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DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN POST-CONFLICT LIBERIA
- AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. AMOS SAWYER

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Contents

Abstract in English	2
Abstract in Danish	2
Introduction	3
The Interview	7
The Story of the Liberian State	7
Polycentric Models of Governance	11
Donors and Governance: The Dark Side of the GEMAP	16
International Order	20
References	23
Annex 1: Liberia Basic Facts and Timeline	25
Annex 2: Curriculum Vitae, Dr. Amos Sawyer	27

Abstracts

ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

This Working Paper contains an interview with Dr. Amos Sawyer - one of the persons most knowledgeable on Liberian politics and society. Dr. Sawyer presents himself as a Scholar-Activist who is driven equally by the curiosity to understand what is happening and the passion to do something about it. It is from this perspective he speaks on the current situation in Liberia and shares his view on the ongoing post-conflict state-building process. Dr. Sawyer's main claim is that a system of 'polycentric governance' is better suited to the social and political realities in Africa's fragile states than the imposed system of unitary sovereignty, which has failed so conspicuously in Liberia and elsewhere. He discusses the international community's approach to state-building and argues that it is in need of serious rethinking. If the post-conflict order is to be both democratic and sustainable, it must be built from the ground up drawing on internal capabilities and local knowledge. Not on international blue-prints. The ongoing attempts at re-establishing law and order mainly through a strong central government entail a risk of reproducing the basic structural problems that have characterized the Liberian state since its creation.

ABSTRACT IN DANISH

Dette working paper indeholder et interview med Dr. Amos Sawyer – en af de mest vidende personer, når det gælder politik og samfundsforhold i Liberia. Dr. Sawyer præsenterer sig selv som en akademiker-aktivist, der ønsker både at forstå og forandre grundlæggende dynamikker i samfundet. Det er ud fra dette perspektiv, han taler om den aktuelle situation i Liberia, og forklarer sit syn på den statsopbygningsproces, der blev indledt efter borgerkrigens afslutning i 2003. Dr. Sawyer's hovedpointe er, at et system med 'polycentrisk regeringsførelse' passer bedre til den sociale og politiske virkelighed i Afrikas svage stater end det påtvungne system med enhedssuverænitæt, der har slået så grueligt fejl i Liberia og andre steder. Han diskuterer det internationale samfunds tilgang til statsopbygning og insisterer på, at der er brug for en radikal nytænkning. Hvis den nye orden skal være både demokratisk og levedygtig, må den bygges op nedefra med udgangspunkt i de institutioner og ressourcer, der allerede findes i Liberia, og som befolkningen har tillid til. Ikke på baggrund af internationale standardmodeller. Genetablerer man lov og orden alene gennem en ny stærk centralregering, risikerer man at gentage de grundlæggende strukturelle problemer, der har præget staten i Liberia siden dens etablering.

Introduction

This Working Paper presents an interview with one of the persons most knowledgeable on Liberian politics and society, Dr. Amos Sawyer.¹ Dr. Sawyer presents himself as a Scholar-Activist who is driven equally by the curiosity to understand what is happening and the passion to do something about it (Sawyer, 2005: xi). It is from this perspective he speaks on the current situation in Liberia and shares his view on the ongoing post-conflict state-building process.

Since 2003 Liberia has been the theatre of one of the most comprehensive peacebuilding interventions in the world. The intervention includes the deployment of 15,000 UN peacekeepers; the establishment of international control and oversight of the Liberian state apparatus; and the formulation of a post-conflict reconstruction program that seeks to enhance national security, revitalize the economy, strengthen governance and rule of law, and rehabilitate infrastructure and basic service delivery.

On the one hand, the Liberian case is fairly standard. It contains the full variety of civilian and military elements typically included in a peacebuilding operation; and it has gone through all the ‘normal’ post-conflict phases from the peace agreement in 2003, through a two-year transitional period to the holding of post-conflict elections in 2005 and the inauguration of a new democratically elected government in January 2006. On the other hand, Liberia is different. Perhaps more by default than design, the country has come to serve as a virtual hot house for what may be a new and significantly more coordinated and intrusive form of international engagement in post-conflict situations.

Among the innovative mechanisms found in Liberia, three stand out:

- The re-hatting of ECOWAS forces into a UN peacekeeping mission in September 2003 – indicating the strong regional involvement that has remained in place also after the transition from ECOWAS to UN (Aboagye and Bah, 2005).
- The joint UN/World Bank application of the Results-Focused Transition Framework (also known as the Transition Results Matrix) in February 2004 (NTGL, 2004) – indicating international efforts to provide assistance in a more coherent and focused manner.

¹ Throughout most of Liberia’s recent history, Dr. Sawyer has been a leading figure in the struggle for democratic governance. He currently serves as chairman of the Governance Reform Commission. See Annex 2 for Dr. Sawyer’s full CV.

- The establishment of the Governance and Economic Management Programme (GEMAP) in September 2005 (Dwan and Bailey, 2006) – indicating the attempt to combat corruption through international control and oversight of ministries and state enterprises.

In addition, it is worth noting that the UN peace operation (UNMIL) continues to stand at its maximum of 15,000 peacekeepers and remains responsible for maintaining security throughout the country. The Security Council has recently requested the Secretary-General to prepare a detailed drawdown plan for UNMIL (UNSC, 2007), yet it seems as if, the international community is determined to avoid a premature exit from Liberia. This may indicate the move towards longer and more coherent interventions which have been called for in most of the peace- and state building literature for years².

Liberia is thus interesting not only on its own account and for the sake of the Liberian people, but also as a possible pointer of the future direction of international interventions. In a sense, this raises the bar for Liberia and its international partners and deems it even more important to ensure that the reports of ‘significant progress’ are mirrored by actual and lasting improvements on the ground. The points made by Dr. Sawyer in this interview can be seen as part of such a reality-check. The grave concerns he voices about the ownership and sustainability of the recovery process are worth pondering for anyone interested in post-conflict reconstruction and state-building.

The interview draws on Dr. Sawyer’s most recent book *Beyond Plunder: Toward Democratic Governance in Liberia* where he explores the collapse of the Liberian political order and the current challenge of reconstituting order (Sawyer, 2005). In his own words, the main message of the book is that:

Institutional arrangements of governance have been inherently flawed and have been a structural source of breakdown and a significant contributor to violent conflicts; to reconstitute order, there is a need for a new constitutional paradigm and a new institutional design that depart significantly from those that have failed (Sawyer, 2005: xii).

² See e.g. Chesterman, 2004; Paris, 2004 and Krasner, 2004.

Throughout the book he explores the notion of polycentric governance as an alternative to the theoretically dominant regime of unitary sovereignty, which is precisely the one that has failed in Liberia.

The interview falls into four main sections: Firstly, Dr. Sawyer provides an overview of Liberian history and the process that has brought the country to its present situation. Secondly, he explains what he means by polycentric governance and relates it to the ongoing state-building process in Liberia with a special emphasis on the security sector. Thirdly, he discusses the GEMAP and its underlying assumptions, which he remains highly critical of. Finally, he touches upon questions related to the wider international order and the possible emergence of new trusteeships and a global empire. Throughout all sections of the interview, Dr. Sawyer returns to the need for a new institutional paradigm that is built from the ground up and thus custom-made to fit the particular Liberian context, not a uniform standard model.

The interview was conducted in person in Copenhagen, 14 June 2007.³ The transcript was subsequently edited and rearranged to allow for a thematic presentation. Dr. Sawyer has read and approved the edited manuscript.

³ Dr. Sawyer visited Denmark to participate in the DANIDA Development Days organized by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry has kindly supported this publication by financing the transcription of the interview.

The Interview

THE STORY OF THE LIBERIAN STATE

Liberia is often referred to as a fragile or even failed state. Is that an accurate description?

Well... yes. The Liberian state did fail. If you consider the extent to which the government collapsed, people were left to their own devices, and order broke down, what else can you say? The state did fail. The more important question, however, is why did it fail and how can it be reconstituted to avoid future failure?

If one looks into the Liberian history, it is clear that the state has been problematic from the start.¹ It was established when a group of former slaves were expelled from the United States. These people were in effect presented with a choice: either you stay in slavery or you go somewhere else. The number of freed slaves who came to West Africa was actually quite small but they, nevertheless, managed to establish an exclusive state that suppressed the indigenous population. For a very long period of time, this state remained in place. There was only limited transformation and few attempts at creating a different and more inclusive kind of state. In the long run, laws and practices designed to preserve an exclusive state turned out to be a clear contributor to state failure.

Expanding the privilege of citizenship to the indigenous population was a very slow and gradual process. Little by little, progress in the area of education and health gradually enlarged the class of active citizens. The expansion of social policies – slow as it was – was, however, proceeding much faster than the expansion of political rights. Social services – poor as they were – were outpacing political inclusion. Indigenous people were increasingly dissatisfied with being excluded from the political arena. I therefore like to think about the collapse of the settler-oligarchy in 1980² as one episode in an ongoing struggle for democratization. It was, undoubtedly, a tragic

¹ Annex 1 provides a time line of Liberia's history and basic socio-economic facts of the country.

² In April 1980, Master Sergeant Samuel Doe led a bloody coup that effectively put an end to the Americo-Liberian rule. After the coup, the People's Redemption Council (PRC) headed by Doe assumed power and suspended the constitution. Increasingly pressed by international organizations and donors, Doe lifted the ban on political parties and called for elections in 1985. Few observers felt they were conducted fairly. The United States, nevertheless, endorsed the results and Doe was named victor.

episode. Lives got lost. But if you look at it within context it is clear that it was an event brought on by the regime's stubborn resistance to political change.

If we think about an ongoing quest for democracy and regard the military coup as an intervention that succeeded in dismantling the oligarchic order, the question since the military coup has been: what kind of the new order will take its place? Today, almost 30 years after the coup, Liberia still has not found an answer to that question. The country remains in search of a democratic paradigm. The violent removal of the oligarchy left a void, which the process that led to its removal was not capable of filling.

The violence and coup-making succeeded in ending the settler-oligarchy, but it could not provide the kinds of platforms needed to move Liberia into democratic discourse. At first, the coup-makers tried to establish a retaliatory regime, but largely as a result of their own greed that didn't work out very well. Later, they began to form selective alliances – in some cases with some of the same people who they initially opposed and overthrew. They soon became a brutal and corrupt military dictatorship: clearly not an instrument through which a new democracy could be established. And yet the democratic struggle went on against the military regime – and it proceeded with more intensively violent resistance by the military that included internal purges and secret killings and ultimately a full-blown civil war that began when Charles Taylor's rebel forces invaded Liberia from Côte d'Ivoire on Christmas Eve 1989. The civil war only ended in 2003.

It is against this background we should understand Liberia's current situation and analyze both the pitfalls and the possibilities of moving towards democratic governance. At this particular point in history we have a unique opportunity for a truly open public discourse on our system of governance. It is the first time in more than a hundred years that there is no dominant political institution, no dominant political paradigm, no warlord overseeing the process. Liberians are actually free to choose how and by whom they want to be governed. This is a very positive thing.

I would, however, like us to focus much more on questions of governance design – of how the entire system should be organized. In my mind, such issues must be dealt with first. But the international post-conflict paradigm prioritizes the holding of elections; and this has also been the case in Liberia. Elections are important, but by their very nature they produce winners and losers and direct attention towards the persons running for office instead of the institutions. That was

what the elections in 2005 were about³. It was in the context of this generic post-conflict transitional program introduced by the international community that elections were held.

I make this point in order to emphasize that Liberia remains in a continuing struggle for democratic governance. I hope we will be able to take advantage of the new and open public space and that the political system does not revert to the old ways of abuse and exclusion. We need to have some serious political diagnostics and begin to put together some kind of a new paradigm for governing Liberia.

In your book Beyond Plunder, you argue that the collapse of the Liberian state was not merely brought on by a few bad men and corrupted individuals such as Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor. You claim it has primarily been a question of bad institutions – including an almost Imperial Presidency.

Human beings have their faults, and Liberia – as other countries – surely has seen some very bad people who got into power. The trend is, however, too consistent to only focus on the individuals. Abuse, corruption and repression may have something to do with personality, but a greater deal of it has to do with the kind of system in which we find ourselves: The institutional landscape and the political ethos in which governance is executed. The constitution refers to Liberia as a unitary state with three independent, but coordinated branches of government. The concept of coordination has, however, been perverted to the extent that in practice it has been the president who coordinates the two other branches. Similarly, the notion of a unitary state has been perverted to take on a different meaning. Rather than implying that Liberia is one nation, it has come to imply that there is only one person in charge; and that person – the President – is supposed to be all-powerful.

If we look at the way in which the constitution plays this out, it fits the kind of culture and history that we have had. Let me be more specific: The constitution gives the president the powers to appoint a whole series of public officials: judges, the cabinet and sub-cabinet positions, heads

³ General elections were held in 2005 for the head of state (president) and the two chambers of the Legislature (House of Representatives and Senate). The elections were widely acknowledged to be free and fair. The presidential elections took place in two rounds as neither candidate could master a winning majority in the first round. In the second round, former World Bank official and senior politician, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, defeated the internationally known soccer star and UNICEF Goodwill ambassador, George Weah. Weah briefly challenged the results but following conflict prevention measures taken by ECOWAS, he and his party conceded. The parliamentary elections were also considered free and fair. International concerns have, however, been raised over the human rights records of some of those who won parliamentary seats.

of autonomous bureaus and agencies, public corporations, their boards, and sub-national leaders and sub-national public officers, county superintendents, district commissioners etc. The reach of the president goes down into each and every village. When this type of all-embracing political appointment is backed up by almost total control of the budget and the president's party being the dominant party in the legislature, it all makes for a situation in which the president becomes all-powerful – an Imperial Presidency. This is too much power for any person, no matter how humble and compassionate that person may be.

Presidential domination and an overly centralized governance system are not uncommon in Africa. Often the presence of a strong central executive is explained by the weakness of other branches and institutions – and the diversity of African societies: The state needs a strong hand to keep it all together.

It is partially true that an autocratic president draws his strength from the weakness of the other branches of government. But this does not imply that the President should be kept strong and at the expense of other branches of government. On the contrary it points to the need for independent and alternative centers of authority. If anything, Liberia shows the degeneration that can occur in a system where legislatures', officials' and civil servants' entire life and livelihood depend on their personal standing with the president. What checks can possibly exist on a president who has the whole government infrastructure available to him as a patronage machine?

But even an Imperial President does not possess totalitarian powers. He needs to co-opt and draw upon other sources of authority to project his power and control – especially in distant, rural areas where the state's physical presence is limited.

Precisely, and in that regard the Liberian state began as a colonial state. In fact, the colonial paradigm was copied from the British model of indirect rule. Throughout its development, the Liberian state structure has manipulated indigenous political and social systems. It did so by appointing – and therefore deciding – who the local chiefs were; and by giving these chiefs the same kind of state functions as in the British system. The chiefs were in a sense turned into state officials.

Liberia is a classic case of what Mahmood Mamdani talks about⁴. Throughout Liberia's history, we have had citizens and subjects as two distinct classes of people and even now, when we have in fact made so much progress, we still have laws of the Hinterland that are different from laws

⁴ See Mamdani, 1996.

elsewhere in the country. This is a fact that Liberia has to confront if the country is to move towards democratic governance for all. We need to figure out how the system of “customary law”, as we call it, can be sufficiently integrated into the formal rule of law. This is crucial if we wish to establish equity among all Liberians.

The division between customary law and formal law goes into every aspect of life, in particular with respect to land and gender issues. Some of these questions – especially those relating to gender issues – are being tackled now, but there is a lot of difficulties ahead of us before we can claim to have a system where all are truly equal. The first step forward is to acknowledge that what we have is in fact a political system with strong colonial-like institutions and that need to be dismantled. The steps we have taken so far are good but have not been nearly bold enough. Things have been done incrementally – for instance the laws of inheritance for women have been changed and there have been some steps to stem the violence against women – but progress is both very recent and very limited. The big question remains: How you create a sense of equal citizenship and equal standing before the law among all Liberians. I still think we’re not there yet.

POLYCENTRIC MODELS OF GOVERNANCE

In Beyond Plunder you argue that Africa needs a fundamental shift in governance system if the path of autocratic presidents is to be broken. As an alternative to the dominant framework of unitary government, you introduce the notion of polycentric governance.

My life as an academic – especially at Indiana University – a practitioner and an activist has taught me that it is possible to have other governing arrangements than those implied by the Weberian standard model. Strictly hierarchical arrangements are not necessarily suitable for all conditions, all activities and all purposes. The premise I work from is that you first ask what it is you want to achieve and then you try to find the institutional arrangement that is best suited for that purpose. This to my mind is much more appropriate for the range of governance challenges a society confronts than trying to fit everything into a predetermined institutional arrangement. The latter approach, however, is by far the most common. People start from the assumption that there must be a centralized authority, there must be this, there must be that, and then they try to manipulate things to make them fit into that mould. Very often the results of such manipulation have been disastrous and counterproductive.

The notion of a polycentric system of democratic governance implies that instead of looking at dichotomies and choosing between, for instance, centralization and decentralization, we should

be looking at a variety of institutions within the context of doing certain kinds of things. The analysis should begin by asking what kind of goods and services do we want to provide, and how can we best provide them in a given setting? There are some things that centralized institutions can do better. For example, central governments have typically been more helpful in the protection of minority rights in a decentralized system of governance.

Central governments have also had more resources to invest in major infrastructural development such as hydro-electric facilities and major highways. Usually central governments can best manage governance challenges involving economies of scale. There are things where local institutions are better. Some of these typically include providing for community-based social services such as community health care and sanitation, maintenance of secondary roadways, provision of foot-patrol in police services and so on. And there are things where a mix of institutions is the best solution. In education, for example, local people typically do better in running primary and elementary schools and central governments do well setting and supervising standards. Sometimes we might find that the public and the private sector in partnership can do certain things, while at other times the civil society may be better on its own. The challenge is to identify and establish a governing system that allows for a mix of all of these institutional arrangements: local /national, private/public. There may even be some issues of scales that go beyond the national borders and span the entire region. Take security, for example or environmental challenges. Many of these span national borders and require some kinds of transnational or inter-state governance arrangements.

If we return to the case of Liberia and look at the field of security in terms of polycentricity, the analysis points towards other solutions than the ones we find in the Security Sector Reform, which is currently being implemented in the country. The war spanned the entire West-African sub-region. Obviously, the security architecture has to be regional. The people who have been making war operate in a sub-regional context and are moving freely back and forth across borders. The flow of arms and the technology of war operate as a coherent system throughout the sub-region. The security architecture therefore has to take this into consideration if it is to provide for durable peace and stability. It also has to take local people into consideration for what they bring to the field. Local people often have their own early warning capabilities and their own conflict resolution capabilities. And in West Africa these are often cross-border capabilities, because ethnic groups straddle two borders and may see themselves as part of one nation despite being citizens of two countries. This does not mean that Liberia does not need a standing army. But if you take a new look at the reality on the ground and begin to ask what all of these entities can bring to the table, it immediately becomes clear that you are designing a different type of security system.

Actually, one of my main concerns right now is the reconstruction of the security system in Liberia.⁵ The process seems to be happening over-night. When you look at the way the security agenda is being pushed, it is as if we did not have the type of war we had. The reform efforts are primarily focused on building a 2000-soldier strong army. Although they say that this time the soldiers will be trained in human rights, the notion of an elite group that is well-trained and obedient to their commander worries me. Organized as an elite group, the army could sit as a unit semi-detached from society and financed by our external partner, the United States. This might work as long as the Americans support it. But what happens when the Liberian state itself has to finance the army? What if we don't have enough money to pay the elite force?

We need an army that will participate in national reconstruction. If the army is not development-oriented then what will the soldiers be doing if there is no war? They are not being trained to be in agriculture, road-building or anything like that. For the time being we have very little political discussions about this in Liberia and that worries me tremendously. Our military culture of plunder and predation is strong, and I am sorry to say that I don't think this culture will change just because somebody recruits 2000 new soldiers and gives them shining boots, brass buttons and new guns. We as a nation have to work on this in a different way. We must create strong links between the men and women in the army and the rest of society. The soldiers must have respect for the people and see themselves as having a responsibility to better the society, which they themselves are a part of. They must learn to work with the people and do things jointly with the people rather than standing over them as an elite unit. The people of Liberia have seen so much of what men with guns can do. I am not saying that the new Armed Forces of Liberia will necessarily behave as the old army did, but I am not quite sure that we are going about the security sector reforms in the right way.

To return to your question of poly-centricity, let us look at another sector: Education. A poly-centric approach to education would begin by asking how we best organize ourselves to provide educational services if we want to build a participatory state: What role can local people play? Research has shown that when local communities are involved, ordinary schools becomes better.

⁵ The Comprehensive Peace Agreement from 2003 contained several articles on security sector reform that serve as the entry point for international involvement. The reforms were initiated during the transitional government and include a complete restructuring of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). The program is financed by the US government, who has contracted a private company (Dyncorp) to recruit, train and restructure the AFL. Reforms are also directed at the national police force. UNMIL is the lead donor and responsible for police training. In 2006, the Government of Liberia initiated a process aimed at formulating a national security strategy. The Governance Reform Commission has been charged with overseeing that process (see eg. Jaye, 2006).

Parents' support to the school increases and helps sustain the educational level. People take pride and ownership on the ground. This does not mean that there is no role for central government in education. The central government must set some standards and may also step in to organize poly-techniques or other institutions that are too expensive for local or county governments to support alone. But you could also imagine two regions joining resources and arranging one poly-technique together. One could also imagine a regional hospital for example with oncology facilities or other facilities that you cannot have in every county. Basically it is a question of looking at how you create various kinds of jurisdictions and empower them to do certain things. Importantly, however, these jurisdictions need not be mutually exclusive. Sometimes they may overlap. There is nothing wrong with overlap, if overlap is needed to ensure robustness and to ensure that you accomplish what you want to accomplish.

To sum up: Polycentric governance is a creative way of looking at how you organize governance arrangement. Instead of trying to fit everything into a standard Weberian model, it provides opportunities to build on what people themselves want to do. Instead of telling people that their ways of doing things is wrong and does not fit into our theory of state, the concept of polycentric governance attempts to evolve a theory of state that is based on the realities on the ground. For the last 20 years, I have been a part of a wonderful policy research center at Indiana University called the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis and it has done a lot of good work in the study of institutions, including polycentric institutional arrangements of governance.

Most post-conflict reconstruction programs are formulated on the basis of needs assessment, which almost by definition highlights all the things that are lacking. To implement your ideas of polycentricity, it seems as if the entire process should be turned on its head. The analysis should start from the opposite starting point and focus on the things, which are there already – not on what is missing and needed?

I think this is very important. In the case of Liberia where we have had over 15 years of war and before that some other 10-15 years of intermittent violence, one cannot ignore the mechanisms and institutions that helped people survive. True, lots of people died. We do not even know how many, but estimates range from 150.000 to 250.000. For a population of three million, that is a whole lot of people. But how did the others survive? The World Food Program was not able to reach everywhere and give everybody food throughout the entire period. Clearly ordinary people had some capabilities of their own, even if they were residual. Villages were plundered; young boys went in and burned down villages, killing a lot of people, but some people as a whole community survived. What did they do? My idea basically is that we need to understand these internal capabilities. Our starting point should be the local capacities, so when donors and governments go in and do their needs assessment, they should also do a capabilities assessment. They need to

find out what people are bringing to the table. Only then can we sit with them and begin a process of discussion and enlightenment on both sides.

Local knowledge and local capabilities should be the foundation for peacebuilding and reconstruction. This is where the process should begin. Surely, this is not always what national governments have been doing. And although development partners often speak of participation and local ownership, I do not think this is where they have been going either. I would like to see much more local consultation. That is what governance is about anyway: How people can be engaged in fashioning institutions for themselves. I dealt with this in *Beyond Plunder*, and in the Governance Reform Commission where I am working now, we try to apply this approach in practice. If we in the Commission are to formulate sustainable reform measures, we need to understand what conceptions of governance people have. Many people were surprised that a female president could be elected in Liberia, but people familiar with the local cultures and indigenous political systems know that it is not unusual to have a woman chief. It has been part of the traditional system in all of central Liberia. In South-eastern Liberia it is also the tradition that men must gain the approval of the women before they can go to war. It is the women who have the final say in the declaration of war, and they are the prime movers when it is time for negotiating the peace. So when Ellen Sirleaf takes a white chicken and releases it, it has clear meaning to local people: The woman chief has said that now there is peace. This is a cultural narrative with a political, a governance, and a conflict resolution message. We miss such symbolisms and more if we ignore local knowledge and do not engage people actively in the shaping of the institutions of governance.

Most people in Liberia are living in dire conditions of poverty. People do not have access to even the most basic services and their livelihoods are extremely frail. How can we expect them to engage in lengthy discussion and dialogue on governance issues? Is this not an academic debate that is quite detached from what people see as their immediate needs in a situation where they may be just barely surviving?

Well, I don't see it that way. What I suggest is an integrated approach where the content of the peacebuilding dialogue is about policy and practices on health care, education and all of the other developmental challenges which we want the system of governance to address. Peacebuilding must be woven into reconstruction and development initiatives and not organized as a separate set of activities. The more the reconstruction program is about building bridges and undertaking community development and other development activities together, the more it advances a peacebuilding strategy. That is why I have difficulty in understanding some of the post-conflict literature that claims that we need to move from peacebuilding to state-building or vice versa. The context demands constant peacebuilding – building bridges of confidence and solidarity and

linking people and communities. State-building is part of this process as it has to do with the power-relations that you want to establish among people. In Liberia we need to discuss these structures and together find a way to establish institutions that we all have confidence in so we can live together in peace. This has direct bearing on people's everyday life and people must be involved if the results are to be sustained.

The Liberian state that we should be talking about now cannot be the type of state we had before. We would do well to think about the kind of state that empowers local people. A state that encourages the bridging of people across cultural and social divides. This is not impossible. Sometimes we may need to create new categories, but we need not create categories that divide people and we need not create categories that impose a kind of order that detracts from people's opportunities to participate in their governance systems and live a full life. I think it is possible.

DONORS AND GOVERNANCE: THE DARK SIDE OF THE GEMAP

Now let us return to the macro-level and the way governance concerns are being addressed by Liberia's international partners. Since 2005, Liberia has been home to an innovative partnership known as THE GEMAP. The aim is to combat corruption and improve governance through international oversight mechanisms⁶. The UN Security Council has welcomed the initiative and has asked the Secretary General to report on the implementation. Critics of the GEMAP, however, have claimed that the arrangement is a form of quasi-trusteeship that endangers Liberian sovereignty.

I was one of the critics and I still remain highly critical – although I must admit that it has also brought something positive. What the GEMAP has done positively, is that it has forced us to think about and put in place systems of accountability. The emphasis on accountability is very important. We must structure a system of accountability along with an operational system that

⁶ The GEMAP (Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program) targets revenue collection, expenditure controls and government procurement and concession practices. Its key features are the provision of international experts with co-signing authority and management contracts and authoritative oversight mechanisms. The GEMAP was signed between the National Transitional Government of Liberia and the International Contact Group for Liberia (lead by the World Bank and USA) on 9 September 2005. Ten days later, the UN Security Council welcomed the GEMAP in resolution 1626. An Economic Governance Steering Committee (EGSC) chaired by the Head of State of Liberia oversees the implementation of GEMAP. The US Ambassador to Liberia is deputy-chair of EGSC. The official GEMAP website is <http://www.gemapliberia.org/>

thinks about both efficient management and efficient maintenance. These are the types of things we get from the GEMAP.

Generally speaking, however, the GEMAP is the result of widespread mistrust and as such a negative mechanism. It was established to provide the international community with a firm control mechanism. When analyzing the origins of the GEMAP, one should, however, also explore how the international community itself has contributed to creating a situation where something as radical as the GEMAP was invented.

In 2003, the international community brokered the peace agreement and installed a transitional governance arrangement for a two-year period. From the outset, elections were scheduled to be held in 2005. Many people, including myself, argued that some of the major issues related to peacebuilding, governance and accountability should be addressed before going to elections, but the international community was quite firm in sticking to their timetable. They claimed that public dialogue and consultation would be a waste of time and that Liberia did not have any more time to waste. We therefore went on with a formula that assumed that any kind of government could carry out any kind of reform-agenda. It was as if the international community ignored the fact that the transitional governance arrangement it had installed was made up largely of warlords who just a few days ago were plundering the resources of the country. These were the people they expected to be talking seriously about national development. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see that this was not going to happen.

By the time the GEMAP was conceived, the transitional government was disintegrating, the transitional legislative assembly was in total shambles, and corruption was so massive and extensive that the situation was not only one of paralysis, but of decay. The donors therefore went back to their drawing boards to figure out how to rescue the situation, and they came up with the GEMAP. The GEMAP was formulated to deal with a bunch of rogues and incompetents. Despite the elections and the change of government, the assumptions underpinning it are still the same: This country is run by a group of incompetent people, who are in office to steal – therefore, the need for strong international control to protect the poor, serve the general interests of the Liberian people and to stop the Liberian leaders from stealing.

I strongly resent that assumption and the attitude that goes with it! How can you have a genuine partnership with a mindset like that? When I began my work in the Governance Reform Commission, the first thing I was advised to do was to meet with all the donors and let them know how I would account for their money. I said: “I need to hold a meeting with the donors to tell them what I want to do; not to account for their money. I only want their money when I need

their money.” The international community, however, seems to assume that a local person would not know what to do and that he or she is in office only to steal. So somebody sends me a brief about the EU approach to fighting corruption in Liberia. I said “I didn’t ask for the EU’s approach to fighting corruption in Liberia. What I want to do first is to consult with the Liberian people on how they see the problem of corruption, and what they are proposing.” Boy, you never saw the level of surprise and in some ways impatience and discomfort. I would even say in some cases anger: How dare I question a proposal that comes along with all this money? But I don’t want the money to do a proposal that I know will not work

Another downside beyond the mindset of dealing with incompetents and rogues is that the GEMAP does not include a capacity building program. There seems to be no exit-strategy. The program is agreed for three years and we are now half-way through the program. I am sure that by the end of this year, we are going to be talking about how to renew the GEMAP for another three years.

On the positive side, this means we will become stronger in how to entrench management systems and we will have more time to do that and to do that well. On the negative side, this means that we will never know how Liberians will perform if they were left to their own devices to run good management systems. Whatever indicators of growth we will have after six years of GEMAP, they will not have been by the hands of Liberians. How do we know that with the removal of the GEMAP we will be able to move on with this system ourselves? I worry about that because we want Mrs. Sirleaf to lead us in building a sustainable system, not one that gives her a lot of credit for doing great things but disintegrates when she leaves.

The GEMAP and related external intervention at this time also give us a false sense of being in control of the resources that are being used to develop the country at this time. We have a false sense that our budget process is what ultimately matters with respect to the mobilization and distribution of resources, and this is not true. The legislature is currently debating the budget. But a good deal of the money that is going into growth and development is not part of the budget. This makes the debate less substantial and critical than it would be if it was about the full pot of money available. I am sure that the quality of the debate would improve significantly if those actors that are now arguing amongst themselves were in fact responsible for decisions that would make a difference in all aspects of public finance. As it is now there is nothing that the legislators are going to say that will make a difference in for example infrastructural development. How – and when – are we going to know whether we can make a difference in our own decision making process? That’s my point and my concern.

Having everything figured within the national budget would also mean that everything in one way or the other would have to go through the central government. This, however, runs against the idea a polycentric system of democratic governance. How can we deal with this paradox?

It is precisely for this reason that I was proposing an extended interim period of perhaps four to six years where we could do a constitution reform, have some kind of truth and reconciliation process and put in place appropriate accounting systems and only then go to elections. What we have now is a situation that was done differently and therefore requires, maybe, a way of working backwards. Maybe what we can do is to use peacebuilding strategies to bring these discussions into the public arena. Not necessarily for total control. Local people cannot control how much money tax-payers from other countries give, but what they can do is to have some voice in determining how the monies are spent and what role they themselves can play in ensuring opportunities for sustainable development.

I would like to see a format in which World Bank people, local people, government folks – central government folks – would be talking jointly about concrete activities. But instead we have this rigid international divide where the World Bank comes in and must deal only with the cockpit: the minister of planning, the minister of works, the minister of finance, etc. The people in the parliament are left out completely. Local people are left to stand by as beneficiaries whose only task is to be grateful for what is done for them.

Not surprisingly, people have begun to act strategically. They know that at a certain time a certain agency is going to bring in certain resources. I see civil society organizations beginning to act strategically: What do the donors want and how can we shape our program to get the resources from them? This to me is unhealthy because it distracts attention from peoples' own resources and initiatives. Even if all funding is from foreign sources, you need as an organization to think about how you can increase you own contribution and begin carrying your weight over time.

These are issues that we need to discuss. People need to get involved and carry some of the weight. A substantial amount of the responsibilities need to be theirs. Some may argue that it is too soon to require so much from Liberians; that their post-conflict needs are too urgent and their capacity too limited. But when do you begin to think about and talk about local ownership? I am not hearing that message strongly. In fact, I don't see in the international approach a good understanding of local ownership. I have read some of the reports and when they talk about local ownership, they talk about the number of meetings they have held with local people, but they don't say anything about the content of those meetings. It is not good enough to meet with

people. What matters is what you talk about and who decides the working plans, the divisions of responsibilities, and so forth; this is what creates local accountability and ownership.

There is, in some cases, a need not for more aid, but for aid given in different proportions over a period of time. Instead of going in with a Big Bang for two years and then leave, the international community with government might engage in honest discussion with local people: "We have got this amount of money and we want to do something with you over five years. We hope you can sustain it thereafter." That would put emphasis right from the start on what the local level brings to the table. In order for such an approach to work, donors need also to look at themselves. They must examine their own expectations and requirements and possibly change the way they report back to their own boards on accomplishments and disbursements.

This points back to the question of accountability albeit in a different manner. The donor agencies and the international community are primarily accountable to tax-payers and voters in the Western countries, who provide the finances. There is no accountability system that links the donor community to the people who have to live with the consequences of their aid and advice.

This is an important observation. It seems to me that it would make a big difference if Western tax-payers, or their representatives, knew how local people feel and coped in situations such as the one we have in Liberia. To be honest, I think it would take a lot of education to get the international community to pay genuine attention to everyday life in Africa. Development agencies often seem as if they just want to get on with their good work and move on to other things. The question also relates to the way international agencies such as the United Nations and the World Bank come with prescriptions. For the time being the Bank is certain that tertiary education is a great thing and the key to human resource development. But 20 years ago they were telling us that primary education was the only way to go. Nobody takes responsibility for the shifting advice agencies provide, and the ways in which bad advice may have contributed to slowing down or perhaps reversing development.

INTERNATIONAL ORDER

So far we have talked primarily about the relationship between state and society and the establishment of a new national order after state collapse. As also evident from our discussion, these issues cannot be understood without also looking at the role of development agencies and the wider international community. In the policy debate on failed states and post-conflict reconstruction, it is sometimes being suggested

*to establish some form of international trusteeship or protectorate for places like Liberia. Some observers even claim that this is in fact what is happening – albeit informally.*⁷

If we ultimately want to achieve a sense of restoring order, developing the economy and enhancing the security and the well-being of the people, there is a role for everybody: for the international, national, regional, and local levels. My concern is that we integrate these levels in a way that ensures that the system on the ground is stable and can stand on its own. It does not help us to pump in resources now, create high expectation and then pull out. Neither, however, does it help us to keep on pumping in large amounts of resources and stay endlessly and create a condition of dependency in local communities. There must be some kind of balance. Compared to those who argue for some form of international trusteeship, I place much more emphasis on the local and intermediate levels as the foundations of governance. These are the levels where people can participate most meaningfully in setting directions for their own lives and the lives of their community.

There are some things for which Liberia needs international assistance. Security provision for example. There is no way that the Liberians could have stabilized their country all by themselves. I think it is still important to have an international military presence in Liberia that can help create an environment for peace. Given the dispersal of human resources and the poor state of the material resources, it was extremely important for the international community to help jump-start the Liberian economy. Equally, the involvement of international efforts in getting the infrastructure going is very important. The main questions that we need to answer, however, are: what should be the nature of international involvement and what role should other actors have? What should be local peoples' responsibilities? What should be the government's responsibilities? What is the role of elected leaders and what role should other authorities have? Such questions and the answers to them are not really being articulated at this point. I do not see local people engaged in decision making as to where the schools should be, what kind of seeds they need, whether they want to organize co-ops and that sort of thing. It is either the Ministry of Agriculture coming to them and saying: "We've got this amount of money. It has come from this source and we are here to help you do farming" or the United Nations, USAID or some international NGO coming in and saying: "This is what we want to be done here". What that will do to people is to kill their initiatives. Already there are places where people are sitting down, waiting, and only wanting to know when the next consignment of this or that is coming. Is this what we want to perpetuate?

⁷ For a discussion of the pros and cons of trusteeship, see e.g. Krasner, 2004, and Chandler, 2006.

Many problems of development and conflict are often treated as national problems. But often they are directly related to processes at the international level. Statehood and independence came to Africa during the Cold War and immediately the new leaders – instead of working things out at home – had to join one camp or the other. Now we have a different kind of global arrangement. Instead of beginning to think about installing an international empire and setting up trusteeships, let us see how local people and their national leaderships can work things out and let us see how we can do this kind of new order from the bottom to the top. Clearly, there are things where we need global and international cooperation: Environment and trade for instance, including fighting illegal trade, are major issues with strong externalities. They cannot be dealt with by each state and community on its own. Finding solutions on such issues require some form of international regime. What I would like to see, however, is that we consider what kind of order we need at the top in order to provide local people and national leaders with an opportunity to organize themselves and gain some sovereignty. I am not wedded to a sense of strong nationalism, but I do think that the international political order should allow local people and communities the opportunity for self-determination and self-actualization. This is crucial for democratic governance. If we start from these values, then we can work our way up to the top rather than the other way around.

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Annex I: Liberia Basic Facts and Timeline

Basic Facts

Population size	3.6 million	Population living on less than 1 USD/day	76.2%
Geographic Area	111,370 km sq	Unemployment rate	80%
GDP per capita	163 USD	Life expectancy at birth, years	47.7
External debt	3.7 billion USD	Illiteracy rate	70%

Timeline

- 1847** Constitution modelled on that of the US is drawn up and Liberia becomes independent.
- 1926** Firestone Tyre and Rubber Company opens rubber plantation on land granted by government. Rubber production becomes backbone of economy.
- 1980** Master Sergeant Samuel Doe stages military coup. President Tolbert and 13 of his aides are publicly executed. A People's Redemption Council headed by Doe suspends constitution and assumes full powers.
- 1984** Doe's regime allows return of political parties following pressure from the United States and other creditors.
- 1985** Doe wins presidential election.
- 1989** National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor begins an uprising against the government.
- 1990** Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sends peacekeeping force. Doe is executed by a splinter group of the NPFL. ECOWAS sets up an Interim Government of National Unity, lead by Dr. Amos Sawyer.
- 1994** Warring factions agree a timetable for disarmament and the setting up of a joint Council of State.
- 1995** Peace agreement signed.
- 1996** Factional fighting resumes and spreads to Monrovia.
- 1997** Presidential and legislative elections held. Charles Taylor wins a landslide and his National Patriotic Party wins a majority in the National Assembly.
- 1999** Rebel forces thought to have come from Guinea attack town of Voinjama. Fighting displaces more than 25,000 people.

- 2000** Liberian forces launch “massive offensive” against rebels in the north. Liberia accuses Guinean troops of shelling border villages.
- 2002** More than 50,000 Liberians and Sierra Leonean refugees flee fighting. In February Taylor declares a state of emergency.
- 2003 March** Rebels advance to within 10km of Monrovia.
- 2003 June** Talks in Ghana aimed at ending rebellion overshadowed by indictment accusing President Taylor of war crimes over his alleged backing of rebels in Sierra Leone.
- 2003 July** Fighting intensifies; rebels battle for control of Monrovia. Several hundred people are killed. ECOWAS agrees to provide peacekeepers.
- 2003 August** ECOWAS peacekeepers arrive. Charles Taylor leaves Liberia after handing power to his deputy Moses Blah. Interim government and rebels sign peace accord in Ghana. Gyude Bryant chosen to head National Transitional Government of Liberia.
- 2003 September** UN launches major peacekeeping mission, deploying thousands of troops.
- 2004 October** Riots in Monrovia leave 16 people dead; the UN says former combatants were behind the violence.
- 2005 September** National Transitional Government of Liberia agrees that the international community should supervise its finances in an effort to counter corruption (GEMAP).
- 2005 November** Ellen Johnson Sirleaf becomes the first woman to be elected as an African head of state. She takes office the following January.
- 2006 February** Truth and Reconciliation Commission is set up to investigate human rights abuses between 1979 and 2003.
- 2006 April** Former president Charles Taylor appears before a UN-backed court in Sierra Leone on charges of crimes against humanity. In June the Netherlands-based International Criminal Court agrees to host his trial.
- 2006 June** UN Security Council eases a ban on weapons sales so Liberia can arm newly trained security forces. An embargo on Liberian timber exports is lifted shortly afterwards.
- 2006 July** President Johnson Sirleaf switches on generator-powered street lights in the capital, which has been without electricity for 15 years.
- 2007 April** UN Security Council votes to lift its ban on Liberian diamond exports. The ban was imposed in 2001 to stem the flow of “blood diamonds”, which helped to fund the civil war.
- 2007 June** Start of Charles Taylor’s war crimes trial in The Hague, where he stands accused of instigating atrocities in Sierra Leone.

Annex 2: Curriculum Vitae, Dr. Amos Sawyer

Education

Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D), Political Science, June 1973
Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA
Masters of Arts (MA) Political Science, June 1970
University of Liberia, Monrovia, Liberia
Bachelor of Arts (BA), History & Government, December 1966

Present Academic Positions

Since July 2005 Co-Director
Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis
Indiana University

Since June 2002 Coordinator
Consortium for Self-Governance in Africa (CSGA)

Since 2001 Research Scholar
Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis
Indiana University

Past Academic Positions

2002-2005 Associate Director
Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis
Indiana University

1986-1988 Research Scientist
Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis
Indiana University

1981-1984 Dean, College of Social Science and Humanities
University of Liberia

1978-1981 Associate Professor and Chair
Department of Political Science
University of Liberia

1973-1977 Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Liberia

1971-1973 Instructor, Social Science (adjunct)
City College of Chicago (Olive-Harvey Campus)

Other Positions

- Since 2006 Chairman, Governance Reform Commission, Liberia
- Since 1996 Chairman, Board of Directors
Center for Democratic Empowerment (CEDE)
Monrovia, Liberia
- 1998-2000 Convener & Chair
Eminent Persons Group in Advocacy for Liberian Children
(organized in collaboration with UNICEF)
- 1994-1996 Executive Director
Center for Democratic Empowerment (CEDE)
Monrovia, Liberia
- 1990-1994 President, Interim Government of Liberia
- 1988-1990 Executive Director
Association for Constitutional Democracy in Liberia (ACDL)
- 1984-1986 Director, Social Research and Consultancy Service (SORECS)
Monrovia, Liberia
- 1981-1983 Chairman, National Constitution Commission of Liberia

Publications (peer reviewed)

- “Social Capital, Survival Strategies and their Potential for Post-Conflict Governance in Liberia.”
In Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis, Ravi Kanbur and Elinor Ostrom (eds.) *Unlocking Human Potential: Formality and Informality in Developing Countries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006)
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