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# The underlying causes of fragility and instability in Sierra Leone

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Commission on  
**State Fragility, Growth and Development**

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## About the commission

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# Executive summary

## 1

Sierra Leone has experienced two brief periods in its history in which it appeared at least superficially, that state consolidation was taking place, and that the country was on a path away from fragility and towards greater stability and peaceful development. These were the period immediately following independence in 1961 until the first military coup in 1967, and the contemporary period after the end of the civil war in 2002 until the Ebola crisis of 2014. In the earlier period, institutions such as the judiciary, the civil service, a civil aviation authority, and a national university took form in ways that suggested the emergence of a modern state apparatus. In the latter period, we see independent state institutions such as Audit Services emerged; a free and vocal press became evident; and for the recently concluded General Elections, the National Electoral Commission took a stand for good governance and accountability. This also suggested that the social contract between the citizenry and the Government could and would be enforced. In both periods, the economy (at least at first) grew robustly. And both periods were kicked off by substantially free and peaceful democratic elections – in 1961 accompanied by celebrations in the streets, and in 2002 accompanied once again by celebrations, and also by a seemingly rapid process of accountability for war crimes, forgiveness, and return to normalcy.

Yet throughout Sierra Leone's history, conflict seems to lurk just below the surface, and often enough to boil over. Indeed, since the uprising of the inland chiefs in 1898 in response to the declaration of the protectorate of Sierra Leone by the British in 1896, Sierra Leone has known few periods of stability. In the earlier period, military coups in 1967, 1968, 1992, 1996, 1997, punctuated a history of endemic social unrest that escalated into overt civil war in 1991, lasting until 2002. More recently, in a country where localised riots and strikes historically preceded national conflict, seven major strikes and riots in and around mines and concessions have taken place over the period 2009 to 2014, in some cases accompanied by the loss of life. Analyses of the Ebola crisis in 2014 showing it to be less a health crisis, and more a crisis of governance and a crisis of lack of confidence of people in their Government, uncomfortably echo analyses of crises past. They give ample reason for continued concern to those whose hope for Sierra Leone is a resilient peaceful and prosperous future.

This paper broadly surveys the socio-political dynamics of Sierra Leone through the lenses of legitimacy, capacity, security, the private sector, and resilience in order to understand the root causes of this historical and contemporary fragility. It draws from both secondary research and primary source interviews. It finds that constructs of performance legitimacy common in contemporary state building discourse – which assume that the core challenge is to reinforce the state so that it is willing and

able to meet popular expectations, and that it is the failure to do so that explains instability – inadequately explain Sierra Leone’s current dilemmas. These models put state-society relations, in particular between the formal national Government and the population that constitutes the electorate, at the heart of the fragility question. This may be truer in other contexts and will be to some extent true in Sierra Leone as well. In Sierra Leone, however, we find a different driving dynamic throughout its history, summarised below and explored in greater detail in the analysis that follows:

- Sierra Leone was historically, and today remains, a hybrid political order. There are multiple loci of political power and cultural authority, including traditional chieftaincies and the “secret societies” (particularly in the rural areas), alliances of elites (particularly in the capital), and to a lesser extent religious bodies.
- Even as the formal trappings of service delivery and democratic accountability developed, the national Government existed, and to some extent still exists, apart from the broader society. That society is better understood as several nation states defined predominantly by ethnic affiliation. That is to say, people’s primary identity and loyalty are with their ethnic or other identity group and its own form of organisation and leadership. It is within the political structures of these groupings that the social contract is formed rather than between the formal state and the population as a whole.
- The contours of conflict in Sierra Leone are primarily defined by tensions between these different social, political, and cultural institutions over power and resources. This is through perceived incursions into others’ sphere of influence, or through exclusion from benefits to which actors feel they have a legitimate claim.
- These dynamics made the national Government, and maintain it as, an arena for inter-group conflict. Policies were and are contested, and positions were and are sought, primarily for the purposes of control over public finances. Institutions such as the judiciary, state security apparatus, and the public service in general were, and to a great extent remain, contested instruments of control by elites, in large measure unresponsive to public pressures or accountability mechanisms.
- The formal economy also became (and in large measure remains) an arena for conflict. It became fundamentally extractive as government structures were manipulated to direct the flow of rents from bloated public contracts and natural resource concessions. Economic growth and job creation – rather than playing their stabilising role – underpin festering resentments over corruption, an uneven playing field for private sector actors, and unfair distribution of benefits.
- Traditional social institutions were (and to some extent remain) reasonably robust in their role of social management and protection within their spheres.

But these institutions are so fragmented and dispersed that they have proved unable to reach durable accommodations between themselves. No institution has emerged at the national level with the power or legitimacy to reliably broker between them; and since the national Government is a primary arena for conflict, it is unlikely to be able to play such a mediating role.

- Inter-group conflict escalated as political control over the state apparatus became more urgent. This was in part because the magnitude of rents available for capture grew with foreign investment in newly discovered natural resources, and because the effective control of formal government structures over those resources improved as more of the economy became amenable to the controls of fiscal policy, tariff policy, and contracts and concession agreements between the national Government and private parties.

To the extent that these dynamics help explain the history and persistence of fragility in Sierra Leone, there are important cautions and lessons for efforts to promote stability and peaceful development, both in Sierra Leone and in similarly situated countries. Indeed, with signs in the post-conflict period of increasing coalescing of ethnicities into a regional divide, these take on particular urgency in Sierra Leone. These can be summarised as follows:

- A desire to promote a “return to normalcy” or “return to peace” by “rebuilding” the country is conceptually and factually misplaced. The peace agreement and subsequent political developments failed to acknowledge and address the root causes of conflict in Sierra Leone as laid out above. This means that current levels of conflict, or of peace, may not be indicative of conflict risk, as the fundamental trajectory of conflict has not been altered.
- The strategy of stabilising the State by focusing on national Government capacity for local service delivery may be misplaced. The state before and after independence was not widely acknowledged as a provider of services to the provinces, and expectations remain generally low. The above strategy therefore puts the Government in conflict with traditional institutions. People may prefer to receive services through more socially embedded (and often more capable) traditional institutions whose decisions they better trust and know how to influence.
- Similarly, “capacity building” initiatives may have limited impact addressing shortcomings in service delivery, as lack of capacity may in many cases be a symptom of policy indifference and a desire to divert resources intended for service delivery to other purposes, rather than a root cause. Resources intended for capacity building become rents subject to the same contestation as any other government-controlled resource.
- In the absence of the guiding hand of a developmental state, inequality tends to increase during periods of high growth and more people become exposed to greater insecurity: for example, through wholesale shifts towards plantation agriculture and cash crops, and the economy’s dependence on

rapid growth in the minerals sector that unleashed symptoms of the Dutch Disease. Furthermore, poorly managed rapid growth can degrade the stabilising influence of traditional institutions as exogenous factors diminish their capacity to provide human security, and thus their legitimacy.

- Absent a mechanism capable of brokering durable political accommodations between Sierra Leone's many power centres, attempts to strengthen the formal Government may have perverse impacts. The more resources it manages and the greater its effective control over them, including the potential for rent-seeking, the more it becomes an arena for inter-group contestation or a target of manipulation by geopolitical or mercenary interests outside its control.
- Similarly, efforts to accelerate economic growth without attentiveness to inter-group dynamics, whether inter-ethnic or rural-urban, will predictably increase fragility and eventually conflict. Sierra Leone is characterised by a limited access economic order in which elites, within both the political class and the bureaucratic class, exercise inordinate control over the formal economy. The distribution of benefits and risks from economic growth remain skewed and highly contested. Additional resources, particularly at scale, add fuel to the fire.

In summary, the analysis finds that the persistence of historical dynamics that underpinned fragility in Sierra Leone, in particular elite predation using the levers of the Government, and the extractive economy, mean that it is easy to overestimate the legitimacy and capacity of the formal state today. It to some extent exists, but it is not socially imbedded; the peace accord did not establish a new social contract. People are genuinely weary of conflict, creating perhaps a false sense of calm. But they feel increasingly under attack as their economic security is undermined and their traditional institutions degrade, meaning conflict risks remain high and may be increasing.

It is important to underline that this analysis does not cast aspersions on any particular leader, government, party or role player in society. Rather, it argues that even well-intentioned leaders and administrations have, throughout Sierra Leone's history, been trapped by the dominant dynamics of fragility outlined above. It warns that promises of fundamental changes will only be delivered to the extent that they confront and address the root causes of fragility.

This suggests, potentially, an important, on-going role by those outside actors who helped to broker the peace agreement. Current political and cultural power centres appear incapable of self-organising their institutional arrangements in ways that sustain peaceful development. A continuation of the externally facilitated process may be both necessary and welcome to broker agreements between them.

Rather than seeing them as threats to the state or relics of the past, however, peace builders and state builders may need to recognise the benefits of working with, through, and to the benefit of the political and cultural intuitions that have proven remarkably resilient throughout Sierra Leone's history, in order to achieve the goal of a stable nation state. This would look different from current policy



and practice across a number of important dimensions. Among these are the following:

- **A re-focus on local governance.** Traditional institutions and local structures in many cases benefit from greater legitimacy than the national Government. This has a historical dimension, a capacity dimension, and an accountability dimension. In the aggregate, they are the keepers of the social contract and its enforcement. The devolution of service delivery towards local structures, particularly in the social arena, provides a potentially rich and under-exploited avenue for bridging the state-society divide, as long as resources and accountability mechanisms match responsibilities. By implication, national governance could and should become an arena in which local authorities have far greater effective voice in the matters that effect them and the people they represent.
- **Greatly enhanced transparency.** Efforts to enhance local governance will be aided by greater transparency, for example, in policy development, law and regulation, public accounts, public contracting, and performance measurement against social and economic measures. Embedded in traditional organisations and structures are shorter and often more effective feedback loops that make them more responsive to popular demands and expectations than can be achieved through periodic national elections. Transparency may therefore be expected to have greater impact on reform locally than it has been able to achieve nationally.
- **A long-term perspective.** Any attempt to impose a quick fix to a deeply rooted problem will tend to reinforce current, dysfunctional dynamics rather than support more positive ones. A long-term perspective has basic and civic education dimensions, as more people become not only consumers of government services, but active citizens. It also has a dialogue and conflict resolution dimension, as both within identity groups and between them, it remains critically necessary to discuss and negotiate expectations of government, the mechanisms by which those will be carried out, and the ways in which agreements will be enforced. Finally, altering the fundamentals of the economy require long term horizons often outside the radar of politicians with a five-year mandate.



# From independence to conflict: The origins of fragility

## 2

This section analyses the evolution of the state from independence in 1961 up to the outbreak of civil war in 1991. Like other analyses before it (Vorrath 2014, Robinson 2008, Acemoglu et al. 2014, Acemoglu et al. 2013, Clapham 2001, Lancaster 2007), including the TRC report (2004), it concludes that the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the state set in motion the forces of fragility and eventual conflict. National choices made, in particular in the continuation of the extractive state established by colonial rulers, favoured negative dynamics in the development of the state. These dynamics are analysed using five dimensions of fragility: legitimacy, capacity, security, the private sector and resilience.

## The roots of state illegitimacy

Sierra Leone as a state was created by the merger of the British Crown Colony and the Protectorate, two entities that had followed non-identical paths before independence. The relationship between the state and the citizens in the Crown Colony differed widely from that of the ethnic groups and the Protectorate for over 100 years. The former was created for freed slaves and as a part of the British Empire; the Colony depended on the British for defence and basic services from the start. This was not so for the Protectorate. Its imposition over a geographical area with arbitrary frontiers was tolerated at best, but never embraced. Similarly, while the provision of security, law and order, and other state services had been available in the Colony, the same was not true of the Protectorate. Thus, the merger brought together two experiences of “the State”, requiring deliberate measures to forge a new relationship between the new Sierra Leone and its citizens. Failure to do so after independence undermined, or better still pre-empted, the development of a legitimate state with a social contract that bound rulers to the citizenry.

The pre-independence system of indirect rule in the Protectorate administered through the Crown Colony set the stage for the coexistence of parallel states: the formal Sierra Leone, and within it the informal states represented

by chieftaincies (UNECA 2012, Vors et al. 2004, Bah 2011, Acemoglu 2014). Local seats of power, the chieftaincies, remained intact after independence and became valuable sources of power for the new political national leaders (Thompson 2007). As with many other newly independent states in Africa, the new leaders replaced the old colonial masters with all the paraphernalia of state power but relying on the informal states for political support at the national level (Brown et al. 2005). In effect, the country functioned with two states operating in parallel – the formal state (largely a continuation of colonial mind-sets and structures) at the national levels and the informal states (largely a continuation of traditional structures). Even when the formal state failed, the informal states remained, as the core of their legitimacy and life-source were rooted in culture and traditions, as distinct from the codified laws and security apparatus of the modern State.

The dominant trend post-independence was the emergence of an increasingly predatory national Government that drained state resources and economic benefits from the economy it controlled, this time into the pockets of an exclusionary elite who had successfully mobilised ethnic support to secure power. The pre-civil war period was characterised by scandals involving senior government officials, including ‘squandergate’ and ‘milliongate’ (Bah 2011). In ‘vouchergate’, the Ministry of Education had fraudulently awarded large Government grants to private businessmen who posed as school proprietors (Kpundeh 1995). Three separate commissions of enquiry – the Foster Commission (1968), the Tucker Commission (1988), and the Beccles-Davies, Marcus-Jones, and Nylander Commissions (1993) – carried out investigations on how the political class economically exploited the State and reported widespread embezzlement between 1970 - 1990, as well as individual assets not commensurate with emoluments (Kpundeh 1995). Businessmen were also implicated in the looting of state funds, including the prominent Afro-Lebanese associate of Stevens, Jamil Mohamed. Vital State assets were plundered in all regions of the country (TRC Report 2004).

Over time there was a growing sense that the promised benefits of the independence struggle were not being realised, and that growing inequality was driven by the rent-seeking behaviour of the new ruling elites and the broader bureaucracy of the state (Abdullah 2004, Robinson 2008). These served to reinforce a growing belief that the state existed not to protect the many, but to enrich the few. The situation was made only worse by the violence that characterised almost every general election since independence, and that left a bitter taste of hopelessness. The apathy and even opposition to the national Government that had existed in the larger Protectorate before independence, and by the inhabitants in the colony post-independence, continued. Five coups d’états and attempted coups occurred between 1966 and 1992, similar to the numerous strikes, riots and even revolts that littered the history of the Protectorate from its announcement up to independence.

In sum, there was not even a partial fusing of the Protectorate and its power structures into the relatively well-formed Colony at the time of independence. State legitimacy was under question from the start, first by the former ruling class of the Colony (who took their case to the Privy Council and lost), and then by younger elements from the Protectorate who were dissatisfied with the way power was consolidated in the national Government. Without support

from broad-based power structures in society such as prominent traditional organisations and institutions, and without popular support, the modern State remained vulnerable to attack and was easily destroyed and dismantled by the rebels. Conflict, first political and then violent, presaged the fall of the Government and the formal State.

## **The lack of capacity a symptom of the predatory state**

The forging of a national State at independence required the extension of public services hitherto available in the Colony to the wider territory. Yet questions of service delivery remained subsidiary to political wrangling. In 1963, for example, the civil service retirement age was reduced to 40 in order to make way for younger protégés from the new political power base, “resolving” tensions with the Colony elite who controlled the state bureaucracy by removing them. Still, technical capacities expanded rapidly in the setting up of various branches of the state apparatus, including meteorology, civil aviation, development-related and commercial banking services, and agricultural extension services.

All institutions reached their zenith in the early 1980s. From then the decline set in as political patronage permeated all institutions, and impunity persisted (Lancaster 2007, Sierra Leone TRC Report, Volume 3A). Connections, not performance, were rewarded. The education sector in particular suffered, beginning with higher education where appointments became increasingly politicised and the practice of academic freedom discouraged (TRC Report 2004).

A de facto dictatorship ensued as the Executive controlled all other arms of a state characterised by inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and high operations costs (Bah 2011, UNECA 2012). The Judiciary was perceived as allied with the police and the ruling party on politically tainted cases (Skora 2010). The Parliament was controlled by the ruling party; opposition members depended on their colleagues for appointments to lucrative commissions or committees, eliminating any check to initiatives emanating from the Executive. The parallel but fragmented informal States were politicised and aligned in one way or the other to the ruling party, so could not intervene as a block. This eliminated any chance for mediating conflict of an economic or political nature.

Many trained personnel left the country to fill positions in other countries and in international organisations. Those who were able to, sent their children abroad. Mediocre teachers and trainers produced mediocre graduates, in turn feeding a workforce poorly equipped with little capacity to manage a modern society (Sierra Leone TRC Report, Volume 3B). The exodus of the young and enterprising gathered steam in the late 80s and became a flood in the 90s. At the time of the invasion of Freetown in 1999 there was another huge flow of refugees, mainly trained cadre and members of the emerging private sector, to neighbouring countries. The capacity loss from all institutions was massive. Inevitably all institutions without exception virtually disintegrated. These were partly replaced by local and international NGOs and organizations – UNICEF, UNFPA, OXFAM etc. – that were increasingly relied upon for basic social services.

## The state and human security

Sierra Leone was never under any foreign threats after independence. Indeed, with Guinea and Liberia it was (and is) part of a sub-regional group of states called the Mano River Union, committed to joint goals of peace and security. Sierra Leone was supported by, and sometimes gave support to, its neighbours when the occasion demanded. An example was the invitation to Guinean troops in 1969 when a threat of coup d'état was apparent, or to fight later alongside government troops during the rebel incursion. From this perspective, the country's security challenges were of its own making. They were tied more to failures of the Government to secure basic rights and freedoms than to any failure to protect citizens from internal or external violence.

Security in one's person and over one's assets is inextricably linked to the functioning of the courts, and therefore an effective judiciary. Yet political interference in the judiciary commenced almost immediately after independence with the appointment by the second prime minister of a loyalist as Chief Justice, followed by other appointments that did not follow the traditional rules of an institution rooted in historical precedence, hierarchy and competence, and at least initially proud of its links with the British justice system. The Sierra Leone Judiciary, which once served as the final court of appeal for British West Africa, became so discredited that during the conflict some judges were targeted and assassinated. A weak and partisan judiciary combined with a police force that was seen more as an arm of the Executive, enhance feelings of insecurity particularly for politically tainted issues (Sierra Leone TRC Report Volume 2 and 3).

Immediately after independence, Sierra Leone had some key state institutions like the military that functioned independently and with a high level of professionalism. However, this dramatically changed when the country became a one-party State in 1978 under the reign of Siaka Stevens, whose rule was dictatorial in nature. The 1968 military coup had led Stevens to distrust the army and thus to form a parallel paramilitary force named the Internal Security Unit (ISU) in 1972, which subsequently became the Special Security Division (SSD) in the police force. Stevens ensured that this de facto security structure was better equipped than the national army. The recruits into this force were carefully chosen to represent members loyal to his All Peoples Congress (APC) Party. The SSD was controlled by the Inspector General of Police, a loyalist to Stevens from the same ethnic background who was responsible for the personal protection of the political elites. The SSD was in charge of enforcing public order and ultimately became an instrument used to intimidate and harass political opponents. The SSD was thus used by the elites to personalise political power as national security apparatuses collapsed. Hence individual security like other public services to be delivered by the state was available primarily to the politically connected. The state was rarely an ally in the broader population's quest for security. It was often enough their enemy. Individual security was therefore, like other public services to be delivered by the state, available primarily to the politically connected.

Before independence, the security role of the state was played differently in the Crown Colony and the Protectorate. After the merger, the existence of parallel states complicated an assessment of the extent to which all citizens enjoyed this protection (Skora 2010). Still, nowhere is the presence of parallel states more evident than in the field of security, where the former Protectorate's native law

existed side by side with the law prevailing in the former Crown Colony. The most obvious case is the law relating to land: the native law and custom determines land tenure, while common law applies to the former Crown Colony. This dichotomy nurtured the perception of unequal treatment.

## **The private sector a tool of exploitation or of inclusive growth?**

A growing and successful private sector, consisting of both foreign and local enterprises, was booming in the country's first 10-15 years. The foreign houses were mainly remnants of the colonial era, largely exporters of commodities and trading houses, and additionally new mining companies. There were indigenous entrepreneurs, with signs of budding manufacturers, retailers, and middlemen. State-owned enterprises launched several light manufacturing enterprises as part of an import substitution strategy, although that strategy eventually collapsed.

Despite these initial, partially positive signals, the system of extraction that characterised early Sierra Leone and the Protectorate continued after independence, dooming the private sector to be a significant factor of fragility. As stated in the TRC report (vol. 3), those in charge of the formal Government joined forces with the fledgling private sector to loot state assets. The nature of transactions in the private sector mimicked that of the public sector, characterised by informality and connections. By the time of the conflict, the state was the fountain of opportunities for the private sector, dishing out lucrative contracts arising from foreign loans and grants to allies and protégés. This dulled if not eliminated the drive for efficiency normally engendered by competition in the marketplace.

The degree of economic concentration was a further source of instability. Two businessmen in particular, known allies of the ruling Government, controlled the minerals, fisheries, and import sector. One, Jamil Sahid Mohamed, born in Sierra Leone of Lebanese descent, had extensive contacts with the political class. Jamil became a shareholder in the national diamond mining company in 1971 and, with the acquiescence of Stevens, smuggled large amounts of diamonds out of the country (Gberie 2002). Stevens essentially gave up the diamond industry to Jamil, with official exports of diamonds reduced from slightly above a half million carats in 1980 to below 50,000 carats in 1988. He also controlled the marketing, insurance, and manufacturing industries as a business partner of Stevens. Although Jamil was not a government official, he wielded significant political power and reportedly approved official government appointments at both ministerial and civil service level. He frequently violated banking and other regulations including foreign exchange market rules with impunity (Kandeh 2009). The symbiosis between such businessmen and the political elite was such that they were the first port of call for short-term loans to the Government.

Their activities left little space for smaller or other indigenous operators to flourish, leaving only foreign operators with high risk appetites willing to enter the country, typically in the minerals sector. This fostered fragility along a number of vectors. It decreased the resilience of the economy due to unsustainable, high-cost operations, and the absence of diversity that could allow economic

opportunities to be seized and needs met across different sectors or industries. It created resentment towards the state as exclusionary tactics combined with patronage to constrict wealth creation opportunities except for the connected few. Consigned to economic informality, the vast majority remained virtually outside the control of the state and hostile to its presence and interventions; it is no coincidence that the conflict commenced in the isolated border regions with Liberia.

Bad policies and dependence on commodity prices nailed the coffin on the private sector as a force for stability or resilience. Incoherent policies reflected partially effective pressures from the Bretton Woods institutions for the usual structural reform initiatives of the 1980s. Government institutions half-heartedly implemented agreed-upon programmes, further squeezing the private sector through monetary policies that restricted credit and foreign exchange, while also increasing taxes. At the same time, the necessary opening of the economy to additional positive forces, particularly indigenous ones, never materialised.

All in all, the private sector failed to grow naturally, create jobs or secure broad-based benefits in a new economy. It rather combined with patronage politics and corruption to restrict important goods and services and exacerbated inequality and inter-group resentment. It thereby rendered the state more fragile and open to external shocks (Wennman, Luiz & Ganson, 2017)

## **Social resilience but not state resilience**

Resilience refers to the capacity to rebound from shocks, whether political, social, or economic.

The political system became increasingly autocratic and intolerant (Robinson 2008, Ogunmola 2009, TRC Report 2004). Therefore, the ability of those in control of the state apparatus to maintain power over an extended period during one-party rule despite widespread disaffection cannot be interpreted as political stability or as resilience at the political level. History has demonstrated that this was an illusion: growing tensions in the informal States took time to surface and expose the illusion of the legitimacy of the formal state and its Government. The general elections did not provide the opportunity for citizens to pronounce on the performance of those in control of the state apparatus and make changes. This was primarily because ethnic loyalties largely determined representation in Parliament, and concerns about accountability or influence-peddling were swept behind the defensive protection of one ethnic group against other groups. The current (2012 – 2017) composition of Parliament reflects sharply the divide along ethnic lines, with the opposition mainly from the south. This is ominous for the future if the next Parliament reinforces this divide.

It must similarly be noted that resilience at a local or social level, including the oft-noted speed with which there was forgiveness after the horrors of the conflict (Richards 2003), does not appear to translate in the Sierra Leone context into resilience of the State. The conflict was resisted by the majority of the population primarily because of the atrocities and abuses being perpetrated. The limited order and respect for human rights provided by the formal state were better than the chaos and anarchy of the conflict. On the same basis the overthrow of the legitimate Government of President Kabbah by Johnny Paul Koroma that

brought in the rebels failed to garner popular support (Richards 2003, Bah 2011, Thompson 2007). Yet, almost all other coup d'états were greeted by people dancing in the streets, hoping for the promised reduction in abuses and positive change by the national Government. It appears that society organised and governed by the informal states was reasonably resilient, but that the national Government remained exogenous: external and only tolerated as long as its impacts were not excessively negative.

This analysis cannot be complete without a brief review of the economic dimension of fragility in Sierra Leone and how this has shaped the nature of the post-conflict economy. From table 1 it can be seen that the economy was virtually stagnant and even declining from 1980 to 1990. During this period the signs were appearing in various sectors of bad days ahead. By the late 90s qualified and experienced cadres in the education, health, public policy, and even the trades were leaving in droves to nearby countries and even to the US and afar. The effects on economic policies and programmes were devastating: development programmes were poorly designed and poorly executed, public debt soared to unsustainable levels, inflation was uncontrollable, and budget deficits were the order of the day. All of these resulted in an economy with distorted market signals that reinforced fragility.

The decline of all indicators accelerated up to the end of the war. Returning to the status quo after the conflict meant a reproduction of an economic system with perverse incentives and inappropriate policies. The question then is whether over the course of the 15 years post-conflict, an evolution has taken place that determined a trajectory different from the pre-conflict system in place.

An examination of some variables does not provide much comfort. After the massive debt forgiveness in 2007, by 2009, public debt stood at 32% (World Bank 2016) of GNI. By 2014 before Ebola it was 28% (World Bank 2016). Interest rates have soared again after the short period of single digits due to a curb in government borrowing, returning to the pre-conflict levels of 20% rates. The tax ratio to GDP has remained low hovering between 11 – 12% as in the pre-war period. The Government's budget continues to be financed by donors to the tune of 40%. The Auditor General's report points to cost overruns in public contracts of more than three to four times market values. All of the above inefficiencies are absorbed during boom years but become severe anomalies in normal times, opening the door to fragility.

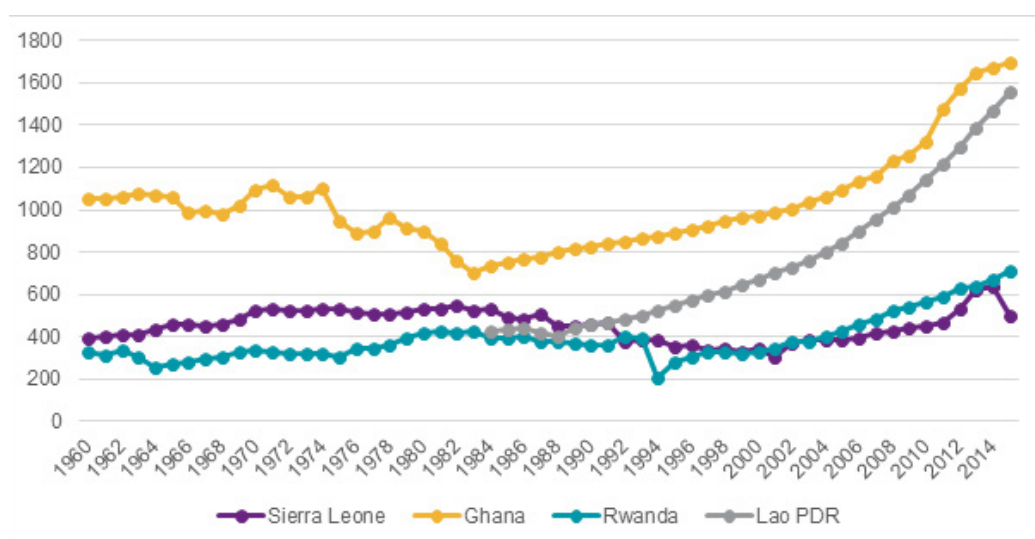


**Table 1: Selection of Socio-economic performance indicators in Sierra Leone**

Indicators	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2010	2015
<b>External debt stocks (% of GNI)</b>	14.42	30.76	45.29	85.62	202.88	149.0	196.81	35.72	28.35
<b>Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)</b>	6.40	19.91	12.91	76.58	110.95	25.98	-0.84	16.64	7.33
<b>Current account balance (% of GDP)</b>	-	-	-16.25	-2.69	-9.20	-10.23	-15.62	-12.50	-14.73
<b>Exports of goods and services (annual % growth)</b>	-6.09	-13.20	-22.03	2.54	-18.71	-36.11	21.35	19.10	11.78
<b>Exports of goods and services (% of GDP)</b>	31.02	25.11	22.86	14.82	34.69	18.59	18.13	16.55	30.60
<b>Trade (% of GDP)</b>	60.30	59.58	61.08	31.43	68.69	45.03	57.53	50.52	86.62
<b>Mineral rents (% of GDP)</b>	2.43	2.76	1.46	3.61	4.75	-	-	0.72	0.16
<b>GDP per capita (current US\$)</b>	172.79	245.61	356.62	247.22	165.25	226.89	156.59	453.02	792.58
<b>GDP per capita growth (annual %)</b>	6.85	-0.39	2.51	-7.76	1.96	-7.50	3.71	3.02	2.33
<b>Mortality rate, infant (per 1,000 live births)</b>	191	177.5	167.3	160.4	156.5	153.4	143.3	107	90.2
<b>Life expectancy at birth, total (years)</b>	34.61	38.49	40.65	40.32	37.35	35.72	38.69	48.23	50.88

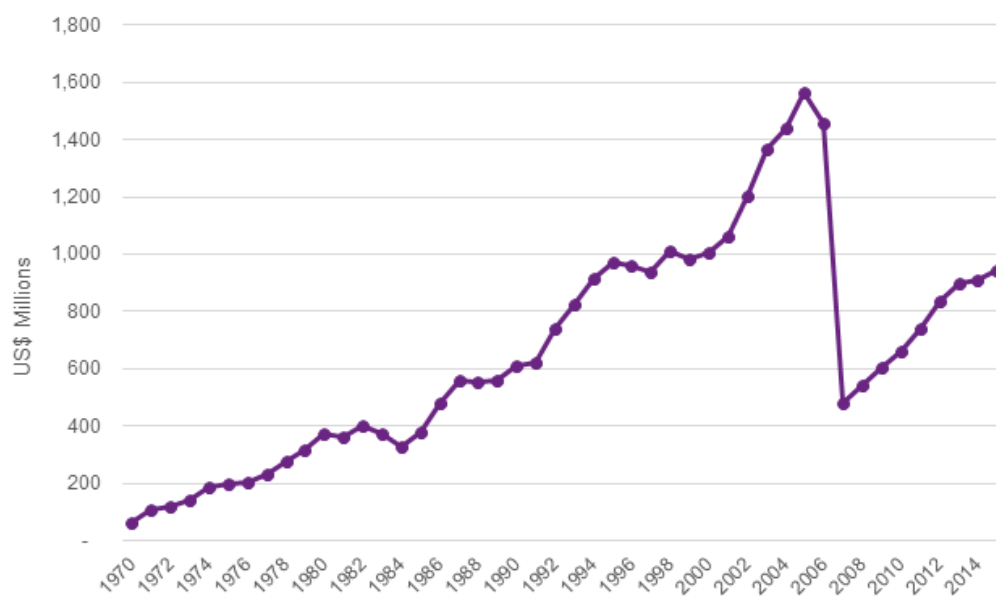
Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators 2017

Figure 1: GDP per capita



Source: World Development Indicators 2017

Figure 2: Sierra Leone external debt stocks



Source: World Development Indicators 2017

# The civil war

## 3

The collapse of the formal State occurred at the onset of the conflict and lasted for 10 years. A review of this period may help explain the direction of the post conflict path taken – with both negative and possibly positive dimensions.

### Exposures of the non-existent State

The expansion of the Sierra Leone civil war to cover the entire territory confirmed that the State was a mere shell devoid of legitimate or effective structures, including the military (Abdullah 2004, Richards 2003). The country's citizens were left unprotected to the rebels: assets within the territory were plundered at will (TRC Report 2004, Clapham 2001), foreign policy was ad hoc, service delivery was non-existent, institutions collapsed, and the formally recognised Government moved into exile in Guinea. In the void, various groups captured various parts of formal government structures.

Many civil defence group and militias sprouted to provide basic security. Curiously, these new players did not degenerate into warlords. This is likely because the structures were rooted in culture and tradition (Reed and Robinson 2012). Arguably, these non-state structures being a part of the informal states maintained the cohesion within their social groups, and explain the resilience of the society as a collection of groups despite the horrors of the conflict. Even in the post-conflict period, commanders in at least some areas reportedly played a moderating role as "arbiters" of political behaviour, weighing in, for example, when they believed that dynamics such as the instigation of election violence had gone too far.

Civil society grew in strength, fostered by connections to NGOs outside the country. These organisations moved into the void left by the Parliament to become the voice of the voiceless. They were able to act at least to some degree as a check and balance on the monopoly power of the Executive. These organisations were typically not engaged in overtly partisan political activities, though they were the training ground for a few leaders. This was perhaps explained by their foreign sponsorship. NGOs were often engaged in provision of basic services. These groups came to appreciate the potential power of a people's movement, both to support the state and to try to hold it accountable.

Some signs of a Sierra Leone State consciousness and identity became apparent through civic responses to external threats, for instance when the State was most at threat from foreign elements and their local allies. In areas that were first attacked by the rebels after the incursion it was observed that many

of the rebel forces spoke the unique Liberian English; Burkinabe and Liberians were sighted as part of the Rebels (TRC Report 2004). Civil disobedience was rampant during the brief occupation of the RUF and allies under Johnny Paul Koroma, who had organised a coup to oust the elected President Kabba.

In resource-rich countries, such resources quickly become the key target of conflict (Clapham 2003). This is particularly true where access to the resources does not require much investment, for example, for artisanal production of alluvial diamonds, gold, or coltan. Even under conditions of declining mineral production leading up to the war, diamonds and gold remained some of the most lucrative sources for rent-seeking and outright theft of state assets.

At the start of conflict, the Government was in no position to defend the country's territory, arm its military, or run state affairs (TRC Report 2004). The rebels on the other hand had easier access to resources to fund their campaigns and ambitions by controlling the mining areas (TRC Report 2004). In areas of the country where the rule of law had been replaced by arbitrary patterns of behaviour, government soldiers quickly found the benefits of taking control of such areas and exploiting minerals themselves. They were baptised "Sobels" by locals – soldiers by day and rebels by night. Villagers learnt to trust neither national soldiers nor rebels.

Other economic activities ground to a halt in a situation of zero security. Local branches of multinational firms were mainly trading houses whose global strategy defined their behaviour much more than local realities. It is not surprising that they retreated quietly as the economy declined and then conflict erupted. Those who could focused on short-term outputs and cultivated smallholdings for food or subsistence. The post-independence trend of investing in the future was reversed by the logic of the short-term.

## **Outside interventions, the peace agreements, and opportunities lost**

The strong support for the first rebel incursion by Liberia and its allies, Burkina Faso and Libya, in some ways transformed the conflict into a geopolitical power play. Nigeria through the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) became the protector and guarantor of the West African region, pitted against Libya's surreptitious support for the rebels (Special Court of Sierra Leone Trial Transcripts 2009). This undermined the stature and legitimacy of the Government.

The British military intervention towards the end of the conflict, on the other hand, gave the recognised Government the ability to legitimise its leadership after the conflict. This was enhanced by Britain's later development support in influencing, if not directing, the post-conflict path for recovery and long-term development. The focus was on the reconstruction of key institutions such as the security apparatus, including the police, army and judiciary.

The Lomé peace agreement signed in 1999 formalised the end of hostilities, prioritising the short-term imperative of keeping the guns silent, rather than more systemic and fundamental causes underlying the country's conflict and fragility. Only two Articles addressed more than the short-term requirements to ensure



there was no return to hostilities: Article VII spoke to the strategic minerals gold and diamonds, and Art XXVIII addressing economy issues. The latter contains only two paragraphs couched in terms of reconstruction and rehabilitation of the economy.

The provisions relating to disarmament, demobilisation and reconstruction were meant to end the security dimension of fragility in both the short and long-term. These provisions were more robust for this dimension than in any of the other four areas of fragility: capacities, legitimacy, resilience and the private sector. The army and police were re-trained and armed to meet the objectives of a professional force that performs the role as part guarantor of state institutions as well as assure collective and individual security.

Elections were seen as a major sign of return to normalcy. But elections based on the same assumptions of the underlying legitimacy of the State, and the culture of governance that had developed since independence, reproduced the very structures that had generated fragility in the first place. State institutions, like the Judiciary the public service, the security apparatus, and even the private sector, have never been given the chance to build up robust defence mechanisms against political interference. As the breath of life was being returned to the formal state, space should have been created for the institutions to grow independently.

In brief, externally negotiated and legitimised “reconstruction”, prioritising almost exclusively the end of hostilities, inevitably did not address the internal forces undermining the legitimacy of the state.



# Post-conflict policy and interventions

## 4

The vision for a post-conflict Sierra Leone was based strongly on the liberal notion of a capable democratic state, possessing checks and balances to the use of power within its system of governance including a strong civil society, and carrying out policies and programmes to improve the welfare of its citizens. Each of these to some extent have been realised, helping to explain why the country, despite serious problems, has not relapsed into civil war or overt chaos. The results obtained, however, have not proved sufficient to move the country decisively away from fragility. This is not only due to failures to follow and achieve goals set but also to glaring omissions of issues to be addressed.

## The “state-building” agenda

A review of the policies and programmes implemented since 2002 provides an accurate report of the actual, as distinct from intended, state building agenda in order to ascertain the prospects of moving towards resilience. The post-conflict agenda is captured by the succession of development plans, Poverty Reduction Strategies, adopted and implemented by the Government of the day. These were treated largely as a technical exercise without accounting for the underlying political and economic forces that shaped their actual outputs. New laws, institutions, and skills training to execute policies mostly advocated by external partners with the sweetener of initial funding were designed and formulated. Some hardware of development, infrastructure in the form of roads, schools and buildings for clinics, courts, and so on were produced.

As was the case in the 60s and 70s, many of these initiatives gave the illusion of development progress but fell short in alleviating the problems faced by citizens. National indicators of socio-economic progress confirm that the accelerated improvements in citizens’ welfare was not taking place. Real prices of basic consumer goods continue to rise, statistics of students’ performance in public exams continue to slide, health data, housing, electricity access, and other indicators remain below the average for the continent, even if better than at the end of the conflict. There has been no independent evaluation of any of the national development programmes so far. In all cases therefore, reports have highlighted successes with little emphasis on how to correct failures or hold

anyone accountable for them.

Those components of the state building agenda that serve elite interests work reasonably well, but those of greatest interest to the broad-based population are less successful. Infrastructure and electricity have focused on towns, although recent efforts are emphasising the rural areas. Strengthening of institutions has not fared so well in light of widespread patronage and political interference. The practice of building sufficient consensus for implementing difficult decisions has not been widespread, resulting in perceptions of exclusionary governance. Formal structures that should be expected to play a mediating role in normalising and implementing better approaches are weak or ignored. Human Rights Commission reports are rarely implemented, and the results of commissions of enquiry in cases of egregious actions are also often ignored. The agenda for reconstruction did not take into account the underlying fissures in the formal State but sought to correct immediate failures that precipitated the collapse. Worse it assumed that reproducing some of the key attributes or trappings of statehood was sufficient to recreate a more robust and resilient state.

A recent growth diagnostic study (GoSL & MCC 2014) identified insufficient and unreliable supply of, and low access to, electrical power, as binding constraints to private investment and economic growth in Sierra Leone. In addition, preliminary studies suggest counter-productive business enterprise reforms and operational obstacles to private sector growth, as well as corrupt practices that increase production costs. The state building agenda actually implemented has not generated the improvement to welfare expected nor reinforced institutions for future robust growth and service delivery. Successive reports by the Auditor General point to major shortcomings.

## The security cluster

The focus of the international intervention after the conflict was to strengthen the security of the state in ways that would make it harder for a similar civil war to emerge. However, the questions remain as to how it has affected “everyday” security: violent crime; domestic violence; and security in homes, schools, and communities. Reports of violent crime have been rising gradually at the same time as gang violence.

The security apparatus has increasingly been used to repress dissent and opposition to government. The initial success of the re-trained and reconstituted security apparatus – when the Military and the Police were hand-held by British and other foreign trainers – gave way to the old ways not long after the departure of the IMAT and Police trainers. Allegations (documented by the Human Rights Commission and others) of the use of excessive force on protesting civilians, reports of harassment of opposition, and denial of rights or abuse of discretionary power by the justice system reported by the media have all gone unheeded. The recent unresolved burning of the offices of an outspoken opposition leader and the incarceration of another for one month only to be released later are examples of a worrying trend as the general elections approach.



## Macro-economic policy and private sector development

The development strategy followed so far has largely replicated pre-conflict economic structures, formal and informal. It has followed the exigencies of the development partners led by the international finance institutions, in turn reflecting the dictates of the few key donors in the country. Over 40% of the State's budget is provided by external partners. The recent boom in the extractives sector created a bubble for a two-year period in which the country was touted as the fastest growing economy in the world (22 – 25% GDP growth). In fact, this was a one-time spike resulting from the investment and operations of two large iron ore mines.

Paradoxically, the collapse in commodity prices has spurred a more broad-based approach with start-ups in agriculture and the services sectors showing some promise as recent investments begin to yield fruit. Nevertheless, the private sector continues to be primarily informal while incoherent and sometimes even contradictory policies limit the expansion and productivity of formal businesses (Wennmann, Luiz & Ganson, 2017). In addition to the poor state of the energy infrastructure discussed above must be added the enormous costs of doing business. In this regard, the country is ranked 162 out of 168 countries by the WEF (2016). Internal studies by the IGC and others point to bureaucratic bottlenecks not unconnected with corruption, inefficiencies in production flows; frequent changes in policies; and limitations imposed by size of operations as curtailing the contribution of the private sector to overall development.

What is not so clear from the current development strategies is the evidence of transformation and diversification of the economy, so essential to enable a rebound from shocks. There are many new laws in place that could provide the framework required, but some are hardly implemented and others incoherent with other policies. Political patronage is often at the root of inefficiencies, just as impunity continues to prevail because of political connections. In sum, there is a real danger of reproducing the same economic structures that preceded the conflict unless a reform programme can be launched to redress these problems.

## The “resilience” agenda: Humanitarian, development, and crisis assistance

The resilience agenda followed the pattern of the day: stop the shooting through a ceasefire, adopt a peace agreement that included disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), and a transition government to organise general elections followed by a first Poverty Reduction Programme, all the while humanitarian assistance poured in for resettlement and some rehabilitation. Large volumes of aid were announced.

Yet, aid was uncoordinated, ad hoc, unconvincing in its execution and quickly reverted to the practices prevailing before the conflict. A number of rehabilitation projects were launched but not all completed. Schools were rebuilt and new ones created in every district but the software to run the schools was inadequate. Many roads were reconstructed but characterised by cost-overruns and poor quality. Health and other social services were delivered, mainly by non-state institutions

as the humanitarian phase gradually gave way to the “development” phase, and often happening in parallel with state support. However, humanitarian aid declined rapidly as peace solidified.

None of these interventions addressed the root causes of the crisis. 12 years later, Ebola eventually laid bare the fault lines. The public health crisis rapidly deteriorated into a complex humanitarian crisis. Again the collapse of the State was arrested only by massive infusion of external support.



# The current situation

## 5

There are signs of positive change that could support moves to reduce and even end fragility. These include greater freedom of the press and increasingly greater knowledge by citizens of their rights and obligations. There has been progress in reducing the binding constraints to private sector development in the form of transportation, electricity, and energy. Elections are held regularly and are being taken more seriously by political parties as an opportunity to send better qualified representatives to Parliament. Yet there appears to be significant danger that progress will continue to be undermined by failure to address the root causes of fragility.

## Legitimacy: Strengths and gaps in state and non-state institutions

The post-conflict period evidenced little political appetite to deviate from patterns of the past that were quickly re-established after the war. Recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation report which pointed out the antecedents to the conflict remain to be implemented. Potentially important political arbitration roles – for example, the Council of Elders created to resolve any misinterpretation of the Lomé Agreement – were not built upon in the post-conflict period. Indeed, it can be concluded that not much of importance has changed in terms of state legitimacy and institutional capacity from the situation pre-conflict.

The lack of legitimacy of the State was demonstrated most notably in the failure to contain the Ebola epidemic in 2014. This was primarily because of the lack of trust in state officials, and weaknesses in the health care system and the system of governance in general. Massive inflows of human and other resources were required to contain the disease. Allegations of rampant corruption are widespread, reinforced by successive annual and special reports of the Auditor General and those of the human Rights Commission, plus ad hoc reports of civil society groups. The persistence of a health state of emergency was used to suppress public expression of disaffection, although it was subsequently lifted after much activism from civil society organisations. It is not clear whether the traditional non-state institutions are as effective as before in either undermining



the legitimacy of the state or supporting it.

The limited positive change can be found in the relative freedom of the press and of opinion, plus the creation of a number of institutions that when effective can form building blocks for change. These include the Commercial courts, legislation relating to freedom of information, and extensive training given to the civil service through attendance at international and regional workshops. The country has come a long way since independence as more and more citizens demand more explanation from the Executive about the way resources are used, and social media provides instant information, albeit not always accurate, of excesses.

## **Capacity: In particular relating to key drivers of conflict and fragility**

As pointed out earlier, most state institutions have returned to the status quo preceding the conflict. Patronage, political influence, poor accountability for results, and widespread impunity prevail. These are manifested in high levels of perception of corruption, the police being the worst group identified. During the recent outbreak of Ebola not only did health services fail, but other institutions responsible for managing a complex emergency – such as decentralised services, internal communications, border controls, and so on – were evidently not up to the task.

More importantly, the institutions responsible for the rule of law are increasingly accused by the media and civil society of a distinct bias in favour of the ruling party. They point to the use of discretionary authority by the courts to arrest and detain political activists, and to the non-application of the recommendations of Commissions of enquiry set up to investigate excesses or malpractices. All of these together increase disaffection that can lead to political instability.

A large number of public service officials enjoy training opportunities abroad and locally. Thus individual capacities continue to improve. Similarly, there is much greater effort by the Government to provide the tools required for good performance in the form of computers, internet facilities, and so on. Some key institutions have been set up, such as the National Minerals Agency that has put in place mechanisms for managing the minerals sector more efficiently. Admittedly, not all the new institutions created have demonstrated their effectiveness or justified their existence, raising questions about the rationality of the public service.

## **Security: From both a state and human security perspective**

Sierra Leone enjoys a relatively low crime rate; murders are few and far between. Violent crime is low and far below pre-conflict levels, although reportedly on the rise. Regular meetings of the MRU at the summit level ensure that the country is free from external threats from neighbours.

Notwithstanding these positive indicators of success, the security services are perceived by the population more as an agent of an oppressive state than as a protector of personal and collective security. Immediately after the conflict, the security services were an integrated force with joint units of foreign and local personnel. The intention was to train and also inspire confidence as well as warn off potential threats. In recent years confidence has been eroded. A recent TI survey (2017), for example, showed that the police were perceived as the most corrupt among government services.

## **Private sector: Its roles in both concentrating and de-concentrating economic and political power and benefit**

Since 2007, with the arrival of the previous political party, the private sector was trumpeted as the vehicle through which rapid socio-economic development would transform the lives of the citizens. Indeed in his inaugural address the President who hailed from the private sector announced he would create the conditions for the private sector to flourish. However, this was not accompanied by a series of reforms to establish the enabling environment for the sector.

Rather, business continued as usual. Mainly international business operatives secured government contracts in collusion with party loyalists. Government officials in turn designed the deals with inflated costs that released generous rents on which they thrived, as illustrated, for example, by the Special Audit report of 2016 on the military by the Attorney General. The evolution of the private sector during the last 10 years has therefore followed the same path as in the period before the conflict – an ever-changing landscape of personalities who rise, exert temporary influence in the royal court, make their fortunes, and disappear. During their tenure, they capture the formal state structures. Even the media is not spared: full page advertisements are placed for drivers' positions, ensuring that even newspapers with readerships hardly exceeding 1000 prosper.

The private sector shows signs of becoming more partisan. During the period of the one-party system, successful bidders for public contracts and their allied rent-seekers hailed from every part of the country. Not so now. Those from the South feel excluded, and the fear is that if regime change does occur and shifts power to the South, the vicious cycle will continue its downward spiral as it will be their "turn to eat". Thus, control over private sector opportunities may yet again become one of the vehicles for reinforcing instability.

The collapse of the country's two large iron ore mines and ADDAX, the large sugar plantation, coincided with the Ebola epidemic. Subsequent reports on the operations of these companies revealed huge inefficiencies and corruption. As in the past, the strong alliance between the ruling class and the management of these companies allowed their use as cash cows. As long as the cow was being fed by high international prices, it continued to provide milk – private plane, trips, advances for salary payments, free fuel for local elites, and exceedingly high salaries for nationals with connections, for example. When the price collapse occurred, many local and international companies holding long-term contracts with these companies went under. Curiously, had the integration of these

companies with the rest of the economy been greater, the result would have been catastrophic.

The lesson here is the undiversified nature of the economy, combined with the dominance of the informal States where decisions are made, leave the country vulnerable to severe shocks even in the realm of the private sector. This is the private sector's most direct link with fragility and instability.

## **Resilience: Sources of socio-political and socio-economic strength and vulnerability**

The formal state draws strength from, and can be weakened by, informal networks and cultural institutions. These have a stronger influence over individual's behaviour through ethnicity than do the rules and regulations of the formal state. Decisions over appointments to positions of power, for example, originate from or are sanctioned by these networks that are in effect the institutions of the informal State; what is often labelled as informality is in fact these networks at work. Appointments are therefore made more on the basis of loyalty than of competence. Additionally, these tight networks lack transparency and are closed to outside information and influence when making decisions. Needless to say, greed plays a key role in perpetuating the system; the national cake is shared only by those in the networks.

Despite the collapse and near failure of the formal State, the informal States continued to operate. The resilience of the informal States since independence can be explained partly by the very limited attacks on their systems of operations, honed over centuries of tradition and culture. It is instructive that voting in general elections generally follows set patterns except in towns, where the influence of the informal State tends to be weaker. The paradox is that attempts to integrate the systems through decentralisation have encountered difficulties, not from the Chiefs but from the authorities unwilling to give up financial control from the centre. The situation is complicated by the presence of District Councils – branches of the formal State – at the local level.

To summarise, there is resilience in the informal States, but this is at the expense of resilience in the formal State. The persistence of informality, particularly in decision making, undermines transparency and accountability of action in the formal State, in turn encouraging a lack of progressive practices and depriving the state of the experience and advice available outside the informal network.

# Conclusions

## 6

Several observations and lessons emerge from this study of the underlying causes of the country's fragility and instability. These tend to contradict the narrative – shared by the Sierra Leone Government, bilateral donors who are rapidly disengaging, and international institutions promoting private sector investment as the primary solution to the country's underdevelopment – that Sierra Leone has emerged from fragility, and, although set back by the shocks of the global financial and Ebola crises, is on a path towards stable development. Rather, these observations emphasise the continuity of socio-political dynamics from the colonial period to the present. They highlight the poor positioning of the country in light of the likely challenges of the future. And they suggest that a tipping point is again being reached in which, absent a concerted effort to construct a peace accord that deals more fundamentally with the sharing of power and resources between Sierra Leone's many nations, chronic instability and even escalating violence remain a significant risk.

## Summary of major observations

A "social contract" has never been established in Sierra Leone at the national level. Rebellions and strikes before independence, and coups d'états and economic crises after independence, were repeated regularly. Yet the promises of a new beginning after every crisis, up to and including the civil war, have never involved a systematic attempt to understand and resolve the contradictions of the existence of two parallel configurations of the State that were entrenching fragility. Economic growth and political calm prevail for short periods, but were never harbingers of a new social and political order.

Notwithstanding some elements of apparent resilience, the country is therefore still fragile and vulnerable to the forces that led to the collapse of the State and civil war 15 years ago. Political interference in the functioning of institutions continues to stultify growth, undermine capacity, and weaken effectiveness, rendering the Government incapable of resistance to the slightest of shocks. There are still few checks and balances to a predatory Executive and ruling class.

The ease with which chronic popular dissatisfaction with government can still contribute to conflict and violence is seen in community protests, student manifestations, and election violence. A recent example (February 2017) included University student protests over non-payment of lecturers' salaries that turned violent. Echoes of how this escalates to a state-society crisis are heard in the



use of the state security apparatus to suppress dissent, and in the way corruption permeates the rank and file of institutions responsible for law and order, rendering individual security impossible. Moving towards the next elections, the signs are visible. The security apparatus is refusing permits for demonstrations on the grounds that they may incite instability; the justice system has arrested a number of political activists only to release them after a period of incarceration.

The private sector similarly represents mostly a reflection of the past, rather than a blueprint for the future. To the extent that the private sector is defined as that part of the economy not controlled by government, it must be admitted that Sierra Leone has little private sector at scale. Characterised by a limited access economic order, the Government continues to exercise inordinate influence over mining, commercial agriculture, infrastructure development, and industry in pursuit of corrupt and rent-seeking aims. More often than not, private sector actors appear to be willing partners. The economic policies pursued and the sectors promoted also tend to reflect elite and foreign interests, not necessarily a sustainable development path for broad majority of the country's people. Once again, there are reports of the use of public security forces to intimidate local communities and pursue private ends.

At the same time, non-state institutions seem to be experiencing slow but steady growth in both scale and capacity. Religious institutions, civil societies, the media, and even international NGOs and partners now provide public goods and services widely. To some extent they compensate for a national Government unwilling or unable to play its social role; they deliver a scale and scope of services in the aggregate on par with, or even exceeding that, provided by the Government. But their impact is fundamentally palliative, in the social sphere providing (still inadequate) direct services, and in the political sphere (in conjunction with Sierra Leone's few independent political institutions) only moderating some of the worst excesses of corruption. They are not capable of re-ordering power relationships or institutional arrangements in ways that result in stability and peaceful development.

## **New challenges on the horizon**

At the same time Sierra Leone has not addressed its past, it has not positioned itself to address the challenges of the future. On the economic front, Africa is losing any form of homogeneity in terms of how countries relate to the global economy. The increasingly rapid flow of more diversified FDI to countries with more stable investment environments will soon result in countries with sustained high growth rates that leave behind countries still struggling with governance and other issues constricting progress. As inequality among countries expands, so too will the dangers of increased fragility. Sierra Leone risks being left behind. Given the almost equally weak state of Sierra Leone's neighbours, this factor of fragility will, as in the past, have a regional dimension.

On the social front, the rapidly expanding youth population with access to social media and instantaneous information dissemination increases volatility. In the past, the Government used the state apparatus to move quickly to suppress expressions of disaffection. In a world in which protests on one campus move quickly to many others, attempts at suppression of dissent only result in increased insecurity, and deepen a sense of the illegitimacy of the State. Similarly, the greater empowerment of civil society groups, combined with the juxtaposition of islands of

efficient institutions like the Human Rights Commission, the National Minerals Agency, and the Auditor General's office, make the abuse of power, looting of state assets, and other aspects of the predatory state more easily and rapidly known. In the absence of a credible response from government or any true accountability, however, these further delegitimise the state and worsen the distrust between state officials and citizens.

In the policy arena, the challenges of the future – from sustainable mining and agriculture, to climate change, to education reform, to the development of job-led growth strategies in a world of declining manufacturing jobs – are not amenable to the dictates of presidential initiatives or short-term planning support by bilateral donors. Rather, they require alignment and coordinated efforts between parts of government, between national and local government, and between government, civil society, and the private sector. Exactly this ability to build sufficient consensus for coherent policy, and then to follow through with comprehensive implementation, however, seems increasingly beyond Sierra Leone's grasp.

## Implications for the future

The imminent collapse of a state is usually preceded by suppression of widespread calls for introspection that could lead to addressing the underlying problems. The signs suggest that this may be playing out in Sierra Leone now. Government claims to be in a new era; bilateral donors use the designation of the country as "post-conflict" as a justification for disengagement; successive IMF reports continue to praise the efforts of the Government even in the face of rapid declines in the value of the country's currency, high interest rates, at times astronomic increases in public debt, and overall sluggish performance of the real economy – macroeconomic stability notwithstanding. Critical voices find few national or international platforms.

Yet the analysis above indicates that any appearance of a move out of fragility in Sierra Leone is a veneer that comes off at the slightest sign of crisis. The recent mudslide which occurred only two years after the major Ebola epidemic found the country's institutions still wanting. The root causes of these crises were found to emerge from underlying drivers of broader fragility, ranging from looting of state resources to lack of confidence by citizens in what the Government was telling them.

The Peace Agreement supplemented by economic development plans represented the agenda for "rebuilding" the formal State after the conflict. The goals were to end the conflict, restore the State and expect its institutions to do better. The post-conflict agenda thus fell short of forming the basis for reconstructing a new State; it rather reproduced the old state with a known history of failures from the time of the first colony of settlers up to the onset of the conflict. A political settlement, driven by the desire to end a conflict, was a superficial cloak hiding underlying fissures that could reappear as soon as the pressures for peace receded to distant memory.

## The path forward

Any genuine movement out of fragility requires first and foremost a deliberate attempt to face the past and apply the lessons learnt so far. The country must deal frontally with issues related to the diversification of the economy, the adoption and application of coherent laws, the provision of jobs, the general level of education, and many others. In particular, it must address the fundamental vulnerability that underpins so many of the country's other challenges: The establishment of the formal State alongside the multiple informal States of traditional authority. The formal State is incapable of sustained resilience in light of competition among the informal States that control and distribute power. The cross-currents and tensions among the latter create turbulences that facilitated if not provoked conflict in the past. At the technical level, the same tensions weaken the effectiveness of national institutions, as evidenced by the Ebola epidemic.

Such a fundamental rethinking and re-ordering of the socio-political compact can evidently not be done by the current Government alone; the national Government is in fact a primary arena of conflict. It will require a non-partisan mechanism that is accountable to the people. A roadmap championed by non-state actors and development partners must be formulated, and commitments by all stakeholders secured, for any chance of success. In other words, required is a broad-based peace and development process that addresses the underlying drivers of fragility and sets a path for the future around which sufficient consensus can be built.

Yet the inevitable question that arises is how feasible a national dialogue to address the underlying flaws revealed above may be, when those in authority stand to lose in the short-term from any change in the status quo.

One entry point for change may be in the recognition that 40% of the Government's budget comes from donor financing. This is a lever that can be used to help arbitrate among the various forces and obtain results that are in the national interest. Today, development partners frequently meet with national leaders to review development progress and the use of donor funds. They do so without ever putting on the agenda the issues narrated above.

The time has come to change this. What is required now is a conversation about the long-term strategy for transformation that will address the underlying fault lines on which development plans and investment strategies are being constructed. That strategy must have broad popular support. It must account for and constructively engage the informal States that have acted with such continuity throughout Sierra Leone's history.

For the first time, civil society leaders have in the run-up to the elections adopted a citizen's manifesto. They call on whichever party wins to adopt its elements. This is a good start. Development partners should not shy off from providing advice that draws from the collective experience of all the partners in the country. They should direct support to those who can and will work towards consequential changes in the country's power structures and institutional arrangements, which after so many decades of crisis and violent conflict still appear amazingly resilient. When Sierra Leone begins to implement such a strategy, it would have taken the road away from fragility towards peaceful development.

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