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Social Capital, Survival Strategies, and their Potential for Post-Conflict Governance in Liberia

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Abstract

This paper investigates how people created, adapted and used social capital and conflict resolution during more than a decade of violent conflict in Liberia, and the potential of such capital to contribute to post-conflict peacebuilding and self-governance.

Keywords: institutions, conflict, community, society, reconstruction

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1 Introduction

The typical approach employed by the international community to assist countries in transition from violent conflicts involves inserting a peacekeeping force, establishing an interim government based on a power-sharing arrangement among antagonistic armed groups, and holding elections. Democratic governance is considered introduced by holding national elections and post-conflict reconstruction planning commenced with needs assessment surveys. While national elections are an important activity in the reconstitution of governing arrangements in post-conflict situations, they cannot yield systems of sustainable governance; neither can all the formal institutions and processes of government by themselves. The informal institutions through which people reach understandings among themselves, resolve conflicts and undertake a variety of collective actions are critical foundations of self-governance. As important as are assessments of needs for developing inventories of what is perceived to be lacking in local communities, such assessments do not always tell the full story because they do not always assess available capabilities such as the stocks of social capital of local communities.

This paper shows that informal institutions were critical to the survival of local people during state collapse and violent conflicts in Liberia as they are in many other conflict situations. It argues that if used to buttress formal institutions, many of these informal institutions can become important building blocks in the reconstitution of post-conflict governance arrangements. Prevailing post-conflict reconstruction strategies focus typically on identifying and repairing formal organizations and physical infrastructures and tend to ignore the informal arrangements that sustain people over years of state failure. While there have been many disastrous formal and informal organizational arrangements in Liberia, there are still some very healthy informal arrangements that have not been well recognized. Failure to recognize these has frequently led to the presumption of a social capital deficit and, therefore, the need to look outside for such resource. This paper, therefore, argues that unlocking such capital is important in enabling people to make transitions from short-term survival strategies to more productive long-term arrangements. I, first, briefly discuss the toll of conflict as a legacy of a failed over-centralized and predatory government in Liberia and then turn to equally brief discussions of how, during years of violent conflicts, informal institutions and networks were used by local people to ensure their security, resolve conflicts and provide other public goods. I conclude by stressing the importance of informal institutions as building blocks in the constitution of self-governing orders in post-conflict situations as Liberia.

2 Violent conflict as a legacy of the over-centralized and predatory governance

Liberia's political order emerged as an over-centralized and predatory order that turned increasingly repressive as pressures for inclusion intensified over the years. Despite formal laws that established a legislature and a judiciary as independent and co-equal bodies, Liberia's political order evolved for a century with powers concentrated in the hands of the president. It ultimately collapsed under such pressures as external support declined with the ending of the Cold War. In 1980 a group of semiliterate noncommissioned officers of the Liberian military staged a *coup d'etat* and established a military government that rapidly degenerated into a brutal dictatorship. In 1985,

rigged elections and an attempted coup triggered a protracted violent conflict that engulfed the entire country and in 14 years made Liberia the center of a wider system of violent conflicts in the Mano basin area of Liberia, Sierra Leone and the forest region of Guinea. More about 200,000 or six per cent of Liberia's population was killed; about a 700,000 Liberians sought refuge abroad at one time or another and more than a million were internally displaced and villages, towns and cities in all parts of the country. Leaders of armed groups turned young children into fighters, young girls into 'war wives' and killed and demeaned elders. Millions of dollars of property was destroyed or stolen. As the conflict raged on, Liberia became a source of illicit international trade items as armed bands plundered the resources of the country and sold them on international markets. In such circumstances, ordinary people who stood vulnerable to the assault of such predators were left to rely upon external humanitarian assistance where available and their own resourcefulness. By seeking to understand what kinds of survival strategies were available to local people, we broaden our understanding of how social capital enables collective action and constitutes foundations for human survival.

3 Social capital and collective action

Hernando de Soto (2000) has reminded us that poor people are poor not because they lack assets but because they are not always able to transform their assets into productive capital and to optimally use such capital. Understanding how social capital is created and utilized in society is of critical importance in assessing capacity for self-reliant development. Elinor Ostrom's (1990) argument that understanding how people craft or adapt institutions of collective action provides clues regarding their possibilities for self-governance can be extended to embrace situations of governance failure and violent conflict where survival is at stake. Studies of how local people survive in situations of violent conflicts focus typically on how behaviour of belligerent parties affecting local people are constrained by the intervention of national and external actors. Creation of 'zones of peace' and demarcation of 'security corridors' for the delivery of emergency assistance by international humanitarian organizations are among strategies often analyzed. Conflict resolution strategies are also typically analyzed with respect to the initiatives of third-party mediation and facilitation (Hartzell 1999; Walter 1999). Important as these external interventions are, they do not exhaust the efforts that enable local people to survive amid such hostilities and resolve conflicts among themselves. External intervention alone cannot provide lasting solutions to security and governance dilemmas within a society, thus, understanding social capital among local people may offer insights for building self-governing capabilities. How did local people survive amid plunder, pillage and carnage that characterize internal wars in African countries? How do they constitute or adapt mechanisms for the resolution of conflicts among themselves? What potentials do these forms of social capital have for post-conflict reconstruction? This paper explores these questions in the case of the Liberian experience.

3.1 Social capital and survival strategies

There is hardly a more inauspicious opportunity to observe how people build and use social capital than that which is offered in circumstances where people are confronted with grave insecurities and uncertainties. In situations of violent conflict when the rule

of law breaks down, people are left largely to find recourse in norms, relationships and institutional arrangements which they create themselves or have inherited over the years through customs and traditions. In such situations when people take advantage of lull between firefights to find food and other goods, an enterprising young man may identify an opportunity to organize a group using wheelbarrows to provide a service transporting goods for local people where, due to shortage of gasoline and commandeering of vehicles by armed groups, automobiles are unavailable or in short supply. Entrepreneurial skills, establishing trusting relationships beyond one's immediate family and associates and crafting and effectively implementing appropriate rules are all important elements in building stocks of social capital. But social capital can also be used for harmful purposes. For example, networks of armed individuals may constitute marauding gangs and harm others. The use of social capital may well have harmful externalities for some and constructive outcomes for others. That is why understanding externalities and developing the ability to internalize negative externalities are crucial in using social capital for collective action (Ostrom and Ahn 2003; Ostrom 2005).

3.2 The availability of international humanitarian assistance

Hundreds of thousands of Liberians, victims of the decade and a half of conflict, owe their survival to the humanitarian assistance provided by the international community. In 1990, West African peacekeepers who arrived in Monrovia met a society so desperate for food that soldiers had to share their rations with local people. Although there are no comprehensive estimates of humanitarian assistance to Liberia, anecdotal estimates run high. Between 1990 and 1995, the United State is said to have provided US\$381 million in humanitarian assistance. In 1997, the World Food Programme targeted its food assistance programme to 1.05 million people, three-quarters of whom were internally displaced. Numerous international humanitarian organizations contributed emergency relief during the period of violent conflict. And yet all those needing assistance could not receive assistance or could not survive solely on the assistance received. Several challenges confronted the dispensing of humanitarian assistance. In some cases, logistical difficulties reduced access to humanitarian assistance. This was frequently the case in the rainy season when roads became impassible and bridges were swept away. In other cases, armed bands held groups of people hostage as a means of seizing humanitarian rations provided to vulnerable groups. There were situations in which limited assistance would be provided after long intervals, clearly leaving local people to their own devices. Many communities could not be reached at all. In 1997, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) reported that several areas in Liberia had not been accessed by international relief agencies in seven years. While international relief organizations were able to assist hundreds of thousands of people, there remained a significant gap between the survival needs of local people and the humanitarian assistance delivered to them. Large numbers of local people still had to rely partially or wholly on their own resourcefulness. In the next three sections I describe how under circumstances of violent assault by armed bands, local communities struggled to provide for their security, resolve community-based conflicts and, where possible, engaged in community development undertakings.

4 Security strategies and mechanisms

4.1 Coping with insecurity

Domination of local communities by the central state has been a defining feature and most enduring characteristic of autocracy in Liberia as is the case elsewhere in Africa (Wunsch and Oluwo 1990). Control by the presidency over the process of selecting chiefs and local leaders and their manipulation by that office is a strategy of domination and predation inherent in the nature of autocratic rule in Liberia (Liebenow 1969; Dunn and Tarr 1988; Sawyer 1992). State-sponsored violence has always been one of the instruments that ensured control. However, during the years of military rule, such violence became the main instrument of control.¹ Local officials were routinely harassed, violently intimidated, and capriciously hired and dismissed. Such practices were intensified when the civil war broke out in 1989. For most of the period of violent conflict, every town and village in Liberia was not only affected by violence but also ruled by an armed commander or an individual associated with an armed group. Young ex-combatants and their associates constituted the largest number of village and township heads. This pattern remained unchanged until 2003 when an interim government was established as part of the peace settlement. Although responses of villagers and townspeople to their new rulers varied, in almost every case, local communities sought recourse in traditional institutions in order to cope with the security dilemmas they faced. Examples from northwestern and southeastern Liberia reveal variability in forms of community responses to the problem of physical security posed by armed groups.

4.2 *Poro* authority and armed rule at the village level

In many parts of northern and northwestern Liberia, villagers adapted to the rule of their new armed leaders through *Poro* solidarity. *Poro* has been the foundation pan-ethnic social institution embracing the collective social and historical experiences of most Mel and Mande-speaking groups in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. It is considered to be of a deeper order of legitimacy than any group of secular rulers and commands a wider pool of resources than those available to any single ethnic community. With deep roots in vast sections of the rain forest, *Poro* institutions have been embedded in social organization from the level of the village to higher levels of authority. With hierarchical and gerontocratic principles central to its operations, *Poro* was a source of stability in the rain forest prior to spread of Islam or the establishment of European colonial control (Little 1966). Despite commitment to its principles, *Poro* organization has seemed flexible when necessary and provided scope to accommodate opportunistic behaviour in adapting to change (d'Azevedo 1962).

¹ The period of military rule in Liberia began with the military takeover of 1980. Although in 1986, the military leader Samuel Doe was elected in rigged elections, the pattern of post-elections rule did not differ substantially from the preceding five years. Threat and use of military force, decrees, and strongman arbitrariness were as much the dominant features of post-elections rule as they were earlier. Thus, except where otherwise stated, the entire period of control by Doe (1980 to 1989) is referred to as the period of military rule.

One way in which *Poros* authority sought to protect rural dwellers during the violent conflict was to co-opt the young armed leaders. In several towns, local people clothed their ‘armed chiefs’ with the traditional chieftain authority and quickly constituted advisory councils in accordance with traditional practices.² These councils sought to constrain the actions of armed fighter-chiefs. In other situations, *Poros* authority constituted a parallel but unobtrusive authority structure that supported some of the actions of the new armed leaders where considered appropriate while artfully and quietly organizing resistance where necessary and feasible to protect the interest of local people. Historically, the dynamics of co-optation between central government and *Poros* has worked both ways: Liberian government officials have often co-opted *Poros* symbols and *Poros* authority has often adapted opportunistic behaviour vis-à-vis the government. More widely understood is how the president and his senior officials have over the years attempted to influence *Poros* authority. In the last 25 years, both presidents Doe and Taylor imposed themselves on *Poros* as its highest authority. What has now become evident is how in recent times, *Poros* authority and local communities have also adopted strategies of manipulation and accommodation to ensure their survival.³ Thus, by co-opting the new leaders, *Poros* authorities of villages and towns sought to restrain the actions and behaviours of armed men who operated with hardly any supervision and owed loyalty only to a warlord.

4.3 Community retreat and the formation of auxiliary forces

In southeastern Liberia where the *Poros* does not exist and where communities are acephalous, some communities tended to respond to the imposition of the rule of armed bands by retreating from their towns and villages to smaller hamlets located deeper in the rainforest. Households retreated as a unit. Villages and towns are typically smaller in the southeast than those found elsewhere in the country. Although most forest communities sought sanctuary in the forest at one time or another, members of southeastern communities were on the run more frequently between 1990 and 1998 and constrained to abandon their towns and villages for longer periods of time. Southeastern villages and towns remained sparsely populated for years after fighting ceased. There are two reasons for this situation: first, the isolation of the southeast from other parts of the country and the small size of towns provided ideal settings for armed rulers to operate with greater levels of impunity. Second, there is an absence in southeastern Liberia of strong pan-ethnic institutions capable of imposing order across clan and ethnic groups. *Kwee* is a social institution that exists across many clans and in many ethnic groups of southeastern Liberia; however, unlike *Poros* in northern and western Liberia, *Kwee*’s authority is circumscribed and its scope of operation limited.

In coastal southeastern areas that were not forested, a common strategy used widely was to mobilize local men in age-set units for defense of local communities. These units operated in association with the occupying armed group. Local elders negotiated with the occupying armed group to have such local militia units accepted as part of the occupying armed group. In this way, local communities were often tentatively spared

² Author’s interview with informant.

³ D’Azevedo (1969-1971) saw the offer of Gola girls as wives to settler leaders and government officials as elements of Gola strategy for accommodation with the Liberian state.

the ravages of armed bands. However, violence always flared up when another armed group sought to dislodge an occupying band. Suspicions ran high between local forces and occupying groups and arrangements of cooperation often broke down.

Thus, what we see are patterns of responses to security threats rooted largely in the nature of indigenous social organization extant in an area. *Poros* as the foundation of social organization and authority relations in northwestern Liberia and trans-boundary communities in Sierra Leone and Guinea provided the institutional framework for responding to the onslaught of the new armed rulers. Even though community responses might have differed tactically, *Poros* hierarchies remained significant actors in providing institutional responses to armed assault in most communities of the northwestern Liberia. A different pattern obtained in southeastern Liberia where communities are mainly acephalous and do not have a dominant pan-ethnic organization. Communities formed smaller clusters of families and sought refuge deep within the rainforest or mobilized local forces and negotiated with armed groups to have such forces used as auxiliaries of such armed bands but assigned to these communities. In all cases, local people found recourse in indigenous and local institutions to cope with their security dilemmas.

5 Local institutions and conflict resolution

5.1 *Poros* authority and inter-ethnic conflict resolution in northwestern Liberia

Poros authority has also been a force for ending violence and managing and resolving inter-ethnic conflicts. The case of violent clashes between Mandingo and Loma communities in Zorzor is illustrative and deserves discussion. Mandingo and Loma have lived together in the same villages and towns in the area of Zorzor district on Liberia's border with Guinea since before the founding of Liberia. Both communities are part of larger ethnic communities that extend into Guinea. Mandingo are largely Moslems while Loma are Christians, Moslems and adherents to forms of traditional worship. *Poros* is an important institution in Loma society but not in Mandingo; nonetheless, Mandingo have always shown respect for *Poros* authority. The two ethnic communities have been closely linked through inter-marriage (more often Loma women to Mandingo men), shared mythologies and history.⁴ Joint mechanisms of conflict resolution evolved between the two communities typically, at the level of the village or town, include processes through which elders of the various *quarters* constitute a court whose decisions are supported by the chief and council and enforced ultimately (if necessary) by *Poros* authority in the case of the Loma and Quranic authority in the case of the Mandingo. Since the consolidation of the Liberian state, state-based conflict resolution processes intervened and imposed a higher level of authority through the interior bureaucracy and a judiciary. Under strains of violent conflicts in recent times, Mandingo accused the Loma of not only abandoning the commitment to protect them but of joining the onslaught against them. They accused Loma youth of torching mosques and demeaning Mandingo elders. The Loma, in turn, accused the Mandingo of ethnic targeting in the latter's retaliatory strikes and of desecrating Loma *Poros* groves. They accused Mandingo youth of defacing Loma *Poros* objects and absconding into

⁴ See Sawyer *et al.* 2000a.

Guinea with them. Both sides accused each other of breaking the age-old covenant that had bonded them. Both communities have been seething with bitterness and suspicion against each other.

Reconciliation between the two groups has become one of the most important post-conflict challenges. Government's mediation was superficial, confined largely to mass meetings presided over by central government functionaries and targeted more to winning support of both communities than bridging the divide between them. Moreover, actions of central government's security operatives also tended to exacerbate the problem (Sawyer *et al.* 2000a). Non-governmental organizations serving as facilitators were better able to get both sides to begin a dialogue.⁵ As dialogue progressed, *Poro* leaders from Loma communities in Guinea were said to have been indispensable in initiating a process of re-covenanting. Pan-Poro solidarity provided a context for security and a framework for problem-solving among the Loma. Loma *Poro* objects were retrieved through pan-Poro channels that involved the intervention of Guinean Loma communities with their Mandingo compatriots. Appropriate rites of restoration were performed and with due respect accorded by the Mandingo, the basis for reconciliation was established. The Mandingo received assistance from Loma communities in the construction or renovation of mosques and both communities were subsequently engaged in establishing joint mechanisms for early warning and for dispute settlement. Such mechanisms operated with the endorsement of both *Poro* and Quranic authority.⁶ As a result of the impact of such local conflict resolution processes, continued violent conflicts in the wider region between central government forces and dissident groups did not further strain the relation between Loma and Mandingo, as was the case earlier in the conflict.⁷ Thus, the *Poro* seems to have partially provided a nested arrangement for local mechanisms of conflict resolution as the Liberian government itself became more deeply involved as a party to armed conflict.

5.2 Resolving conflicts over property rights in northern Liberia

Post-war conflict resolution among the Mano, Gio and Mandingo of northern Liberia has taken a different pattern from that seen among the Loma and Mandingo of Zorzor district, Lofa County. Unlike their ethnic kinsfolk of the northwest, the Mandingo of northern Liberia are relatively newcomers to the area. Most were traders from Guinea who settled in Mano and Gio country and married local women. While many Gio embraced Islam, the Mano remained a *Poro* community.⁸ Mainly agriculturists, Mano

⁵ The Center for Democratic Empowerment, the Catholic Peace and Justice Commission and the Lutheran World Federation are among the non-governmental organizations that have played facilitation roles.

⁶ There is no sense of *Sharia* legal application in these matters. Mandingo Islamic clerics operate in conjunction with Mandingo elders, many of whom are of mixed parentage.

⁷ The use of indigenous institutions as mechanisms for conflict resolution is an important strategy currently employed in Rwanda. The *Gacaca* is an indigenous institution considered legitimate by both Hutu and Tutsi for the settlement of disputes. It is now playing a role in resolving certain conflicts connected with the genocide of 1994. See Neuffer (2000); New York Times 7 October 2001.

⁸ Chief Tuazama of the Gio town of Bahn is said to have been a convert to Islam and to have given many Gio girls in marriage to Mandingo men.

and Gio reached an accommodation with Mandingo traders for whom land ownership was not a critical concern once use rights were granted.⁹ With such rights, Mandingo traders exploited streams, creeks and riverbeds prospecting for alluvial gold and diamonds. They also dominated land transport and the housing market in northern Liberia.

Property rights in land have become the critical issue in post-conflict relations between the two groups. Many Mano and Gio communities revoked land use rights granted to Mandingo. The Mandingo, on the other hand, demanded the restoration of property rights said to be granted by central state through licenses and mining claims. Community-based approaches to the settlement of land disputes have had some success. Ethnic leaders of Mano and Gio and Mandingo elders seemed to have agreed that all lands sold or otherwise given to Mandingo in urban areas should be returned to Mandingo owners. Thus, Mandingo-owned real property seems to have been reinstated. With respect to settlement of mining claims, by 2000, Mano and Gio leaders working through county branch office of the Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy were able to establish a 'rolling registration' scheme such that Mandingo claims were considered on a case-by-case basis and honoured interchangeably and periodically with Mano/Gio claims. Consanguineous ties have been critical in the process of inter-ethnic conflict resolution among the Mano/Gio and Mandingo of Nimba. Individuals of mixed ethnic backgrounds, especially men whose fathers are Mandingo and mothers Mano or Gio have been able to shuttle between both communities and this has helped promote a sympathetic understanding on both sides. Mano/Gio elders have become more appreciative of Mandingo predicament as Mandingo elders have become better informed about the concerns of Mano and Gio community leaders. Yet a continuing inter-ethnic dialogue has been required.

5.3 'External elite' as conflict resolution catalysts in southeastern Liberia

In southeastern Liberia, reconciliation among ethnic groups proceeded differently. As stated above, there is hardly a single indigenous institution whose legitimacy cuts across all communities of these acephalous groups. As a result, Kru and Sarpo elite living in Monrovia have been the prime initiators of reconciliation between the two groups. Local people have relied on the lead and advice of their educated sons in Monrovia.¹⁰ Such 'externally-driven' approach to conflict resolution has not been without noticeable consequences. Firstly, up to the ending of hostilities generally in 2003, rifts between communities did not seem to be healing as fast enough as they appeared to be between the Loma and Mandingo of northwestern Liberia. Secondly, these Monrovia-based processes of reconciliation were more easily manipulated by president Charles Taylor up to the time of his downfall and expulsion. Rival Monrovia-based elites could hardly avoid the temptation of turning to the Ministry of Internal Affairs for some form of intervention. Thirdly, solutions evolved from such government-driven reconciliation processes seemed designed to redress perceived ethnic-based imbalances in

⁹ To the Mano and Gio and to all other ethnic groups in Liberia, ownership of land is inalienable. Most land is communal property charged to the custody of the elders of the community who serve as 'owners of the land.' Use rights can be granted but ownership can only be attained through community sale. See Sawyer (1992: especially chapter 10).

¹⁰ See Sawyer *et al.* (2000b).

appointments to county-level positions in government than to heal wounds between people who had committed egregious breaches against each other. As a result, when differences among such elites about job placements proved irreconcilable, demands for the creation of new political jurisdictions such as new statutory districts or townships have been heightened.¹¹

The case of ethnic conflict between the Krahn and Grebo also of the southeast was even more illuminating with respect to the creation of new political jurisdiction as a strategy for the resolution of ethnic-based conflict. The military takeover of 1980 catapulted the Krahn to national leadership as well as local leadership in their southeastern home county of Grand Gedeh which they shared with the Grebo. Until then, Grebo dominance in local government and professional positions was due largely to their superior educational achievements.¹² Krahn and Grebo elders and elites were unable to arrive at a common understanding of their differences and an approach to their resolution. Massive Grebo support for anti-government forces during the early years of the conflict was attributed in part to their desire to end Krahn domination and control of their jointly shared home-county. Becoming more dominant in Charles Taylor's government, Grebo leaders used their new-found influence to press for the carving out a new county from what was Grand Gedeh County. The creation of Grebo-dominated River Gee County has ended the competition for central government allocated positions which has been a major bone of contention between Grebo and Krahn elites over the years.

What we have seen here is that, deeply affected by violent disruptions, local communities found recourse for conflict resolution in their own indigenous institutional patterns where such institutions were available and appropriate or otherwise strategically involved state authorities. *Poro* authority interacted with Quranic authority to provide a basis for co-existence and gradual cooperation between the Loma and Mandingo of northwestern Liberia while a more issue-specific approach to conflict resolution seemed to be going on between the Mano and Gio on one hand and the Mandingo in northern Liberia. In southeastern Liberia, among the Kru and Sarpo, the role of elites of the two ethnic communities resident in Monrovia seemed pronounced and where reconciliation has proved to be more difficult due to lack of appropriate institutions, as is also the case between the Grebo and Krahn, local elites have opted for the creation of new political jurisdictions. Thus, the nature of community social organization has played a major role in determining prevailing responses to conflict. It is important to understand that all of these relationships remain under pressure and in various states of adaptation.

6 Collective action and associational life under adverse circumstances

In many instances society's resilience can be observed in the nature and quality of associational life that makes survival possible in spite of state predation and collapse.

¹¹ The creation of the statutory district of Tarjaurzon out of Juarzon is a more recent example.

¹² Grebo communities extend from the Atlantic coast into the interior; as such they were among the first ethnic groups to have access to schools first established along the coast by missionaries and later, the Liberian state. Located entirely inland, the Krahn lived largely in hunting and gathering communities well into the early decades of the twentieth century. See Schroder and Seibel (1974).

By associational life, I refer to the full array of collective action situations organized by individuals and communities in pursuit of a full range of desired outcomes.¹³ These include formal and informal groups, networks and associations established on the basis of a variety of membership rules for collective action for the provision, production and use of collective goods (Ostrom 1990; 1992). The crucial point here is a consideration of non-state institutional arrangements, rooted in the initiatives of local people that have been the source of their resilience in the face of predation and violence. Many of these organizations and networks have members who live outside Liberia. I briefly highlight some examples of how in situations of state predation, repression and violent conflicts, local people in both rural and urban communities have still been able to engage in collective action to provide some of the public goods and services essential to their lives. Clan and community-based organizations have been the principal institutional arrangements for collective action in such situations.

6.1 Clan-based institutions of collective action

The most enduring form of collective action that ensured community survival despite violent conflicts was undertaken by networks and organizations whose membership is based on clan-related identity. These are genuinely self-reliant and demand-driven groups. Typically, they are referred to as ‘development’ associations and have numerous voluntary groups nested within them. Organizations such as the Dugbe River Union in Sinoe county are well known for their multiple roles as safety nets, conflict resolution mechanisms and for the social and physical infrastructure development activities they undertake independent of the state and often, despite state predation. In northern Liberia, among the Mano and Gio, the accomplishments of clan-based organizations have been indispensable to the welfare of local communities. *Seletorwaa*, the development association of Mensonnoh Clan and Zao Development Association of the Zao, for example, have been extraordinary in their development initiatives. They have built schools, clinics and roads and have organized scholarship schemes to assist promising young men and women to go to college. *Seletorwaa* began in the early 1980s by members of the Mehnsnonoh clan resident in Monrovia. It was a response to the military takeover and its consequences on Nimba County. Among the numerous projects it has undertaken over the years is a clinic built in Guotowin and several scholarships to the young people of the clan to pursue studies at technical schools and institutions of higher learning in Liberia. *Selezoway*, the Yarwin-Mehnsnonoh District development association of which *Seletorwaa* is a member has, over the years, transformed the district, building roads, market sheds, community halls and other public facilities.¹⁴ Women’s clubs within the development association have catered to the needs of sick and disabled, and have often organized for increased production of food to ensure food security. As self-reliant entities, clan development associations are largely supported by the resources of their individual and constituent community members,

¹³ Discussion about associational life in Africa frequently becomes central to the debate about what constitutes civil society in Africa. That debate largely centers on the potential of civil society to advance democracy in Africa. See Harbeson *et al.* (1994); Hutchful (1997); Kasfir (1998); Orvis, (2001). Although critical, this debate is not central to the concern of this paper. My focus is on how individuals and communities organize themselves for collective action to meet the variety of dilemmas they confront in the circumstance of state predation, collapse and violence.

¹⁴ Interviews with members of *Seletorwaa*.

through labour quotas and through taxation of individual production. The role of clan members in Monrovia and abroad is critical in resource mobilization. Many such organizations receive regular contributions from members now resident in the United States. More recently, members of *Seletowaa* in the United States have been providing equipment and supplies for elementary schools in the clan.¹⁵ Clan-based development associations are often able to tap into external resources mobilized through intergovernmental entities such as those of the country offices of organizations of the United Nations system, the European Union and international and local non-governmental organizations. Yet their strength is in their self-reliance. They must be seen as significant local capabilities for the reconstitution of post-conflict governing order in Liberia.

7 Informal institutions as building blocks for constructing post-conflict self-governing orders

Survival strategies used by local people faced with violent conflict perpetrated by armed groups range from complicity and accommodation with the perpetrators to resistance. While some of these strategies, especially those that involved complicity with armed groups to harm others, pose serious huddles to post-conflict reconciliation, many others can appropriately serve as building blocks of a new post-conflict order. For example, the entrepreneurship of clan-based organizations, remittance flows of diasporic groups, and the self-organized deliberative forums of leaders of trans-boundary ethnic communities offer a rich pool of ‘informal’ institutional resources for conflict resolution, community development and foundations for self-governance. A fundamental mistake is made when post-conflict reconstruction initiatives begin with an assessment of needs of local communities unaccompanied by a corresponding assessment of capabilities such as these. The *Joint Needs Assessment* undertaken by the Liberia government, the World Bank and UNDP has ignored the fact that even before the collapse of the state, local clan-based and community-based associations supported by members and alumni associations abroad were the prime supporters of schools and road repair projects in several parts of Liberia.¹⁶ By failing to reflect the capabilities of local people and their extensions abroad, needs assessment surveys have the potential of reorganizing local communities for dependency and not for self-reliant development.

The challenge of attaining lasting peace in post-conflict situations such as Liberia can best be met by constituting self-governing institutional arrangements rather than reconstituting the over-centralized state. Self-governing orders are constituted on foundations rooted in local communities; they draw upon the capabilities of individuals and local communities rather than smother or destroy them. They provide possibilities for building from the bottom up and of doing so in variable patterns that link communities in horizontal and vertical arrangements for provision of public goods. For

¹⁵ The amalgamated initiatives of clan-based organizations that sustain inter-clan development projects must not be confused with such countywide development associations that are organized by the central state through the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The former are the result of local initiatives; the later are top-down government-driven structures that seem to become very active on special occasions such as a pending visit of the president.

¹⁶ See National Transitional Government of Liberia, United Nations and World Bank (2004).

example, a local community may build and run an elementary school while several working together and assisted by their diasporic members may build and run a secondary school. The variable principles of organization and patterns of aggregation to be found in local communities in Liberia as in other countries make for potentially robust systems of polycentric governance (Ostrom 1999). Moreover, in the case of Liberia, capabilities provided by sub-national trans-boundary institutions such as pan-ethnic conflict resolution mechanisms can add resilience to governance arrangements and nest them in the larger Mano basin subregion that includes Sierra Leone and Guinea such that subregional levels of governance rooted in interactions among communities and not only in interactions among unitary states can be imagined. For a subregion that is awash in arms as a result of 14 years of violent conflict, there is no better way of sustaining efforts to ensure a secure environment than by establishing early warning and early response mechanisms that draw upon the self-organized initiatives of local peoples throughout the Mano basin area (see Sawyer 2004).

What all of this means is that understanding and use of appropriate locally-based social capital can unlock human potential and add to the resource pool from which a society draws to constitute self-governing orders that can further enhance human capabilities to transcend destructive conflicts.

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