

**UNMIL's Role in Addressing Local Conflicts in Liberia**  
**Lessons Learned Study**  
May 2018

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## **Introduction**

After peaceful presidential elections in 2017, Liberia demonstrated political maturity and ignited hope in the population for a peaceful and more prosperous future. As stipulated in Security Council resolution 2333(2016), the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) concluded its mandate on 30 March 2018. Prior to the closure of the mission, the Civil Affairs team in the Policy and Best Practices Service conducted a visit from 12-18 February 2018 to Liberia, to capture lessons on how the mission addressed local conflicts. Local conflicts as defined by the Stimson Center (2017) “involve violence or the risk of violence centered at the subnational level.”<sup>1</sup> Local conflicts are between loosely organized structures and social groupings and do not involve individuals who have grievances against each other.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Local Conflicts in Liberia***

According to the National Conflict Mapping Exercise conducted in 2016 by the Government of Liberia, in collaboration with the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) and the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), land and property are the main sources of conflict at the subnational level in Liberia. Disputes over land and property occur at multiple levels – family, community and between statutory entities, including villages, towns and counties, given overlap and other shortcomings in formal demarcation. The government allotted a substantial amount of land used by communities to foreign concession companies, creating tensions between concession companies and local communities. Concession companies promise employment and other benefits to local communities, but in many instances, fail to deliver on these promises. Another challenge related to land is that because of a lack of a land registration system in the country and title deeds, the same piece of land can be sold to multiple buyers creating conflict between individuals and communities. Boundaries between counties are also often contested. Gbarpolu and Bomi counties, for example, experienced conflict because each claimed ownership of land between them. The conflict subsided after UNMIL supported mediation efforts by civil society organizations and other local actors. Local conflicts in Liberia, much like any other setting, are context dependent and hinge upon the actors at play.

Local conflicts often appear distant from national political tensions. In Liberia, however, local conflicts, particularly land conflict, are often manipulated by politicians to incite tensions especially during elections. Land conflicts become subsumed in national political tensions and spread easily within and between counties. Local conflicts in Liberia have been identified by the population as a key driver of tensions and a potential catalyst for violence.

## **Methodology**

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<sup>1</sup> Stimson Center, “local conflict, local peacekeeping,” (2017 p. 7

<sup>2</sup> See DPKO/DFS 2017 study “The role of United Nations Peacekeeping in Addressing Local Conflicts” for an expanded discussion on the subject.

The study was conducted in Monrovia and Bomi counties. It was guided by four main questions: 1) What mechanisms did the Peace Consolidation Services team (previously referred to as the Civil Affairs Section) put in place to address local conflicts? 2) What are the measures in place to ensure the continuity of these efforts/mechanisms? 3) How will these efforts be sustained? 4) What can we learn from UNMIL on strengthening POC in peacekeeping? Interviews were conducted with UNMIL's Peace Consolidation Services team, as well as the Gender Advisory Unit, Human Rights Protection Section and Political Affairs Section. Interviews were also conducted with UNDP, UNWOMEN, civil society organizations, peace committee members as well as the Liberian Land Authority, Liberian Peacebuilding Office, and Peace Ambassador. A day visit to Bomi County was also undertaken to meet with civil society organization and peace committee members. This study looked at some of the efforts put in place by the mission to establish mechanisms to address local conflicts. Given that the study was conducted a month before the mission's closure, information and details pertaining to how the mission functioned at the start of the mission was not easily accessible. This was because a large number of the mission staff had left the mission and the focus for those who remained was on the completion of ongoing activities by the closure of the mission. This study was not conducted as an impact assessment but rather focused on the concrete mechanisms in place to address local conflicts following the mission's departure.

### **The Link between Local Conflicts and the Protection of Civilians**

The importance of addressing local conflicts is based on their potential to derail national peace processes and their ability to pose threats to civilian populations. Liberia does not currently face local conflict of such magnitude, and the mission did not have a shared definition of what constitutes local conflicts. When discussing local conflict towards the end of the mission's existence, many in the mission referred to them in broad terms as ranging from domestic violence to land conflicts and boundary disputes. UNMIL adopted a POC strategy in 2016 that notes that there have not been any major threats to civilian physical violence since 2003. As a result, the mission focused on Tier I (protection through dialogue and engagement) and III (establishment of protective environment) of POC given that the country had reached a point at which Tier II (provision for physical protection) could be addressed solely by the government.<sup>3</sup> The strategy also identified land disputes between local populations and conflicts between concession companies and local populations among potential triggers of violence. Unlike at the start of the mission, towards the end of the mission, the connection between local conflicts and POC in Liberia was not based on actual physical violence but was rather linked to "potential" triggers of violence which require a preventive approach. Inevitably, towards the end of the mission, UNMIL focused on a preventive approach to protection of civilians, a situation many of the UN's most challenging peacekeeping missions currently do not have.

### **UNMIL's Approach to Addressing Local Conflicts in Liberia**

#### ***Mechanisms***

UNMIL's Peace Consolidation Services team played a significant role in addressing local conflicts in the country by focusing on the extension of state authority. Other sections viewed the Peace Consolidation Services team as the vanguard of addressing local conflicts. Collaboration with other sections was not coordinated around a strategy but rather occurred when a need arose. For example, Political Affairs section worked with the Peace Consolidation Services team on local

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<sup>3</sup> UNMIL (2016) United Nations Strategy for the Protection of Civilians in Liberia. Ref. 2016/01

conflicts when the government was drafting the Land Rights Act. Other sections spoke of their experiences with local conflicts but in a way, that demonstrated that they perceived the subject to be linked more to peace consolidation. The various sections often had different understanding of what constituted local conflicts, some spoke of gender-based violence and others of criminal activities. A strategy would have provided more coherence on the definition of local conflicts and how they can be addressed by different sections in a coordinated manner. The team used a combination of Quick Impact Projects (QIPs), programmatic funding and resource from the peacebuilding fund to provide technical, logistical and financial support to local and national actors to address local conflicts. Some of the mechanisms are listed below:

*Peace committees:* UNMIL's Peace Consolidation Services team engaged in typical civil affairs activities and focused on supporting the creation of peace committees in all 15 counties in Liberia. Peace committees are volunteers within a county chosen by the community who perform early warning functions and mediate conflicts when possible. Peace committees in Liberia address a broad range of issues from domestic violence, criminal activities, land conflict as well as boundary conflicts between counties. By supporting the creation of such conflict resolution mechanism, the goal of the peace consolidation team was also to provide counties with a way to channel early warning information to the state for its intervention.

*Multi-stakeholder platforms:* Another mechanism created by the Peace Consolidation Services team in UNMIL in collaboration with UNDP, was the multi-stakeholder platform. The platform, which is similar to peace committees in structure, was created to exclusively address conflict between communities and concession companies. The platform is comprised of individuals from affected communities to address grievances local communities have stemming from the presence and operations of concession companies. Individuals are selected by the communities and they are agreed upon by the concession companies. This joint project was implemented by UNDP with the use of UNMIL's programmatic funds. The project also strengthened the National Bureau of Concessions, responsible for monitoring the implementation of concessions agreements, by establishing a dedicated secretariat.

*Peace huts:* Although not initiated by UNMIL, another noteworthy mechanism is the peace huts. UNWOMEN has been supporting the peace huts which are a mechanism initiated by Liberian women to address conflict. The peace huts were established to provide women a space to engage in conflict resolution given that they were excluded in the traditional palava hut<sup>4</sup> mechanism which only includes men. Peace huts address various conflicts including domestic violence, land conflicts and in some cases, they have also played a role in resolving conflicts between communities and concession companies. Furthermore, UNWOMEN ensured to create a program consisting of loans and savings for the peace huts to ensure their sustainability.

*County security councils:* The Peace Consolidation Services team contributed to efforts aimed at ensuring that all local mechanisms such as peace committees and peace huts fall under the County Security Council, a government structure at the subnational level that coordinates efforts and information sharing on security threats. The benefits of peace committees being part of the County Security Council is that they receive recognition from the government as vital mechanisms that address local conflicts and they gain sustainability through government budgetary support. The Peace Consolidation Services team played a role in setting up the County Security Councils by providing technical advice and logistical support to county superintendents.

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<sup>4</sup> The palava hut mechanism is a traditional mechanism which brings men together in a hut to resolve conflict.

### ***Other Support***

Throughout the lifespan of the mission, the Peace Consolidation Services team (previously referred to as the Civil Affairs Section), provided technical, logistical and financial support to local communities, government agencies and ministries to address local conflict. Furthermore, technical support was provided to various government bodies working on laws and Acts to enable the country to better address local conflicts particularly those related to land. For instance, the team supported the Liberian Land Authority in drafting the Land Rights Act. Although the Act has not yet been passed it entails a provision which recognizes communal land and the right of communities to land.

At the national level, the team supported the Peacebuilding Office, a government office located in the Ministry of Internal Affairs that was created to lead national peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. Through QIPs, the team also supported the establishment of the Peace Ambassador's secretariat by providing furniture as well as the ambassador's activities promoting dialogue throughout Liberia. The team also supported dialogue sessions in 2017 on peace and reconciliation in eight counties using QIPs and programmatic funding. The team first used QIPs to fund pilot dialogue sessions in one county. The county then produced a five-year reconciliation plan. The team then replicated this activity to seven other counties using programmatic funding. Each county produced five-year reconciliation plans that will pave the way for reconciliation efforts. The remaining seven counties will be supported by the government to also produce five-year reconciliation plans. These will be funded by the government, although it is questionable as to how realistic it is for the government to finance these efforts given the dire economic situation facing the country.

The Peace Consolidation Services team also focused its efforts on building the capacity of civil society organizations to address local conflicts, by providing them with support through QIPs and a platform to voice their concerns. The Peace Consolidation Services team also hired consultants to provide training to a number of local partners including civil society organization in mediation, reconciliation and decentralization. Civil society organizations have played a pivotal role at the county level and at the national level. They have successfully resolved conflicts in communities particularly land conflict. The Bomi and Gbarpolu counties boundary conflict, which was mediated by civil society and local actors, led to the signing of a peace agreement which civil society members are monitoring.

The peace consolidation team also launched a survey study in collaboration with the NGO SEED to formulate a Score Index that reveals the counties with the most challenges in the areas of co-existence and civic trust in Liberia, violent tendencies, political tribalism, readiness for UNMIL to leave and development orientation. The Score Index analysis demonstrates geographically where intervention is required in each area and what type of intervention is needed. The survey was conducted in 2016 and served as an indicator of status of the country particularly with regards to local conflicts, as UNMIL was preparing to withdraw. Future surveys can also serve as assessment tools to reveal the effectiveness of efforts. Measures, namely training of government workers on the Index, were put in place to enable the government to continue with the Score Index.

### **Continuity and Sustainability**

Many mechanisms supported by UNMIL need to be continued and sustained by other partners including the government, donors, the UNCT, civil society and local communities. The

peace committees, for example, are now under the Peacebuilding Office and this office will be responsible for ensuring the continuity of their work. To ensure this continuity and sustainability of the peace committees, the Peace Consolidation Services team advised the Ministry of Internal Affairs to issue a letter instructing county superintendents to allot resource from county budgets for the work of peace committees. Furthermore, the team supported the development of County Security Councils which aim to coordinate the activities of peace committees and other mechanisms. The peace committee in Lofa and Nimba country, for instance, used the letter provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to seek funding for their activities from the superintendent. This has enabled them to continue functioning. Donors, including USAID, the European Union, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency among others, will likely be approached to provide support to local initiatives where the government is unable to realistically provide financial support. Some peace committees and NGOs are already receiving funding from USAID. In addition, the mission ensured to work with ECOWAS on ensuring that the latter was linked to local early warning structures in its early warning center for the continuity of local early warning structures.

Furthermore, the team provided a significant amount of technical advice and training to local and national counterparts thereby creating a large pool of individuals who have some expertise to resolve conflict. Other activities will naturally be continued by the UNCT, particularly UNDP, which worked closely with the Peace Consolidation Services team on a number of efforts particularly the multi-stakeholder platform.

### ***Challenges***

UNMIL supported the creation of structures to address local conflicts, however, the effectiveness of these structures will depend on whether they are able to prevent or stop violence should it arise. Several structural challenges remain. Despite efforts at promoting decentralization, the government is still highly centralized, the Local Government Act has yet to be passed, and efforts at the local level often lose traction unless brought to the attention of Monrovia. Furthermore, UNMIL withdrew just as a new government entered office. The president appoints a range of government positions including the superintendents of counties. This means that many of the mission's counterparts who have benefited from training and technical advice will likely be replaced by individuals without the same training and expertise. In some counties and for some activities, this will mean a loss, not only of expertise but of institutional memory.

The economic situation in the county is dire and the government lacks resources. Salaries have not been paid to many government workers and those that are highly skilled are leaving their government positions to work elsewhere which compromises continuity. The government has also been marred by corruption which has contributed to the depletion of resources. During the visit, government workers, civil society organizations and local communities voiced significant apprehensions regarding UNMIL's departure and uncertainty of who would fill the gap given the government's lack of funds.

Finally, the different mechanisms to address conflict, although positive in many respects, led some government officials to perceive the creation of the multi-stakeholder platform to address disputes between concession companies and local communities as a duplication of efforts. They questioned how these two mechanisms would operate harmoniously after the departure of UNMIL given this potential duplication. They also believed UNMIL and UNDP missed an opportunity to strengthen existing mechanisms, namely the peace committees, when the platform was created.

UNMIL and UNDP created the platform to have a dedicated capacity to address concession-related tensions.

## **Conclusion**

The study on local conflicts in Liberia demonstrated the important work conducted by the mission in addressing local conflicts. This notwithstanding, apprehensions regarding the departure of UNMIL were inevitably voiced. The mechanisms in place to address local conflicts were meant to prevent an escalation of tensions in the counties if sufficiently supported after the departure of the mission. Indeed, the timing of the mission's departure raised questions for some national counterparts. Although elections were held peacefully, the country lacks resources and this has an impact on all aspects of Liberian social, economic and political life creating a sense of apprehension by many of the country's ability to move forward without the mission's presence. For many, local conflict mechanisms will likely struggle unless resources can be secured. The Peace Consolidation Services team did its utmost to ensure that other partners fill the gap however the main partner responsible for these efforts is the government, and reliance on the government to fill this gap is questionable for some. Peacekeeping operations are intended to address security concerns and missions cannot be expected to remain in a country simply to fill resource gaps or address deep seated social and economic factors underpinning conflict and tensions. The sustainability of a mission's success after its departure is therefore contingent on how the development pillar supports the government to address structural and systemic issues after peacekeeping missions have contributed to bringing about security.

## **Lessons**

- 1. To sustain peace and thereby ensure continuity and sustainability, the Peace Consolidation Services team not only built the capacity of government workers but also built the capacity of civil society and local communities. The team employed both a top-down and bottom-up approach to addressing local conflicts. Although the state bears primary responsibility for resolving conflict, it is important to build the capacity of a wide range of actors such as civil society to fill gaps where the government might not be able to. The Peace Consolidation Services team also supported dialogue between government and civil society to improve state-society relations, also to sustain peace in the country given the importance of state-society relations with regards to conflict.*
- 2. The use of the Score Index was one of the most innovative approaches to planning and monitoring interventions on local conflicts in UNMIL and should be replicated in other missions. The Score Index allowed for evidence-based analysis and interventions at the local level. In addition, when the survey is replicated, it allows for assessment of activities and interventions thereby revealing their effectiveness. Civil Affairs teams require enhanced conflict analysis tools, clearer methodology to determine appropriate responses and interventions, and assessment tools. The Score Index can be used to achieve all three objectives.*
- 3. The use of programmatic funds and QIPs in a flexible manner allowed for a significant amount of work to be done. The team often initiated projects with QIPs and then extended the projects by using programmatic funding. While there is a difference between QIPs and programmatic funding particularly as it relates to scope of work, the fact that some programmes were initiated with QIPs funding and then followed by Programmatic Funding,*

*enabled the team to launch and elaborate on a number of important projects such as the county reconciliation plans. Programmatic funding should therefore be available to missions from the outset.*

- 4. UNMIL and its partners engaged in numerous efforts to address local conflicts. There was a plethora of activities being undertaken to prevent local conflicts. A coordination structure between UNMIL and its partners, particularly the Liberia Peacebuilding Office could have facilitated the alignments of efforts aimed at addressing local conflicts. National counterparts complained about duplication of efforts that resulted from the creation of the multi-stakeholder platform. This could have potentially been avoided had there been a coordination structure between UNMIL and other partners, especially if led by the government. It is important particularly at the transitional phase for the mission and UNCT to align with government priorities and structures.*
- 5. Within the mission, the Peace Consolidation Services team was considered the vanguard of addressing local conflicts by other sections. A mission wide strategy on local conflict management could have assisted in bringing various sections together on issues related to local conflict in a more systematic manner. Although the Peace Consolidation Services team would remain the custodian of efforts, such a strategy could enable other sections such as Political Affairs, Gender, Human Rights, UNPOL and others to work closely with the Peace Consolidation Service team on local conflict. A strategy would also be instrumental in ensuring a collective understanding of what constitutes local conflicts, narrowing the definition and identifying how they are linked to protection of civilians concerns other areas of the mission's mandate. Furthermore, a strategy with the requirement of monitoring and logging local conflicts could provide sections with an indication of the severity of local conflicts, their prevalence, and any casualties related to them.*
- 6. In its last years, UNMIL operated in a space where threat of physical violence at a large scale was absent unlike many other peacekeeping missions. This notwithstanding, what we can learn from UNMIL with regards to POC is the importance of building a protective environment and protection through dialogue as a preventive measure. POC mandates need not only be adopted when overt violence is present. In addition, addressing POC measures in a preventive manner contributes to sustainable peace. Therefore, what UNMIL teaches us is that POC can be addressed and worked on even in the absence of widespread violence.*