' Congress (APC) had a similar standing in the north, but each exploited local factional divisions in order to extend its support beyond its core zone; there was no unbridgeable ethnic divide.

The Creoles, despite their initial domination of the public service, could not gain the same political pre-eminence as the analogous Americo-Liberian community in neighbouring Liberia, but were likewise obliged to build alliances with one or other of the major hinterland parties. This process was aided in turn by the division of the hinterland between a large number of roughly equal paramount chieftaincies, each with its own internal political rivalries,<sup>2</sup> which permitted parties to gain support across the ethnic divide, consolidating an embryonic but apparently viable two-party structure. From

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa*, Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2000, pp.154, 157.

<sup>2</sup> See Walter Barrows, *Grassroots Politics in an African State*, New York: Africana, 1976.

the mid-1950s, with the discovery of large deposits of alluvial diamonds, Sierra Leone also acquired a ready source of foreign exchange. In short, if you were looking for an African state with the physical, social and economic infrastructure appropriate to success as an independent state, you would have had difficulty finding a better candidate than Sierra Leone.

While much criticism has been heaped on Sierra Leone's rulers, and especially Siaka Stevens, this is not a case where state collapse can easily be ascribed to a simple failure of leadership. Sierra Leonean politicians were not evidently more venal, brutal or incompetent than most of their African equivalents. Stevens had extensive political experience, dating back to his apprenticeship in the trade union movement, in sharp contrast to the unskilled military rulers who have precipitated many of Africa's worst political failures. He moved steadily towards the imposition of a single-party system, and established a network of neopatrimonial relations through which to manipulate the connections between state power, political factions, and market opportunities; but he did so with considerable skill and with little overt use of force – though any direct challenge to his power was ruthlessly suppressed. There was little here to distinguish Sierra Leone from most other African states. Though Stevens' successor Momoh – again like many African leaders – had to struggle with factional divisions, economic decline, and increasing demands for multi-party democracy, he was able to cling to power until overthrown by a military *coup d'état* in 1992. Corrupt and uninspiring though Sierra Leone's leadership certainly was, the country was not hastened towards the abyss by any equivalent to Uganda's Idi Amin, or Master-Sergeant Samuel Doe in neighbouring Liberia.

Perhaps the most fundamental source of the Sierra Leonean malaise, difficult though this is to pin down, is a deeply rooted sense of cultural insecurity and dependence. In this respect, the exceptionally long period of British colonialism may have done more harm than good. The Creoles, who provided the reference group that shaped the aspirations of the national elite as a whole, were imbued with a sense of the superiority of British culture.<sup>3</sup> The debilitating atmosphere of Freetown affected even the colonisers themselves, most famously chronicled by the British novelist Graham Greene.<sup>4</sup> Sierra Leone never developed any vibrant or self-confident nationalist movement, and its independence came about much more as a consequence of voluntary withdrawal by the colonial power than because of demands for self-determination by the colonised; the return of the British in 2000, nearly forty years after independence, appears to have been greeted with almost universal relief. The emergence of the first Prime Minister, Milton Margai – a medical doctor from a chiefly family – exemplified the deference shown to persons with social status and education, and is echoed in the election of a former UN bureaucrat, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, as President in 1996. The country has suffered from a profound lack of domestic leadership; and although popular alienation from the elite has given rise to periodical riots and insurrections from the 1950s to the present day, it has failed to generate any effective alternative leadership or vision. The development in different African states of distinctive national cultures has been generally neglected in the analysis of modern Africa, but the sense of such a culture in Sierra Leone is profound.

While the ultimate causes of state collapse in Sierra Leone lie in the deep-seated problems of adapting a European model of statehood to the circumstances prevailing in this area of West Africa, its proximate sources may be traced to three distinct forms of interaction – none of them, worryingly, unique to Sierra Leone – between the indigenous social, economic and political structure, and its

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<sup>3</sup> For a sensitive exploration of Creole society, see Abner Cohen, *The Politics of Elite Culture: explorations in the dramaturgy of power in a modern African society*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981.

incorporation into a wider global order or disorder. These consist respectively in the political economy of 'shadow statehood', the political sociology of alienated youth, and the regional politics of insurgency.

### 3.2. The Political Economy of the Shadow State

The next critical element in the analysis of state collapse in Sierra Leone lies in the nature of the relationship between domestic resources, political elites, and the international market. There is nothing original or exceptional in the choice of these variables: maintaining states throughout the Third World depends on the ability of rulers to exploit the leverage that they can gain from control over economic and political resources, and this in turn – in a setting where power necessarily requires access to external sources of wealth and diplomatic and military support – requires them to manipulate the flow of resources across state boundaries. The difference between successful and unsuccessful states is one between successful and unsuccessful brokers, and depends partly on the resources available in both domestic and external arenas, and partly on the skill of the broker. Such brokerage is always difficult for the rulers of poor and weak states, but seldom has it gone so spectacularly awry as in Sierra Leone.

The central problem lay in the management of the diamond economy, which provided by far the most important source of readily available wealth. During the first two decades of independence, some 60-70% of Sierra Leone's export earnings derived from diamonds, together, directly or indirectly, with a correspondingly high proportion of its government revenues.<sup>5</sup> This was a resource peculiarly difficult to bring under state control, given their very high unit value, the relative ease with which they could be mined without needing capital or sophisticated processing and transport facilities, and the extreme ease with which they could be smuggled. If there was one element in the country's endowment that marked it out for destruction, this was, paradoxically, its major source of wealth. African states characteristically rely on a very small number of commodities to provide a high proportion of their income, but while in some respects – notably price stability – diamonds provide an enviable source of income, in others they are deeply subversive. It is nonetheless worth noting that in Africa's other main diamond producing state, Botswana, diamond revenues provided the foundation for the continent's most successful economy. What mattered was not so much the diamonds themselves, as the mechanisms through which they were exploited or controlled. In this respect, there seem to have been three key differences between Botswana and Sierra Leone.

First, whereas in Botswana diamonds derive largely from kimberlite pipes, which require sophisticated deep mining techniques and can thus be brought under the control of multinational corporations associated with the government, in Sierra Leone they derive from alluvial deposits, which can be exploited (however inefficiently) by anyone with a spade and sieve who is prepared to sift through the gravel beds in which the diamonds lie. Although a multinational corporation, Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST – an offshoot of the De Beers/Selection Trust group that controlled most of southern Africa's diamonds), was given a monopoly of diamond mining under colonial rule, this monopoly depended not on control of capital, technical skills and large-scale organisation (as would

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<sup>4</sup> See notably Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter*, first published in 1948.

<sup>5</sup> See Christopher Clapham, *Liberia and Sierra Leone: an essay in comparative politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976, p.134.

be the case, say, with an oil well or copper mine), but on physical control over a large expanse of potentially diamond-bearing gravel.

Second, the control over the labour force that was possible in sparsely inhabited Botswana could not be replicated in Sierra Leone, where huge numbers of ‘illicit diamond miners’ from both within and outside the country flocked to the diamond fields – in the process also leading to a neglect of agriculture. With them came diamond brokers and merchants, mostly of Lebanese origin, who managed both the commercial linkages between miners and global markets, and the political linkages between the country’s main source of ready cash and the networks of prominent politicians.<sup>6</sup> The level of illicit diamond mining (IDM) not only challenged the ability of the state to extract an economic rent from the diamond fields, but also created powerful local political interests, and empowered those who controlled the diamond trade at every level. Straightforward repression of IDM proved politically unacceptable (even had it been physically feasible) for a late colonial government faced by African political mobilisation, and illicit miners had instead to be bought off through what was termed the Licenced Diamond Miners Scheme (LDMS), under which miners were permitted to pan for diamonds outside the areas allocated to SLST, and required to sell their diamonds to the Government Diamond Office (GDO). This in turn subverted state control over both mining and marketing: there was no telling whether any diamond that turned up at the GDO had actually been legally mined, while the GDO had to pay market prices, since otherwise the diamonds would have been smuggled out of the country – as did indeed happen to many of them, especially through the cross-border trade with Liberia, which maintained the US dollar as its national currency. Paramount chiefs in diamond areas could use their local regulatory powers to enrich themselves (and were in turn subject to political leverage from the centre), while at the lowest level, the money generated by diamonds was enough to subvert any policeman or customs official.

Third, and most vital of all, whereas Botswana’s rulers could draw on the stability provided by an ethnically homogeneous and generally deferential society, Sierra Leone’s had no such advantages. They had constantly to scramble for allies in a fragmented political system, in which access to diamond money was the critical source of leverage. As well as enriching themselves, they had to do deals with other actors – such as diamond merchants or paramount chiefs – whom they could only partially control, and who in turn possessed some leverage over them. Though control over the state provided politicians with a critical resource, which they needed for purposes both of domestic coercion and of international legitimacy, this was a situation highly conducive to the maintenance of legal norms and bureaucratic state structures. Formal state structures were indeed potentially threatening to hinterland politicians, insofar as they were disproportionately staffed by highly educated Creoles.

Sierra Leone politicians – and notably Siaka Stevens – therefore resorted to strategies of political management that not only weakened the state, but systematically undermined it. Operating through what Reno describes as the ‘shadow state’,<sup>7</sup> they maintained the state as a façade, behind which they pursued essentially private forms of political management and wealth accumulation. The formal show of statehood is important to rulers, if not absolutely essential, in order to enable them to benefit from the deference displayed to states in the modern international order. This enables them to cut internationally recognised deals with other states and foreign businessmen, as well as to benefit from

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<sup>6</sup> See L. van der Laan, *The Sierra Leone Diamonds*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1965.

<sup>7</sup> See William Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1995.

official aid and military assistance. It also carries certain costs, such as responsibility for officially contracted debts, and the external monitoring of the standards of behaviour that are expected of a formally recognised state, but these are on the whole outweighed by the advantages.

The provision of public goods, of the kind that are normally held to justify the existence of states, is on the other hand almost entirely counter-productive. These make substantial demands on state revenues, for purposes such as health and education, which bring with them few corresponding short-term benefits to the state's rulers. The same goes, perhaps more surprisingly, for the maintenance of institutional structures of rule, which might have been expected to strengthen the power of the individual at the top of the state hierarchy. The problem is that such institutions sustain internal norms of correct behaviour, which restrict the freedom of action of the individuals who wish to use them. Two examples must suffice. In 1980, President Stevens sought to crown his long career by hosting the annual summit of the Organisation of African Unity, which carried with it the chairmanship of the OAU for the following year, and thus the titular leadership of Africa. Hosting the summit was also, however, extremely expensive, since it required the construction of a lavish conference centre and associated facilities for the visiting heads of state and their entourages, which were extremely unlikely to recoup the capital outlay through any regular subsequent use. For a small state like Sierra Leone, it thus involved desperate attempts to raise the necessary cash, which led to questionable deals with foreign businessmen that involved, for example, secret agreements for the storage of toxic waste. Protests against this abuse of power by the Governor of the State Bank of Sierra Leone, Sam Bangura, led to his summary murder by ejection from his upper-storey office window, by thugs undoubtedly acting at the President's behest.<sup>8</sup>

A similar rationale applied to the military – the institution on which, on the one hand, the ruler most directly relied, but which on the other presented the most obvious threat to him. The crumbling of professionalism in the Sierra Leone armed forces dates back to 1967, when the then force commander, Brigadier Lansana, was deposed by his own officers after launching a *coup d'état* that was all too obviously intended to serve the interests of his patron Albert Margai, who had just lost the election of that year. A year later, these officers were themselves ousted by their own other ranks, and marched to jail through the streets of Freetown wearing nothing but their underpants – a humiliation peculiarly subversive of the authority of the officer corps. Further conspiracies and attempted *coups d'état* during the Stevens period ensured that his successor, Momoh, took over in 1985 not as head of the institutional military which he nominally commanded, but as a politician backed by a military faction. Recruitment to the army, greatly expanded after the start of the war in 1991, favoured unemployed urban youths who belonged to gangs associated with one or another senior politician. From the mid-1990s onwards, moreover, the army's monopoly of legitimate force was challenged, not only by the RUF 'rebels', but by militias which formed to defend local communities when the army was unable to do so.

When the Sierra Leone 'state' came under armed challenge from the early 1990s, therefore, it would be more accurate to conclude that there *was* no state, in the sense of an institution concerned with the provision of public goods. Instead, there were a set of essentially private operators, using the mythology of statehood as one of a collection of resources, along with management of the diamond market and control over parts of a fragmented military, through which to achieve personal goals of survival, wealth and recognition. When these operators were challenged by rivals, to whom even the

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<sup>8</sup> See Reno, *Corruption and State Politics*, pp.137-41.

mythology of statehood was largely irrelevant, it was not so much that the state collapsed, as that its non-existence was revealed.

### 3.3. The Political Sociology of Alienated Youth

A second scenario treats state collapse in Sierra Leone, as in neighbouring Liberia, as a phenomenon arising from the reactions of the people at the bottom, rather than the strategies of the people at the top: as the result of the collapse of linkages between the regime and the societies that it was supposed to govern, and especially from the crisis of alienated youth. These approaches are indeed complementary: both emphasise the failure to incorporate critical masses of the population into a political structure rendered legitimate by its provision of public goods, and they differ largely in whether they concentrate on the initial sources of this failure, or its subsequent consequences. Though both have a place for the mode of Sierra Leone's incorporation into the global system – indeed no aspect of a society as intimately affected as Sierra Leone by external influences for so many centuries can be considered exclusively 'indigenous' – in each the critical fissure is that between the government and its people.

Ever since Robert Kaplan picked out Sierra Leone as a case study for his apocalyptic vision of population explosion, resource depletion, and social decay, the role of alienated youth has held a prominent place in the Sierra Leone story.<sup>9</sup> Kaplan's account – which owes more to the global scenario that he was attempting to sketch out than to familiarity with the Sierra Leonean scene – has been strongly contested, notably in the work of Paul Richards,<sup>10</sup> who points out that the country suffers neither from overpopulation nor from resource depletion, and argues that the origins of violence are more rational and more political than Kaplan allows. The origins, ideologies and activities of dissenting youths have nonetheless clearly played a major role in promoting state collapse, and have been intricately related to Sierra Leone's place in the global economy, politics, and even culture.

For a start, rural youths in much of Sierra Leone, and especially in the eastern areas of the country where the RUF initially operated, lived in an environment that was far from the stable and 'traditional' society that rural Africa is often assumed to comprise. On the contrary, many years of illicit diamond mining had led to mass migration into diamond areas, where a shifting population of diggers provided the base on which the vast illicit diamond trade depended. Earning little more than they would have done as farmers,<sup>11</sup> sustaining their existence under primitive conditions in an uncertain and often violent world, diamond miners were excluded from the 'official' lines of communication, directed through paramount chiefs, through which the formal politics of Sierra Leone was conducted, and on which its politicians largely depended to extract their rent from diamond mining. The products of an alienated American youth culture, notably the Rambo film, *First Blood*, and gangster rap music, were readily reinterpreted in local terms as symbolising and legitimising resistance against a repressive official structure.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> R.D. Kaplan, 'The coming anarchy: how scarcity, crime, overpopulation and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet', *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994.

<sup>10</sup> The central theme of Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: war, youth & resources in Sierra Leone*, Oxford: James Currey, 1996 is an attack on Kaplan's conceptualisation of Sierra Leone.

<sup>11</sup> See Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, 'The political economy of a rural slum: rice, diamonds and youth', pp.48-52.

<sup>12</sup> Gangster rap has likewise been a prominent feature of violent youth culture in neighbouring Liberia, superbly analysed in Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, London: Hurst, 1999.

Other analyses, notably by the Sierra Leonean sociologist Ibrahim Abdullah, have concentrated on the emergence of alienated intellectuals in the capital, Freetown, and their relationships with a lumpenproletarian youth culture.<sup>13</sup> The progressive impoverishment and radicalisation of students at Fourah Bay College, as job opportunities disappeared, prompted increasing clashes with the APC government (which students had supported at the time of its emergence in the late 1960s), and led to a shift in political focus, away from an aspirational seeking to join the elite, and towards the forming of a common cause, and culture, amongst the unemployed youth of east Freetown. What had once been isolated groups of student radicals thus gained a political constituency, in which their relatively fragmentary learning nonetheless assured them a measure of authority among people less articulate than themselves. Though it could readily be claimed that their ideological reference points – in the work of third world radicals such as Frantz Fanon and Walter Rodney, or the Green Book of Muammar Gaddafi – were, like the Rambo films, half-digested, nonetheless they could be put together to provide a reasonably coherent account of their own plight, and a rationale for violent action to destroy the ‘system’ – in effect, the post-colonial state, in the corrupt and degenerate form that it had assumed – as the prerequisite for its resolution. Elements in this combination of urban and rural, uneducated and intellectual youth, together with the extent and nature of their ideological base and organisational capacity, are contested between the scholars who have analysed it.<sup>14</sup> The broad picture that they present is nonetheless both coherent and convincing.

### 3.4. The Regional Politics of Insurgency

The final strand in the story, and the one that understandably attracts most attention both among scholars in international relations, and among external governments seeking to contain the consequences of state collapse and restore some kind of functioning state in Sierra Leone, concerns its explicitly international element. This is very far, of course, from providing the only incursion of the ‘global’ into the story of state collapse in Sierra Leone; but even though analysts who have been closely concerned with trying to understand the Sierra Leone catastrophe from the inside for the most part accord it only a relatively minor role as a precipitant of eventual breakdown, it nonetheless has its part. That part in turn falls into two sections: Colonel Gaddafi’s radicalising project in West Africa, with the international linkages and training that it provided; and the immediate impact of the Liberian civil war.

The role of Libya, and its West African ally Burkina Faso, in training and arming a core group of the RUF, has now been established beyond dispute. The training of future RUF cadres in Libya has been chronicled by Abdullah,<sup>15</sup> who estimates that about thirty-five, and possibly as many as fifty, Sierra Leoneans were trained in and around Benghazi from 1987 onwards. Among them was Foday Sankoh, a former army corporal, political malcontent, and photographer, who was subsequently to emerge as leader of the RUF. Sankoh’s Libyan connections, together with the relationship that he

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<sup>13</sup> See Ibrahim Abdullah, 'Bush path to destruction: the origin and character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36:2, 1998; Ibrahim Abdullah & Patrick Muana, 'The Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone: a revolt of the lumpenproletariat', in C. Clapham, ed., *African Guerrillas*, Oxford: James Currey, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Yusuf Bangura, 'Understanding the political and cultural dynamics of the Sierra Leone war: a critique of Paul Richards' *Fighting for the Rain Forest*', *African Development*, Vol.22 Nos.2-3, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Abdullah, 'Bush path to destruction', *loc.cit.*, pp.214-9.

established with Charles Taylor from 1988/9 onwards, may well have been instrumental in enabling him to emerge at the head of the RUF; access to external resources has classically been a significant element in establishing and maintaining the leadership of African guerrilla movements. Though there is no evidence that Sierra Leoneans were trained in Burkina Faso, Burkinabes were among the initial group that attacked Sierra Leonean territory from Liberia in March 1991.<sup>16</sup>

Only after the outbreak of the Liberian civil war late in 1989, however, were the RUF able to gain a frontier across which to launch their campaign in Sierra Leone. The ability to exploit the frontier with a complicit (or at least acquiescent) state has been critical to most African insurgencies, and the assault by Charles Taylor's NPFL on the Doe regime in Liberia was made possible by its ability to operate across the frontier with Côte d'Ivoire, following the failure of earlier incursions from Sierra Leone. Taylor in turn was more than willing to extend the war into Sierra Leone. For one thing, the Momoh regime took a prominent role in the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), which despite its official status as a 'peacekeeping' force, rapidly developed into a Nigerian-run military intervention on behalf first of Samuel Doe and then of the Interim Government of National Unity headed by Amos Sawyer, whose effective mission was to prevent Taylor from seizing Monrovia. Subsequently, one of the Liberian armed factions promoted by ECOMOG as a counterweight to the NPFL, ULIMO, operated from Sierra Leonean territory back into Liberia. Support for the RUF was thus an eminently rational response on Taylor's part, to which was added the probably still more important incentive of access to the rents provided by control of the Sierra Leone diamond fields, which were readily accessible from the Liberian border.

What relative priority is to be given to each of these sources of state failure is inevitably a matter of judgement, though my instinct is to place the greatest emphasis on the crumbling of political authority within Sierra Leone, and to regard the NPFL's backing for the RUF incursion from Liberia as no more than an immediate precipitant. At all events, the combination of elite corruption, popular alienation, and external support for insurgency was too much for the Sierra Leone state to bear.

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<sup>16</sup> Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, pp.4-5.

## IV. The Sources of Extractable Surplus

The shift from a general analysis of conflict in Sierra Leone to a specifically political economy focus is best achieved by identifying the major available sources of extractable wealth (or in classic Marxist terminology, the ‘surplus’), and then examining the ways in which this surplus is integrated into the structure of conflict. First, a word of warning is needed: political economy approaches to conflict management characteristically assume that solutions can be achieved through the rational manipulation of economic rewards, in such a way as to induce combatants to opt for peaceful rather than violent strategies of self-enrichment. While this must clearly be part of any approach to conflict resolution in Sierra Leone, however, it cannot be regarded as the whole story. Few if any of the participants in the conflict can be treated *solely* as rational economic actors. Much of the story is characterised by activities which cannot conceivably be analysed as ‘rational’, even according to the most cynical and short-term calculus, and which bear witness to the deep psychic origins of violence. Any attempt to apply a political economy approach must therefore be integrated with strategies geared to other elements in the conflict.

### 4.1. Diamonds

Diamonds, as already noted, provide by far the most important source of extractable surplus in Sierra Leone, and have been at the centre of political competition in the country throughout the modern era. As a product, they are perfectly adapted to the requirements of illicit resource extraction. They are fairly widely spread, with roughly 20% of Sierra Leone’s 146 chiefdoms holding diamonds; the main concentrations are in Kono and Kenema districts in the east and south of the country, respectively adjoining its frontiers with Guinée and Liberia. They have an exceptionally high unit value; they require only the most basic technology for their extraction, which under Sierra Leone conditions is highly labour-intensive; they are easily transportable in secrecy, and do not require on-the-spot processing; and since (unlike narcotics, for instance) they are legitimate products at the point of use, they can be ‘laundered’ through their introduction into legal trading networks.

All parties to the conflict, apart from those that are paid from outside by national governments or international organisations, depend on diamonds for a major part of their revenue: the Sierra Leone government, the various mercenary forces (notably EO) that have been brought in to assist it, the RUF, its Liberian backers, soldiers and local militias operating on their own account, and indeed significant elements in the ECOMOG and UNAMSIL forces, which have been plausibly accused of exchanging their own weapons for diamonds.<sup>17</sup> With the diamond fields at the present time well beyond Sierra Leone government control, the major revenues have gone to the RUF, which has been estimated by the United States mission to the UN to gain \$US 30-50m annually through diamond sales, and to the

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<sup>17</sup> See Eric G. Berman, 'Arming the Revolutionary United Front', *African Security Review*, Vol.10 No.1, 2001, pp.5-14; and Ian Douglas, 'Fighting for Diamonds – private military companies in Sierra Leone', in Jakkie Cilliers and Peggy Mason, eds., *Peace, Profit or Plunder? The Privatisation of Security in War-Torn African Societies*, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 1999, pp.175-200.

Liberian government, which has provided the major conduit for the RUF, and has itself become increasingly dependent on Sierra Leone diamonds.<sup>18</sup>

Increased international pressure has now been focussed on Liberia which has exported far greater amounts of diamonds than could ever possibly be mined in the country. In the last several years, a recent UN reports notes, Liberia has exported 6 million carats of rough diamonds even though its estimated productive capacity was only 100 to 150,000 carats, worth less than \$10 million.<sup>19</sup> A first effort to undercut the benefits that the RUF was receiving from the diamond trade was to initiate a system of end user certificates so that diamond buyers and dealers would know where the stones were coming from. That has had little impact given that such paperwork is easily issued by the Liberian authorities. More recently the Security Council has voted in favour of a sanctions regime against Liberia to prevent diamonds from that country been marketed internationally.<sup>20</sup> The system, however is unlikely to be watertight, interviews in RUF controlled diamond digging areas suggests that there are more than enough willing buyers from other surrounding countries as well as from further afield and if an end user certificate can be produced (and even in some cases if it cannot) diamond dealers in the major buying centres have little compunction in buying up the available stock.<sup>21</sup>

The Liberian regime of Charles Taylor has an important interest too in ensuring that the proceeds of the diamond sales continue to filter through. There are precious few other means of acquiring wealth, including for paying for the presidential security detail which consumes just over one quarter of the total national budget of the country.<sup>22</sup> Efforts also to ensure that the connections between Freetown and the leadership of the RUF are cut appear to only have limited success and UN investigations into the matter suggest that while on the surface the RUF no longer has a presence in Freetown connections between Taylor and the movement have continued.<sup>23</sup> More recently also the war has expanded into neighbouring Guinea, and Taylor has come under threat from dissident rebels in Liberia itself.<sup>24</sup>

These developments suggest that attempts to fund both the Liberian regime and the RUF will continue. Two consequences will result. The first will be the growing criminalisation of the diamond market as criminal groups with skills and capacity will seek to provide the required 'paperwork' or will simply buy diamonds directly from the digging areas and then market them as legitimate products from elsewhere. Second, it will raise the requirement of the RUF to raise resources from elsewhere either through looting or through more comprehensively exploiting other natural resources such as hard woods and other natural resources. Thus the certification scheme may both have unintended consequences and fail, in any event, to stop the resourcing of the RUF.

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<sup>18</sup> See Berman, 'Arming the RUF'.

<sup>19</sup> *Summary report along with observations by the Chairman on the exploratory hearing on Sierra Leone diamonds*, 31 July to 1 August 2000, United Nations Security Council, 4 December 2000, S/2000/1150.

<sup>20</sup> See *The Economist*, 12-18 May 2001, p. 47-48.

<sup>21</sup> See Lutz Kleveman, 'Mining Bloody Diamonds: Inside Sierra-Leone's rebel-held hellhole', *Newsweek*, 14 May 2001. Among other things, the report details the use of child labour by the RUF to extract diamonds.

<sup>22</sup> This figure is given in a special report on Charles Taylor by *Newsweek*, 14 May 2001.

<sup>23</sup> These are detailed in *First Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to Security Council resolution 1343 (2001) regarding Liberia*, 30 April 2001, S/2001/424.

<sup>24</sup> *The Economist*, 12-18 May 2001, p. 47-48.

## 4.2. Aid and Other External Resources

In poor states, a large amount of the resources used to sustain conflict are brought in from the outside – often as part of the very international operations that are intended to resolve or restrict conflict. Somalia provides the classic example. Control over these resources is often inadequate, as the result of the institutional weaknesses both of the local government which aid is intended to sustain, and often of those who are ostensibly there to help it.

### 4.2.1. Official External Assistance to the SL Government

The Sierra Leone government is virtually destitute of domestic revenue raising capacity, and is therefore almost entirely sustained from outside through aid. In 1999 the World Bank records the country as having received US\$ 74 million for that year, a significant decrease in aid flows which averaged over US\$ 200 million per year between 1993 and 1995.<sup>25</sup> The 1999 figure is also bolstered by the approval US\$21 million from the IMF in aid for the country. The money was to provide for "the authorities to rebuild their capacity and to re-establish adequate security and pave the way for a more comprehensive programme of reforms..."<sup>26</sup>

Key questions surround the provision of aid to the Sierra Leone government and whether or rather how some of that funding has been siphoned off to fund the war. These include, among others:

- who provides this aid, and how much of it?
- what is it used for in Sierra Leone?
- in what ways may it be diverted into conflicts?

Further investigation of these aspects will be a focus of the second phase of the research.

### 4.2.2. Arms and Ammunition brought in through Official Channels

Arms and ammunition have been acquired by the RUF in two ways. The first is through the supply of weapons in exchange for diamonds through Liberia (considered below) and the second is the capture of arms from the various military forces that have been deployed in Sierra Leone. Significant numbers of arms were lost by Nigerian troops deployed as part of ECOMOG. In December 1998, the RUF routed the ECOMOG at Kano, one of the force's key supply dumps, and captured substantial quantities of weapons. In addition, an active network of smuggling appeared to exist between the opposing forces and RUF commanders were able to buy weapons from Nigerian ECOMOG troops for cash, diamonds, food and medicine.

A series of 'operations' against UN peacekeeping detachments also ensured the acquisition of arms for the RUF. The single largest incident was the capture of the Zambian peacekeeping contingent who were later released without any of their weapons. It is believed that the battalion lost as many as 500 AK-47s and several heavy machine guns. Kenyan, Nigerian and Indian peacekeepers have also all reported lost weapons to the RUF.

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<sup>25</sup> The World Bank, *African Development Indicators 2001*, Washington DC, 2001, p. 284.

<sup>26</sup> IMF Press Release No. 99/62, 'IMF Approves US\$21 Million in Emergency Post-Conflict Assistance for Sierra Leone', 17 December 1999.

Finally, weapons supplied to the Sierra Leone Army have been lost when SLA defected to the RUF, and have also rapidly found their way to child soldiers and other potentially dangerous users.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.2.3. *External Aid to the RUF and Other Unauthorised Combatants*

The most critical sources of aid to the RUF, as has already been suggested above, has come through Liberia. The process through which this has been achieved is complex and closely paralleled the development of Liberia into a criminalised state. By the end of the 1990s a recent report notes, "Liberia had become a major centre for massive diamond-related criminal activity, with connections to guns, drugs and money laundering throughout Africa and considerably further afield."<sup>28</sup> Criminal entrepreneurs have actively sourced arms from countries in the former Soviet Union, most notably Ukraine, and supplied them to the government of Liberia and Burkina Faso which provided the appropriate end user certificates. These weapons were subsequently supplied to the RUF largely in exchange for diamonds. The Ukrainian authorities have formerly acknowledge that armaments were sold to the countries concerned, but that they were passed onto the RUF without their knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

The degree to which the trade in arms around the conflict has involved individual criminal operators or middlemen is key. Individuals such as Fred Rindel, the former South African defence attache to Washington DC and Zief Morgenstein an Israeli arms dealer active in Sierra Leone have connected the requirements of buyers with sellers without either being aware of the other. Such criminal networks are difficult to track but appear to be increasingly extensive, becoming a feature of the conflicts in parallel with attempts to outlaw the supply of weapons and the sale of diamonds.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4.2.4. *Diversion of Resources through NGOs*

In a number of African and other conflict situations, non-governmental organisations have brought resources into the conflict zone, which have then been stolen or diverted from them; again, the best known examples are from Somalia. The extent to which this has occurred in Sierra Leone is unclear from current secondary information sources and the second phase of the research would need to focus in more detail on this particular aspect.

#### 4.2.5. *Remittances*

Remittances from nationals domiciled overseas have been a significant source of revenue for belligerents in quite a number of African conflicts, and have sometimes – notably for the EPLF in Eritrea and the RPF in Rwanda – been systematically and effectively managed as a taxation system for exiles. Again on current information it is unclear as to the extent of the Sierra Leone remittance economy, and although there are large numbers of Sierra Leoneans in exile, many of whom are highly qualified and are likely to be relatively well paid, it seems improbable that the RUF or any of the other

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<sup>27</sup> All the above aspects are detailed in Berman, 'Arming the RUF'

<sup>28</sup> Ian Smillie, Lansana Gberie and Ralph Hazleton, *The Heart of the Matter: Sierra Leone, Diamonds and Human Security*, Partnership Africa Canada, January 2000.

<sup>29</sup> See *Summary report along with observations by the Chairman on the exploratory hearing on Sierra Leone diamonds*, 31 July to 1 August 2000, United Nations Security Council, 4 December 2000, S/2000/1150.

<sup>30</sup> For an overview of arms trafficking and its relations to ongoing conflicts around the globe, see Brian Wood and Johan Peleman, *The Arms Fixers: Controlling the Brokers and Shipping Agents*. Available on the web from <http://www.nisat.org/publications/armsfixers>

combatant groups are sufficiently well organised to tax them. Information on remittances would nonetheless be useful.

### 4.3. Loot and the Rural Economy of Insurgency

The RUF has systematically stripped areas under its control of marketable resources, including everything from corrugated iron roofing through stolen cars to forest timber. Two key developments mark this process.

First, is the fact that in many cases disposal of resource rich items (such as rare hardwoods) require supply networks. In such conditions the only operators who are willing and able to disperse the goods and pay in either hard cash or items that the RUF require such as weapons or medicines verge on the criminal underworld. These supply lines, as have been now shown only recently in the case of Angola, are often complex networks.<sup>31</sup> At their hub appear to stand a limited number of individuals who stand between buyers and sellers who never come into contact with each other and are generally unaware of who they are eventually selling to or buying from.<sup>32</sup>

Second, the acquisition of loot provides a key driving force for the further acquisition of territorial gains and ensures that an army that does not aim to control more territory is unlikely to acquire more loot. Thus, while indications now are that the RUF may be willing to talk to the Sierra Leone government where its progress has been blocked by British and UN troops, it has sought to spread its war elsewhere. The result is the recent expansion of the conflict into Guinea, which lies along the northern border of both Liberia and Sierra Leone. Press reports suggest that a key feature of RUF attacks in the area has been the looting of towns. The picture is complicated by the fact that Guinea has responded by supporting rebel groups fighting against Charles Taylor in Liberia, ensuring a widening of the boundaries of the conflict.<sup>33</sup>

### 4.4. Narcotics

Nigeria, along with DRC, has developed into a major route for the transshipment of narcotics, especially into Europe, and there have been reports of the engagement in the narcotics trade of Nigerian members of the ECOMOG force in Liberia. As in the case of other societies which have developed into transshipment points, West Africa has developed a significant problem of abuse of its own. The most recent and as yet unpublished UN report on global illicit drug trends shows increases in consumption of cocaine for both Nigeria and Liberia.<sup>34</sup> These developments have overlapped with the conflict in Sierra Leone and a significant local drug problem has been recorded by those fighting on both sides, but particularly among the RUF. Around the abandoned house of RUF leader Foday

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<sup>31</sup> Johan Peleman, 'The logistics of sanctions busting: The airborne component', in Jakkie Cilliers and Christian Dietrich, *Angola's War Economy: The Role of Oil and Diamonds*, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2000.

<sup>32</sup> See Mark Shaw, 'The cost of war and the price of peace: The political economy of crime and conflict in sub-Saharan Africa', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 8, No 2, Winter 2001 (forthcoming).

<sup>33</sup> *The Economist*, 12-18 May 2001.

<sup>34</sup> United Nations International Drug Control Programme, *Global Illicit Drug Trends 2001*, ODCCP Studies on Drugs and Crime, Pre-publication version, p. 250. For other related drug abuse patterns in West Africa see United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, *World Drug Report 2000*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2000.

Sankoh on his arrest last year, were found thousands of surgical syringes. Child soldiers of the RUF told reporters that they had been forcibly injected with cocaine before being sent into battle.<sup>35</sup>

Unsurprisingly information on the actual trafficking of illicit drugs by any of the parties to the conflict is scarce. There seems little doubt however that Liberia is an important transit point for and increasing consumer of illicit drugs. Whether drugs have developed into a commodity of their own which can be traded for other commodities such as weapons or food is currently unclear. That information which is available from foreign police sources stationed in West Africa is that the region serves as a transshipment for consignments bound for Europe or North America and as a result has developed a drug habit of its own. Given its value however drug distribution is tightly controlled and seems unlikely to develop as a commodity of exchange, although some cases have been reported of the bartering of weapons for drugs.<sup>36</sup>

The same probably does not apply to more widely available narcotics such as cannabis that is also grown in the region. No evidence however has been found in the literature to provide more detail in this respect. But given that local groups can cultivate cannabis themselves and market it to potential traffickers for the external or the local market it certainly holds such a potential. Cocaine, heroine and other drugs that are transhipped through the region are controlled by highly organised networks whose main aim is to acquire profit by distribution in the developed world.

#### 4.5. Other Actual and Potential Income Streams

Prior to the conflict, the non-diamond sectors of the Sierra Leone economy included a relatively insignificant cash crop sector, with palm oil as its most important product, and a more important minerals sector, exploiting iron ore, rutile and bauxite. The industrial sector was very small, and heavily concentrated in Freetown. This may be regarded as the 'legitimate' economy of Sierra Leone, and its destruction or drastic diminution forms one element in the political economy of conflict, that needs to be noted alongside the much more dramatic use of resources to sustain conflict.

While data on the nature of the commercial economy is patchy it is a significant point to make that important components of the economy appeared to be in terminal decline *before* the onset of the conflict. Thus, the percentage of palm oil exported by the country between 1985 and 1989 declined on average by 48% each year. Unsurprisingly, no production at all appears to have been recorded between 1995 and 1999.<sup>37</sup> An average decline of just over 8% per year is recorded between 1985 and 1989 for the export forest products which includes hardwoods, although this decline in the official figures is probably not matched by the activities of the criminal economy.<sup>38</sup> Growth in the agricultural sector during the 1980s is slight (just over 1 percent) while an average 4.7% decline per year characterised the country's tiny manufacturing sector.<sup>39</sup> World Bank data shows no manufactured good exported from the country from 1980 at all.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> 'Brutal child army grows up', BBC, 10 May 2000 on <http://news.bbc.co.uk>. Other accounts are also recorded in UNODCCP, *The Drug Nexus in Africa*, undated report on drug use and trafficking Africa.

<sup>36</sup> See Berman, 'Arming the RUF'.

<sup>37</sup> *African Development Indicators 2001*, p. 98.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Even prior to the conflict then, the management of the cash crop sector (notably through the Sierra Leone Produce Marketing Board) was notoriously inefficient and corrupt, and there were very high rates of unemployment, especially in Freetown. The minerals sector was managed through foreign companies, several of which progressively scaled down and eventually abandoned their operations, as a result of government exactions and mismanagement. The import sector, notably for rice (the staple food) was likewise subject to massive and corrupt political interference.

With the collapse of the legitimate economy, the government's revenue has been cut off, and individuals who have been deprived of livelihoods have needed to look for alternative means of subsistence, with crime and engagement in conflict as prominent possibilities.



## V. Agendas for External Military, Political and Economic Engagement

Sierra Leone has by no means been neglected by the international community. Indeed, for a small African state of negligible global economic and strategic significance, it has attracted a significant amount of concern, notably from the former colonial power, the United Kingdom, the Economic Community of West African States (through ECOMOG), and the United Nations (through UNAMSIL), as well as from a variety of other public and private external actors. With the exception of those that have tacitly or overtly supported the RUF (among which not only Liberia and Burkina Faso but also Côte d'Ivoire and even France may be included), these have overwhelmingly been concerned with projects of state reconstruction, seeking to rebuild the Sierra Leone state whose evident deficiencies were at the base of the conflict in the first place. This in itself places a very large questionmark over the likely success of such projects. Very little attention, and that very largely directed through NGOs, has been concerned with attempting to identify and rectify the underlying sources of conflict – though to be fair, this has been so massive a task, and one so evidently dependent on a level of domestic leadership and initiative that has generally been in short supply, that it is understandable that external actors should have shied away from it.

Critical to the project of reconstruction is not simply the deployment into Sierra Leone of external physical resources, most prominently foreign military forces and a substantial quantity of financial assistance, but also a distinctive conception of what a legitimate state ought to look like. This conception in turn derives from ideas of statehood that have become deeply entrenched in the Western political tradition, and which have been elevated to apparently unchallenged supremacy by the Western victory in the Cold War, and the abrupt disappearance from public discourse of any rival model of the state. It has three key ingredients, all of which have been prominent in the attempted reordering of the global system under the aegis of the dominant Western capitalist states over the last two decades. The first of these is 'democracy', by which is meant that the political authorities are established through competition for votes between rival political parties, under a constitutional formula which they all accept. The second is 'good government', by which is meant the establishment of effective state institutions, capable of ensuring peace, stability, the rule of law, and the protection of basic human rights. The third is 'economic liberalisation', by which is meant the management of the economy according to market principles, including the maintenance of an effective regulatory framework by the state, and a consequent separation of powers between the state on the one hand, and those actively involved in production and exchange on the other. Simply to outline these ingredients is to indicate how far the operation of the Sierra Leonean state has been from the globally validated model, and to emphasise the task involved a creating a state that corresponds to it. So entrenched has this conception of statehood become in the eyes of Western governments and international institutions, however, that these appear to have no alternative conception of how the task of reconstruction could be achieved.

The immediate tasks of state reconstruction encompass two critical elements: the creation of an effective structure of coercion, and the re-establishment of a legitimate political authority. Only with the achievement of these would it be possible to put into place the third leg of the tripod, the re-establishment of a viable national economy. All three call for considerable external resources, through which to engender an internal transformation. Finally, external actors have sought to insulate Sierra Leone's against sources of instability arising from its external environment. The argument of this section of the paper is that the contradictions involved render these tasks virtually insuperable.

### 5.1. Creating a Viable Structure of Coercion

Given that the most immediate threat to peace and stability in Sierra Leone has been a military one, it is understandable that the restoration of a basic framework of public order has been the primary goal of external involvement. Given that long-term military involvement by external forces is likely to be both illegitimate and ineffective, it is equally understandable that these efforts have comprised a combination of immediate stabilisation of the military situation, with the construction of a military force with which the Sierra Leone state could assure its own long-term security.

It will however be apparent from the previous discussion that the re-establishment of Sierra Leone's military capability has been attempted, and has failed, on numerous occasions. The first attempt to reform the institution inherited from colonial rule took place after the collapse of the first military government in 1968. It was followed, after a number of attempted *coups d'état* during the 1970s, by the progressive subordination of any institutional capacity to the demands of Stevens' neopatrimonial state. A further upheaval followed after the ousting of Momoh in 1992, and a fourth attempt at reconstruction occurred with Kabbah's takeover in 1996. The fifth followed his restoration in 1998, while the British military training mission is currently engaged on the sixth. These efforts, which have followed one another at progressively shorter intervals, make all too clear the magnitude of the task involved, and the very uncertain prospects of success.

Alongside these attempts to create a viable internal structure of coercion has occurred the deployment of various external forces, all of which have had as their ostensible objectives, not only the stabilisation of the immediate security crises that have led to their introduction, but the training of an indigenous military which was expected – according to the time-honoured formula of the post-colonial 'transfer of power' – to take over from the departing foreigners. These foreigners in turn have come in various shapes and sizes: private military companies (especially Executive Outcomes, or EO), the regional military hegemon (Nigeria/ECOMOG), the returning colonial power (the UK), and the United Nations (UNAMSIL). While these forces have achieved varying degrees of success in restoring the immediate security situation, with EO as the most effective and UNAMSIL as the least, their capacity to render themselves redundant has in each case been negligible. Indeed, the greater their own effectiveness, the greater the level of dependence that they have induced, and the more disastrous the consequences of their withdrawal. The example of EO illustrates the dilemma with particular clarity. The extraordinary speed with which a force of no more than three hundred men liberated the most important areas of the country from RUF control, imposing heavy casualties at negligible cost to themselves, illustrated the massive military advantages that professional military forces enjoy over the ill-organised levies of the indigenous government. This very discrepancy in competence inevitably aroused the jealousy of the RSLMF, as did the high demands that EO made on the available financial resources, and indeed the unspoken assumption that EO's presence was intended not only to defeat the

RUF, but to protect the government from its own armed forces. As soon as the military situation appeared to be stable, therefore, the Kabbah government came under intense pressure, both financial and political, to disembarass itself of the force that had given it the leverage to negotiate with the RUF from a position of strength. The withdrawal of ECOMOG led to an even swifter collapse of the government's military position, and tentative attempts to withdraw the British force have had to be reversed, as it immediately became clear that this provided the essential guarantee of stability, without which neither UNAMSIL nor the government forces could provide any credible challenge to the RUF.

An alternative possible solution to the security dilemma is provided by the *kamajors*, and equivalent militia organisations that have been formed under different titles – *tamaboro*, *donso*, *kapra*, *gbenthis* – in other areas of the country.<sup>41</sup> The *kamajors* (like a number of movements elsewhere in Africa, such as the Lofa Defense Force in neighbouring Liberia) certainly started as a genuine 'civil society' movement of people determined to protect their homes and families against the RUF, and the Kabbah government sought after May 1997 to turn them and other movements into a Civil Defence Force with responsibility for local security. However, this raised problems both on the ground (since some areas were far more effectively organised than others), and at national political level. The militias aroused the deep hostility of the 'official' armed forces, which rightly saw them as a threat to their own position, while the fact that the *kamajors* (who were by far the most effective movement) were closely associated with the deputy defence minister, Hinga Norman, made them suspect even to the president himself. The experience of ethnic militias elsewhere in Africa, moreover (especially in Somalia and Sudan), has been a thoroughly unhappy one, and there was an all too evident danger that civil defence groups might turn into rival armies under the control of local warlords. In short, the security problem has had no evident solution, short of the quasi-permanent retention of a viable external force.

## 5.2. Re-establishing a Legitimate Political Authority

The second task, that of re-establishing a legitimate political authority, was in principle accomplished with the election of President Kabbah. Even though the 1996 elections were held in a country at war, under the threat of RUF disruption, and produced some impossible results,<sup>42</sup> they were accepted by all parties in the interests of peace. The level of usable authority that they conferred was nonetheless very limited, and they were much more important in providing Sierra Leone with a government that its external allies could publicly support, than in laying the foundation for a viable political system in Sierra Leone itself. Kabbah himself was indeed – as a former United Nations official who had spent most of his working life in New York – a perfect expression of the combination of the 'global' and the 'local' that his election represented. He had, however, only very limited leadership capacities, and when his regime was challenged both in May 1997 and in January 1999, his immediate response was to take refuge under foreign protection. He all too evidently lacked the aura of authority around which personalist regimes in Africa are characteristically constructed.

If the 'democratic legitimacy' route to a viable political structure was simply too feeble to serve its purpose, the alternative 'negotiated settlement' route was downright disastrous. On two occasions,

<sup>41</sup> See Yusuf Bangura, 'Strategic policy failure and governance in Sierra Leone', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol.38 No.4, 2000.

<sup>42</sup> For example, more votes were cast in war-torn districts in the south and east (strongholds of Kabbah's SLPP) than the number of registered voters; see Bangura, 'Strategic policy failure'.

first under the Abidjan agreement of November 1996, and then under the Lomé accord of July 1999, an attempt was made – in each case, and especially at Lomé, under strong international pressure – to engineer a compromise under which the RUF would be demilitarised, and converted into an accepted civilian political party (in the Abidjan version) or a partner in government (in the Lomé one). The model was the Mozambique settlement of 1992-94, which succeeded in thus converting Renamo, a movement with a record of brutality equivalent to that of the RUF. The circumstances, however, were entirely different: in Mozambique, Renamo had been negotiating from a position of weakness, given the loss of its external supporter, apartheid South Africa, and the determination of all the country's neighbours to impose a settlement; in Sierra Leone, on the other hand, the RUF was negotiating from a position of strength, given its evident military capacity, its control of the diamond areas, and its access to cross-border support in Liberia. It never demonstrated the slightest commitment to any of the agreements that it signed. Indeed, the restoration of peace to war-torn African societies through negotiated settlements between 'government' and 'rebels' has proved an almost invariably unsuccessful strategy, with only Mozambique on the one side to set against a catalogue of failures (among which Angola and Rwanda had the most appalling costs) on the other.<sup>43</sup> The critical point is that the achievement of peace requires not merely the negotiation of some formula for sharing power, but the imposition of a viable actual power structure which the participants accept. The Abidjan and Lomé accords rested not on the presence of this essential precondition for lasting peace, but on its absence. Their breakdown was inevitable.

Following the May 2000 fiasco, the international community – in the form of the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the West African states – reverted to the previous formula of support for the democratically elected government, which was due to face another round of elections in 2001. In practice, however, the search for a political settlement was abandoned, and Sierra Leone reverted to what was to all intents and purposes a trusteeship, under the aegis of UNAMSIL and, more effectively, the former colonial power. Though the British resumption of its Sierra Leone protectorate, nearly forty years after independence, could only seem bizarre, it was nonetheless very widely accepted. Sierra Leone had long been exceptional among British colonies in Africa for the nostalgia with which much of the population regarded colonial rule, a nostalgia which could only have been enhanced by its traumatic experience of independence. All too clearly, however, it provided no viable long-term formula for state renewal, and even its short-term survival rested on the willingness of the British government to maintain an anachronistic military force in a part of the world where it had no significant interests.

### 5.3. Restoring the Economy

Restoring the third leg of the tripod – an economy that would provide for at least minimal government services, and ultimately form the foundation on which the project of state reconstruction would have to rest – was simply out of the question, until a structure of civil order and a plausible political framework could be put in place. By 1999, the Sierra Leone state's internally generated revenues had sunk to about \$10 million, compared with about \$250 million annually (at constant prices) in the mid-

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<sup>43</sup> See C. Clapham, 'Rwanda: the perils of peacemaking', *Journal of Peace Research*, 1998.

1970s.<sup>44</sup> Here, the initial dependence on global rather than local resources for state reconstruction was virtually total. These resources, moreover, would not only be required to sustain the 'lean' state which the economic orthodoxy of Western developmental discourse sought to put in place; they would also have to provide for the extremely expensive demands of fighting a war, and maintaining a structure of order that would be needed for far into the foreseeable future; and they would likewise have to give local populations a strong incentive to opt for reincorporation into the civil framework of statehood, in place of the opportunities (fragile though these were) created by the informal networks through which they had hitherto kept themselves going.

The immediate requirement for re-establishing an economic basis for government rested on recapture of the diamond areas, together with the restoration of effective control over other natural resources (such as the rutile mine) which did not offer the same opportunities for plunder as diamonds, but which required long-term stability in order to create an incentive for the investment that would be needed to restore destroyed infrastructure and exploit them effectively. One advantage enjoyed by the Sierra Leone government, in depending on forces provided by foreign states rather than on private military companies in order to keep itself in power, was that these did not demand payment for their services – though some of these forces were certainly liable either to tap into the rents available from the diamond trade on an individual level, or else expected to be rewarded with economic opportunities at a governmental one. Even the restoration of government control, however, would do no more (at best) than re-establish the situation that had existed before state breakdown, and as already noted, that situation was itself to a very significant extent responsible for the collapse of political authority and the provision of public goods in the 1970s and 1980s. Effective state creation would require not only state control over the extraction of economic rents, but the long-term maintenance of external control over the state itself, in order to impose the 'good governance' conditionalities required for the production of public goods – or in other words, effective recolonisation. Given that such a formula would be acceptable neither to the indigenous political authorities (to whom it would deny opportunities for private rent-seeking), or to the 'trusteeship' authorities (who would find themselves placed in an increasingly invidious position, as they sought to control both local populations and the state authorities on whose behalf they were nominally acting), it can effectively be ruled out.

#### **5.4. Controlling the External Environment**

Even though the external environment is not, in our view, the most important source of Sierra Leone's problems, controlling that environment could nonetheless provide a critical boost to bringing the conflicts under control. As already noted, in the one case in which a civil war in Africa has been brought to a reasonably satisfactory conclusion, that of Mozambique, the insulation of the conflict from external support for the rebel group, Renamo, was the key to securing a settlement. A further vital element in the Mozambique case was that the resources used to sustain the conflict came to an exceptional extent from outside, with the result that insulation deprived the combatants (most explicitly Renamo, but also the Frelimo government) of the means to keep it going. Mozambique produced virtually nothing by way of externally tradable resources. Attempts to replicate the settlement in Angola, where neither of these two conditions was met, proved disastrous.

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<sup>44</sup> William Reno, 'Sierra Leone: warfare in a post-state society', unpublished paper for World Peace Foundation conference on failed states, Harvard University, January 2001.

Regrettably, Sierra Leone comes much closer to the Angolan than to the Mozambican pattern. Although the country is much smaller than Mozambique, its frontiers are dramatically shorter, and it has only two immediate neighbours (compared with Mozambique's six), it lacks the supportive regional system that developed with the end of apartheid in southern Africa. Its frontier with Guinée – especially in the southeast, close to the diamond areas and the Liberian border – has become a major area of instability, with high levels of conflict and massive refugee flows; while the Liberian government under Charles Taylor has given barely concealed support to the RUF, especially as a conduit for arms in one direction, and diamonds in the other. Equally, although Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, it does generate internal resources, notably through diamonds, that are of interest to outside actors.

The international community has taken some measures in an attempt to deter Liberian support for the RUF, notably through the suspension of EU aid. Other attempts to control the RUF's access to external economic resources are discussed in the next section. These efforts are however undermined by two features of the regional security system that badly hamper any attempt at control. The first is that the very measures that were needed to stabilise the long and catastrophic conflict in Liberia, served at the same time to destabilise the closely related conflict in its neighbour. ECOMOG intervention in Liberia, though disguised as a 'peacekeeping' operation, was in practice a means of keeping Charles Taylor out of power, by sustaining a puppet government in Monrovia, while encouraging the formation of other Liberian armed movements that would undermine Taylor's control over the hinterland. Given Taylor's character, a good case could be made for keeping him out of power, but the strategy proved to be unsustainable, and its long term effects were disastrous. Peace, of a kind, was ultimately brought to Liberia only through a settlement which enabled Taylor to take control of the national government, after an election in which Liberians overwhelmingly voted for him as the only plausible means of bringing the war to an end.<sup>45</sup> This settlement in turn gave Taylor a free hand to pursue his ambitions, and his profits, in Sierra Leone.

Second, both the Liberian and then the Sierra Leone conflicts became enmeshed in the major fault line in West African regional politics, that between anglophone and francophone states, and in turn between the U.K. and France. Taylor invaded Liberia through Côte d'Ivoire, the most important French client state in West Africa, and his ruthless extraction of resources from Liberia was very largely channelled through Côte d'Ivoire, and orchestrated by French companies. France also provided tacit diplomatic support, notably in the person of the then French ambassador in Côte d'Ivoire, Michel Dupuch, who under the Chirac presidency became head of the *cellule africaine* at the Elysée, responsible for managing presidential relations with Africa. West African clientele networks thus reached into the heart of the French government, and – although Chirac's freedom of action was restricted by the need for cohabitation with the Jospin government – helped account for French obstruction of attempts to control Taylor's involvement in Sierra Leone. Much of the military side of this involvement was handled through another francophone state, Burkina Faso.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See David Harris, 'From 'warlord' to 'democratic' president: how Charles Taylor won the 1997 Liberian elections', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol.37 No.3, pp.431-55.

<sup>46</sup> See Berman, 'Arming the RUF'.

## VI. The Limitations of Resource Management

All of these factors have inevitably impeded external attempts to manage the political economy of conflict. Looking in turn at each of the sources of exploitable surplus already identified, we can see how economic conflict management has been subverted by factors drawn from the broader social and political environment, both within Sierra Leone and externally.

### 6.1. Diamonds

The control of the diamond economy turns critically on two requirements: first, the physical or military control of the main areas, notably Kono and Kenema, in which diamonds are found; and second, the control of the networks or conduits through which diamonds are transported and marketed. Both of these have proved extremely problematic. It should be noted, too, that even a ‘satisfactory’ solution to the first requirement, that of controlling the diamond fields themselves, does not necessarily resolve the problem: even if Kono and Kenema are occupied by forces answerable to the government in Freetown (be these the Sierra Leone army, foreign mercenaries, or international peacekeepers), there still remain numerous channels through which diamond revenues can be appropriated to private use, and even used to sustain continued conflict.

Given the incapacity of the Sierra Leone army to wrest control of the diamond fields from the RUF, military control has effectively depended on the willingness of some external force to undertake the job on the government’s behalf. The only such force that has done so effectively has been Executive Outcomes, which in turn was closely linked to international companies (notably the Branch Energy/DiamondWorks consortium), for which access to diamonds was the major reason for involvement. It could well be argued that, had EO control of the diamond fields been sustainable, it would have provided the least bad option from the viewpoint of Sierra Leone security as a whole. However unpalatable in many respects, it would at least have created an alliance between military and economic interests, under the formal control of the national government. Instead, as already noted, the EO operation was politically unsustainable, and other mercenary operations have been even less successful. Other external military forces have been unwilling or unable to fill the gap, or (like the Nigerian forces in ECOMOG) have themselves been engaged in diamond trafficking. UNAMSIL proved completely incapable of challenging RUF control, even supposing that to have been their proper task, while the British forces have restricted themselves to securing the area around Freetown. This in turn has placed whole onus on the control of transport and marketing networks.

The most ingenious device was the attempt to divert diamond revenues from Monrovia to Freetown by incorporating the RUF into the Sierra Leone government under the Lomé agreement, a central part of which was that RUF leader Foday Sankoh would chair the commission responsible for mineral resources – in essence enabling him to take first cut of the revenues, provided that he did so, formally at least, on behalf of the Freetown regime. Had this arrangement been carried through, it would probably have eventually permitted the RUF to take over the whole government, since it would have possessed both Sierra Leone’s most effective armed force, and its most important source of rents

with which to build up a political following; in effect, it would have duplicated the Liberian settlement by which Charles Taylor took power, though without even the formality of elections that legitimated Taylor's accession. What prevented it was the RUF's refusal to cede control of the diamond fields to UNAMSIL: when it came to the crunch, physical control of production mattered more than legal entitlement to marketing. This solution would also have threatened Sankoh's alliance with Taylor, and (since his political following in Sierra Leone appears to be negligible) left him exposed in the almost inevitable event of the breakdown of the very fragile political settlement on which the Lomé agreement depended.

This failure in turn left open only the attempt to control diamond revenues at a distance, through the imposition of sanctions on the Liberian government, and the creation of a global regime to regulate 'blood diamonds' at the point of sale: in effect, an attempt to police the boundary which diamonds had to cross, in order to enter the realm of legitimate commerce. This could at best only provide a very partial and inadequate solution, since the financial interests in evasion are such as to make it resemble keeping water in a sieve. There are problems even at the point of production: just as many of the diamonds mined by UNITA in Angola are marketed through official government channels, as the result of corrupt deals with leading MPLA politicians and army officers,<sup>47</sup> so the RUF has had extensive deals with (especially) Nigerian officers in ECOMOG and UNAMSIL. At the point of sale, the origin of cut diamonds is apparently impossible to distinguish. All along the way, there are opportunities for leakage.

## 6.2. Aid

The political economy of aid receipts is in principle easier to control, since – with the exception of covert aid to the RUF through Liberia, Burkina Faso and other sources – it enters Sierra Leone largely through official channels, from foreign governments, international organisations, and reputable NGOs. At the level of explicit control, the major problems lie in the institutional weaknesses of the Sierra Leone government itself, and the difficulty of ensuring that the aid is actually devoted to the purposes for which it was intended – a problem embarrassingly illustrated when arms provided by the United Kingdom for the newly reconstituted Sierra Leone army in 2000 turned up within days in the hands of child soldiers.

But the major problem with the political economy of aid is a more basic one: in a deeply dependent country and culture such as Sierra Leone, aid merely encourages and intensifies dependence. If one rules out a thoroughgoing process of recolonisation, which is hard to envisage under current global conditions, then any lasting solution to the problems of conflict and state collapse in Sierra Leone must be conditional on the creation of a viable, effective and legitimate political structure within the country itself. Were this to be achieved, then external assistance could certainly help the country's leadership to rebuild its shattered economy, society and governmental institutions, and would indeed in the short term be essential for the purpose. In the hands of a feeble and deeply dependent Kabbah regime, however, aid merely becomes a substitute, rather than a support, for the necessary domestic transformation.

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<sup>47</sup> See Cilliers and Dietrich, *Angola's War Economy*.

### 6.3. Loot

The political economy of loot provides, paradoxically, a potential source of progress. The stripping of marketable resources from rural Sierra Leone has by all accounts been brutal. Whatever can be stolen and sold has been. But for this very reason, an economy based on looting very rapidly becomes unsustainable, simply because there is nothing left to loot. Before very long, it becomes evident even to the crudest looters that their own subsistence depends on there being something to steal, and hence on the maintenance of some kind of productive economy. Eventually, it may even dawn on them that the richer the economy, the greater the extent to which they can themselves profit, and that it may even be in their interests *not* to steal things straight away, so that there will be more for them to steal later. This further step is admittedly still some way beyond the grasp of the kinds of looters who are currently operating in Sierra Leone. This central insight, however, provides the basis for Olson's distinction between *roving bandits* and *stationary bandits*.<sup>48</sup>

Evidence for the validity of Olson's insights is already available in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Whereas the initial takeover of an area by the NPFL in Liberia or the RUF in Sierra Leone has been entirely rapacious, eventually even these organisations have had to settle down to some kind of *modus vivendi* with the local population, in which these are permitted (indeed forced) to continue working their fields or their diamond mining operations, and are in turn subject to crude forms of taxation by their overlords. This deal should not be disguised as anything but what it is: a mechanism by which people with guns terrorise local populations into providing them with the kind of 'protection' money that is characteristically extorted by the mafia or terrorist organisations. At the very least, however, people whose hands have been chopped off – an atrocity for which the RUF has been particularly notorious – are simply not in a position to provide slave labour for their oppressors.

Managing this morally repugnant form of political economy in the interests of peace and the ultimate welfare of the people affected by it is extremely difficult, and takes a hard head and a strong stomach. At the very least, it means tacitly ceding areas of territory to an organisation such as the RUF, while maintaining effective internal security systems in other areas of the country that prevent it from compensating for the inadequacy of its rule over areas that it does control, by simply raiding into areas that it does not. It also requires very close attention to the political economy of aid: the whole point of the process is destroyed if aid donors, with the best intentions, seek to compensate peasants for looting by providing replacement goods which are then available for looting in their turn. As a general rule, it may be necessary to insist that development aid is provided *only* to areas and populations who are already living under stable and protected government control. The situation in Sierra Leone, however, appears to have reached the point at which some such mechanism for stabilising the economy of loot may be needed.

### 6.4. Narcotics

As already highlighted earlier, more work is required in the second phase in respect of this area. As a general principle however, the management of a narcotics economy raises exactly the same problems as the management of a diamond economy, with the major difference that – since the product itself is illegal – there is no point at which one can police the point at which it enters the legitimate economy.

## 6.5. Others

The rehabilitation of other significant areas of the Sierra Leone economy, including notably large-scale and capital intensive mining operations, industries, and plantation agriculture, broadly depends on the *prior* establishment of effective political order. In short, these are dependent variables, which follow after peace, and which cannot be managed and manipulated in such a way as to help promote it. Indeed, premature rehabilitation carries the same risks as the provision of aid in a way that only encourages further looting: capital intensive operations provide tempting short-term targets for roving bandits, who have nothing to gain from waiting for the much greater benefits that are promised in the longer term. In short, there is nothing much to be done here now.

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<sup>48</sup> Mancur Olson, 'Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development', in Olson & Satu Kähkönen, eds, *A Not-so-dismal Science: A Broader View of Economies and Societies*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2000, pp.119-137.

## VII. Conclusion

It must by now be apparent that the task of restoring any reasonably stable and effective form of peaceful governance to Sierra Leone is an extremely difficult one, and that the role that can be played in this process by external donors and other agencies is extremely limited. Indeed, ill-considered external intervention, no matter how honourable its intentions, may well be counter-productive. In particular, the central element in any process of rehabilitation must be the creation – rather than the restoration, for it has to date scarcely existed – of domestic political leadership and commitment to good governance. In the mean time, the donor community finds itself facing the invidious dilemma that while its presence is essential in the short term, in order to prevent further collapse and provide basic necessities for a desperate population, it can only be debilitating in the longer term, since it impedes precisely the domestic processes that offer the only prospect of a permanent solution.

In these circumstances, there is at least something to be said for the maxim, “Do no harm”. There is a limited role for external actors, especially in doing what they can to insulate the conflict from the wider regional and international system, even though this can never been entirely successful. There may also be something to be done in laying the foundations for the eventual development of civil society and essential management skills. Any such role, however, can only be modest, and carries no guarantee of success.



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