

With the departure of Charles Taylor, the arrival of some peacekeepers, the signing of a new peace agreement and the selection, at the Accra conference, of the leadership of a new transitional government, there should be immediate improvement in the security environment in Liberia. Lurd and Model should have no reason to continue fighting and Interim President Moses Blah should be assisted in bringing government fighters under control until the peacekeeping forces reach full strength and disarmament gets underway. Despite these positive developments, this is still a delicate period for Liberia as jockeying continues for positions in government and young fighters remain uncertain about their future.

The sooner the peacekeeping forces are brought up to full strength, the better the chances of consolidating the ceasefire and implementing the peace agreement negotiated in Accra. The leaders of LURD and MODEL and the Blah government, all of whom will be in the transitional government are urged to demonstrate their commitment to the peace process by observing the ceasefire unreservedly, allowing humanitarian assistance to be moved throughout the country and preparing their fighters to disarm. It is very important that all Liberian leaders and the international community continue to press the belligerent parties to accomplish these immediate goals. This is a critical challenge. Another critical challenge is organizing an appropriate post-conflict peacebuilding process for Liberia-the subject of this brief memo. Peacebuilding and security are interlocked and mutually reinforcing. While efforts are underway to ensure a secure environment through effective peacekeeping, it is important to begin the process of organizing an appropriate approach to peacebuilding in Liberia. It must be recalled that peacebuilding initiatives have been going on in Liberia since the elections of 1997. However, Liberia now has a good chance of establishing an effective peacebuilding process that can benefit from the lessons learned from previous initiatives. The purpose of this memo is to identify some critical foundational challenges that confront peacebuilding initiatives in Liberia and to raise issues that are essential to constituting an appropriate approach to peacebuilding in Liberia that can yield sustainable outcomes.

Achieving Sustainable Outcomes

Peacebuilding practitioners the world over have emphasized that peacebuilding projects should strive to achieve sustainable outcomes. There can be little long-term impact if peacebuilding processes cannot survive when external funding dries up or when their outcomes cannot be sustained. For example, an approach to community-level reconciliation that ignores local mechanisms of conflict resolution or leaves them weak and in a state of disrepair while relying upon external arbiters or mediators may be effective in the short run and win a good name for the external actors but deprives that community of the capacity to manage conflicts on its own over time. It should be appreciated that if peacebuilding initiatives are to produce sustainable outcomes, they must be grounded in local realities, seek to build local capacity and enhance the empowerment of local communities. There is no long-term alternative to developing and strengthening local entrepreneurial skills in problem solving if dependency and breakdowns are to be avoided. Only in this way can peacebuilding sustain peace and promote development.

Foundational Challenges

The Need to Strengthen a Sense of Identity and Shared Community

In view of the magnitude of Liberia's violent conflict, all peacebuilding challenges are important and should be treated seriously. Some, however, lie at the foundations of Liberian society and constitute the base upon which other challenges and dilemmas can be more appropriately addressed if Liberia is to become viable as a country. These fundamental peacebuilding challenges involve issues having to do with identity, a sense of shared community and perceptions of exclusion and marginalization. Many of these are historical and structural challenges. The 14 year-old violent conflict that has ravaged Liberia was ignited in a society made combustible by years of governance failure, emanating not simply from shortcomings of leaders but mainly from inappropriate institutions. Over the years, governance reforms did not keep pace with or go far enough to meet Liberia's changing circumstances. For example, some of Liberia's national symbols and governance institutions constructed in the 19th century have not been able to meet growing demands for inclusion and equitable distribution. Liberia's national motto, its sense of historical mission and the interpretation of its history as transmitted to students through textbooks do not always convey a sense of shared identity and shared community. These are not simply challenges that affect the elite, they penetrate the core of Liberian society, affecting people's perception of themselves, of their standing in their society, and their predisposition to undertake collective action across ethnic and other communities, among other things. These issues go to the heart of what it means to be a citizen of Liberia.

Fundamental peacebuilding challenges like these need to be addressed on a long-term basis and at all levels of governance—from the level of local communities to the national level. However, because they impact almost every other endeavor in peacebuilding, the process of addressing them must begin immediately. Only Liberians can address these challenges and this is the most opportune time to begin—when self-examination and reconciliation are sorely needed. External actors can assist but only Liberians can undertake the diagnostic assessment. The Liberian transitional government due to take over in October should be encouraged and assisted in establishing a process that will address these challenges. Reconciliation and healing cannot be achieved through slogans of "let by-gones be by-gones." Liberians must find out where and how they went wrong if they are to get on a course to durable peace. Peacebuilding in other areas such as in health care delivery or natural resource use also need to begin with appropriate diagnostic assessments and with the need to foster a sense of shared identity and community in mind.

The Need for Constitutional Reform

A sense of national identity and shared community can only be sustained through appropriate institutions, especially those that offer opportunities for broad-based participation in decision-making. Despite efforts to introduce constitutional reforms in the 1980s, Liberia remains an over-centralized state with powers so highly concentrated in the hands of the president that it is impossible to ensure legislative and judicial independence without a good-natured and predisposed president. There are no autonomous institutions of local governance such as county

or district councils. After passage of the national budget into law, the legislature has no substantive role in decision-making concerning patterns of allotment and expenditure.

These decisions are wholly the preserve of the president. Even the responsibility to audit government's expenditure and performance falls to the president. Peacebuilding initiatives that seek to reform Liberia's electoral system may facilitate the holding of one cycle of credible and participatory elections but would not address the foundational governance challenges that result from autocratic government and flawed institutions. Constitutional reforms need to be undertaken during the transitional period so that, among other changes, county and other councils of local governance can be elected and other participatory institutions established. Such reform should be seen as a medium-term peacebuilding initiative of two to three years. What is needed is a broad-based participatory constitutional reform process characterized by enlightened discourse that should take place in the open public realm.

It will be a mistake to hold elections without completing a significant portion of the reform process, especially regarding devolution of constitutional authority to local government jurisdictions. Not many newly elected presidents would want to initiate or support these reforms after having tasted the excessive powers of the Liberian presidency. The Accra peace agreement should have mandated the transitional government to hold a national conference with a view to setting in motion a process of governance reform that should address these foundational challenges. The transitional government would do well to hold such conference and the international community must be prepared to assist. However, it should be the duty of suitable Liberian specialists to drive the process of governance reform in Liberia.

An Appropriate Approach to Peacebuilding in Liberia

Promoting Empowerment and Self-Reliance through Capacity Building

As already stated, fourteen years of continuous violent conflicts have taken a huge toll on lives and property in Liberia; as a result, the country's needs are enormous and wide-ranging. Humanitarian relief such as food, medicines, and tentative shelter are urgently needed and should be made available by whatever means. However, it is important for Liberia's future that every peacebuilding initiative be organized with the goal of obtaining sustainable results. This requires an appropriate peacebuilding approach. The best way to ensure sustainability is to promote empowerment of local people through the building of human and community capacity. Therefore, capacity building should be the objective of all peacebuilding initiatives. Human and community capacity building cannot be done without the involvement of local people right from the start of any peacebuilding initiative, the use of local knowledge, building upon appropriate local institutions and other local resources and promoting an orientation of self-reliance. These should constitute essential elements of the methodology of peacebuilding that should be reflected in the conceptualization, design and implementation of all peacebuilding projects and programs.

Building Bridges and Linkages

Promoting self-reliance within the context of local communities while simultaneously promoting a sense of shared identity across communities can prove to be difficult or even contradictory if

peacebuilding initiatives are not properly conceived and implemented. To achieve this balance, peacebuilding initiatives should aim to identify and strengthen local social capital that will be capable of creating bridges and linkages across communities-be they ethnic, religious or regional communities. Therefore, peacebuilding practitioners must, right from the start, strive to promote individual and community empowerment on the one hand and the building of cooperative relationships across communities on the other hand-all at the same time. This also needs to be seen as a critical element of the methodology of peacebuilding appropriate for Liberia at this time.

Assessing Capabilities

The assessment of needs is a standard activity typical of peacebuilding projects. What is often neglected but also crucial is an assessment of capabilities. Capability assessments are an indispensable tool for peacebuilding that seeks to promote sustainable outcomes rooted in local foundations. The logical first step in such peacebuilding is not only to find out what the people need but also to find out the potentials of the individuals and institutions of the society: What are the value orientations and skills of local people? What is the state of local institutions and what principles of organization underpin these institutions? What are the holdings or assets of local communities and how can these contribute to self-sustained community development? A major initiative designed to assess the capabilities available in Liberian society should, of itself, be considered an indispensable initial peacebuilding project. Liberian professionals and peacebuilding practitioners are most suited to lead the implementation of this project; other Liberianists can be most helpful.

Thus, a peacebuilding approach that seeks to empower Liberians by building on existing capabilities and by strengthening within Liberians an action-orientation of self-reliance and a willingness to cooperate across communities and sub-identities seems most appropriate for Liberia at this time.

In Summary

As Liberians and the international community gear up to launch peacebuilding initiatives, the most important contribution the international community can make to peacebuilding in Liberia is to urge and assist Liberians to engage each other in constructive, problem-solving ways, to use their human and material resources to conceive of, design and implement peacebuilding programs to address the foundational challenges and other challenges of their society in a manner that produces desirable and sustainable outcomes. There is a considerable pool of Liberian talents and skills available. No degree of external support can help Liberia in the long run if Liberians are not the driving force in peacebuilding but are simply the beneficiaries of peacebuilding programs driven by others. And no peacebuilding approach can yield sustainable outcomes if it does not seek to empower Liberians by strengthening their individual and collective capacity to do things for themselves, to rely first on their own resources and then seek assistance from others. This is how Liberians can build and sustain peace and development in their country. These challenges fall to the transitional government and to all Liberians.