HPG Background Paper

Humanitarian aid in post-war Sierra Leone: the politics of moral economy

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Abstract

This study examines some of the strategies aid agencies employ to provide effective delivery of inputs in the complex political environment of post-war Sierra Leone. These are considered in the context of project design, monitoring and oversight, community liaison and relationships between international agencies and local implementing partners. Some of these strategies, while representing genuine attempts to comply with international professional and moral standards, are incompatible with current conditions on the ground. Some agencies are aware of this problem, and the study also considers how they are seeking to improve dialogue with a highly politicised yet vulnerable post-war population. Political economy analysis may not offer any singular solution for improving the performance of aid agencies in situations of chronic political instability, but it does draw attention to the fact that agencies cannot avoid influencing politics, and that the nature of that influence has a critical effect on the performance of programmes. Improving the design and implementation of projects requires greater sensitivity to the moral and ethical dilemmas raised by such political engagement. There is no substitute for information about the local social and cultural environment; to that end, good liaison between project designers and local field staff and implementing partners is essential.

Acronyms

ADB	African Development Bank
AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
APC	All Peoples' Congress
CAP	Community Action for Progress
CBO	community-based organisation
CDF	Civil Defence Force
CEO	Chief Education Officer
CRRP	Community Reintegration and Rehabilitation Project
DDR	disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
DFID	UK Department for International Development
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group
ERT	Emergency Response Team
ESF	Emergency School Feeding
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organisation
FMPU	Financial Management and Procurement Unit
GDP	gross domestic product
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries
IDA	International Development Association
IDP	internally displaced person
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MCCC	Micro-Credit Chiefdom Committee
MDTF	Multi-Donor Trust Fund
NaCSA	National Commission for Social Action
NARICOM	National Relief Committee of Sierra Leone
NCDDR	National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
NCRRR	National Commission for Reconstruction, Resettlement and Rehabilitation
NPRC	National Provisional Ruling Council
NRC	National Recovery Committee
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PIU	Project Implementation Unit
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SAPA	Social Action and Poverty Alleviation
SLPP	Sierra Leone Peoples' Party
TSA	Transitional Safety Net Allowance
UNAMSIL	UN Mission to Sierra Leone
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
USAID	US Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme

1. Introduction

On 18 January 2002, at a ceremony accompanying the destruction of a large arms cache near Lungi airport, President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah announced to the nation that Sierra Leone's decade-long conflict had come to an end. The previous week, the disarmament and demobilisation of ex-combatants in all districts was reported complete. These developments were the first fruits of a massive international aid effort to achieve peace and stability in Sierra Leone following the successful conclusion of the 'Abuja II' ceasefire negotiations in May 2001. Almost 75,000 people registered as ex-combatants at disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) camps from 1998 onwards, 60% of whom were processed between May 2001 and January 2002. This eight-month period also saw the tentative re-establishment of civilian authorities in former rebel-controlled areas, the commencement of infrastructure rebuilding programmes in these same areas, and renewed efforts to resettle an estimated (2001) 1.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs), and 450,000 refugees in Guinea and Liberia. In May 2002, presidential and parliamentary elections saw the return of Kabbah's Sierra Leone Peoples' Party (SLPP) with a greatly increased mandate.

Immense problems remain, with widespread destruction of private housing and infrastructure and the almost complete disappearance of state services and local government structures from rural areas. The war devastated a country already impoverished and in deep social crisis. According to recent estimates, per capita gross domestic product (GDP) in Sierra Leone stands at $510, and average life expectancy at birth is 37 years. Nearly 70% of the national labour force is engaged in primary food production, and the adult literacy rate is 31% (45.4% for men, 18.2% for women). The country has substantial natural resources, especially diamonds, but greed and political calculation have robbed the nation of much of this wealth. Successive governing cliques in post-colonial Sierra Leone converted the most productive sectors of the economy (diamonds and foreign exchange) into patrimonial resources. Mining licences were distributed as political favours and foreign exchange generated from diamond mining funded imports of cheap rice to feed mining gangs and other political clients. These strategies robbed the domestic agricultural sector of much-needed commercial stimuli, and in turn helped to entrench patronage as a prerequisite for entry into state education and employment (Luke and Riley, 1989; Reno, 1995; Zack-Williams, 1995; Richards, 1996).

This system began to unravel in the late 1980s as revenues dried up, services contracted and the infrastructure collapsed. Matters came to a head in March 1991, with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) insurgency. This Libyan-backed movement, which had recruited a fighting force among Sierra Leonean exiles and dissidents caught up in the Liberian civil war, entered Sierra Leone from Liberian territory. The insurgents pledged to overthrow the discredited All Peoples' Congress (APC) government, restore multiparty democracy and redistribute wealth to ordinary citizens. However, repeated attacks on civilians appear to have alienated the public from the very beginning. Unable to sustain a conventional war, the movement retreated to forest camps. New personnel were acquired by means of abduction. Children and young people, preferably with some schooling, were taken for political indoctrination and combat training. Other captives – mainly illiterate adults – were used as slave labour. The RUF acquired a reputation for human rights abuse, including summary execution, rape and mutilation. Some of these acts were preceded by psychological torture.

Despite the manifest failure of its original political project, the RUF benefited from disarray among pro-government forces. The moribund APC regime soon lost control over the army. Neither the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), which seized power in a coup in April 1992, nor the democratically elected SLPP coalition, which replaced it in 1996, managed to win this control back. The old Sierra Leone army was officially disbanded in 1998 after seven years of looting, coup plotting (twice successful) and collusion with the RUF. Some units lived on as private militias. In the meantime, several proxy security solutions were tried. These included Executive Outcomes (a South African-based security firm with mining interests), the *kamajoisia* (an ethnically-aligned counter-insurgency militia identifying with traditional hunters), and the Nigerian army (operating under the banner of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG)). None succeeded decisively against the RUF, and in some instances only added to the looting and terror suffered by civilians.

Several factors combined to bring the conflict to a close – for the time being at least. Many belligerents were combat-weary, the Sierra Leone military began to make effective use of Ukrainian-manned helicopter gunships, and the RUF's operational capability was diminished by aggressive Guinean counter-insurgency operations in the north and west and by the recurrence of conflict in Liberia. But perhaps the clinching factor was increasingly overt international intervention. This change was signalled by the replacement of ECOMOG by UN Mission to Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) peacekeeping forces in May 2000 and the arrival shortly afterwards of a small but high-profile British military task force, which helped to secure the capital and international airport.

Even as President Kabbah spoke in January 2002, the government of Sierra Leone remained very much a multilateral affair. UNAMSIL was the chief intelligence and security agency, while the British force provided additional security and training for the new Sierra Leone army. UNAMSIL's civilian wing provided a public information service, monitored political affairs and human rights issues, advised the Sierra Leone government and other international agencies on policing and electoral matters and assisted in the restoration of the civil authorities. In some areas, especially the former RUF strongholds of the north, UNAMSIL served as a proxy administration.[1] Sierra Leone's police force acquired a British Inspector-General, and was placed under the managerial control of a Commonwealth task force largely comprising retired British police officers. The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) employed local and international experts to review Sierra Leone's law and justice system, provide technical

assistance for the rehabilitation of the civil service and local government system, support civil society groups, train broadcasters and journalists and design infrastructure projects to provide employment for ex-combatants. Other UN agencies, a European Union (EU) delegation and a plethora of international and local NGOs provided further coordination and support in the areas of macroeconomics, governance, food security, refugee resettlement and the training and education of ex-combatants.

Sierra Leone does not feature prominently in the geopolitical strategies of rich and powerful nations, yet there is no doubt that aspects of the recent conflict have alarmed Western governments. An allegation surfacing repeatedly in both local and international news media was that forces opposing the RUF – be they the Sierra Leone army, civil defence militias or international peacekeepers – have brokered private deals with the insurgents, allowing one or both parties freedom to loot civilians and mine diamonds. At one point, Western governments openly accused Charles Taylor and Blaise Compaoré, presidents of Liberia and Burkina Faso respectively, of resupplying the RUF and brokering sales of looted diamonds. But any number of shadowy organisations have been implicated in the international trade for looted Sierra Leonean diamonds, including al-Qa'eda. Restoring state authorities and curtailing the looting of diamonds have therefore offered a tangible geopolitical dividend for Western governments.

A further source of international anxiety in relation to Sierra Leone is that neither ideology in general, nor ethnic and religious factionalism in particular, has featured strongly in the conflict. Some commentators have suggested that the conflict represents a breakdown in law and order rather than a civil war – that the social fabric of West Africa as a whole is coming apart as a result of a fatal encounter between globalisation and consumerism on the one hand, and overpopulation, scarcity and environmental degradation on the other (Kaplan, 1994). The more considered view is that years of government neglect of education and other state services have helped to create a large cohort of unemployed and barely literate young people, easily conscripted by both political and criminal organisations (Richards, 1995, 1996; Abdullah, 1997; Kandeh, 1999; OCHA, 2002). Ongoing hostilities in Liberia, and the recent outbreak of a similar pattern of conflict in Ivory Coast, suggests that these problems are regional. Again, restoring stability to Sierra Leone serves the interests of the international community in that it may help to stem any further rupture to the familiar patterns of commerce and diplomacy in West Africa.

Humanitarian concerns have also galvanised the recent international intervention in Sierra Leone. The suffering of children has been particularly extreme, and Sierra Leone has become symbolic of Western governments' desire to score a success in the peace- building arena after the debacles of the former Yugoslavia and Somalia and the ongoing chaos in Congo and Angola. For the UK in particular, Sierra Leone remains a test case for the once-vaunted 'ethical foreign policy' of the New Labour government. In this environment, macro-level political interests and humanitarian concerns have converged. The fundamental challenge of post-war reconstruction in Sierra Leone goes beyond reconciling warring factions and reconstructing war-damaged infrastructure to encompass the rebuilding of state and society in such a manner that future conflict is averted. This not only generates considerable demand for the services of aid agencies, but also places them in an unusually powerful position. Many among the old political elite have opted for exile overseas, and local government functions have yet to return to full operational status. Working under the aegis of UNAMSIL, aid agencies have direct access to a mass of vulnerable people and, so far, freedom to design and implement programmes with little risk of high-level political interference. They are also well placed to influence the macro-level security strategies they are helping to implement.

Yet these opportunities also contain potential dangers. Any distribution of benefits in a war-ravaged country like Sierra Leone must contain elements of both material and moral economy. There are never enough resources to benefit everyone on any single occasion, so an order of priority in access to benefits must be established. But who does this, and who has the final say if there are differences of opinion among stakeholders and beneficiaries? What happens when local government functionaries, long renowned for corruption and nepotism, return and demand that aid agencies cede decision-making authority to them? So far in the post-war reconstruction process, aid agencies have acknowledged the desirability of consulting with all stakeholders and beneficiaries, but tend in practice to retain control over all decision-making in respect of aid distributions. They justify this practice on the grounds of contractual obligation towards donors and a moral obligation to prioritise the needs and defend the rights of the most vulnerable (Humanitarian Accountability Project, 2002). Yet the situation in Sierra Leone is changing rapidly. The Sierra Leone government has welcomed the international peace-building intervention and aid effort, but UNAMSIL is currently undergoing a phased withdrawal (scheduled for completion in 2004) and the government was pressing for greater control over aid programming even before its recent landslide election victory. Furthermore, even after the social upheavals and displacements caused by the war, aid agencies are not working in a political and cultural vacuum. In order to maintain full control over aid programmes, NGOs tend to insist that local employees and implementing partners conform to the same standards of accountability and practice that they themselves espouse. Yet who decides whether such standards are appropriate and/or workable in Sierra Leone?

Political economy analysis can have considerable value in assisting aid agencies to recognise, and develop responses to, these questions and dilemmas. 'Political economy' can mean different things to different people. It is understood in this study as a conceptual approach that focuses on power and its social and cultural dimensions. There has been much talk among academics recently about the relative weighting of 'greed' and 'grievance' as motivating factors in modern civil conflicts (Collier, 2000). But one does not need professional training in anthropology or sociology to realise that power has both physical and moral/political dimensions. After all, even the most grasping of guerrilla leaders must inculcate a common sense of moral cause among their followers if the

latter are going to risk life and limb in battle. That task may be made easier if these followers are already experiencing social exclusion on the grounds of ethnic or religious identity, age, gender or location. This draws attention in turn to the conditions of such alienation – whether, for example, it is the result of a conscious political strategy on the part of local actors, or the result of changing social currents. The point at issue is that, while political economy analysis cannot predict how power will be deployed in any given setting, it can describe how it is established and maintained.

Aid agencies cannot avoid becoming political actors in a post-conflict situation like Sierra Leone, however morally defensible that political agency might be. Political economy analysis draws attention not only to the moral and ethical dilemmas such political agency raises, but also to the ways in which it may impinge upon local political interests. The following discussion examines in further detail how these issues of power, and the moral questions and dilemmas they raise, are emerging in the implementation of current aid projects in Sierra Leone. It also examines the strategies aid agencies are developing to address these issues, and offers suggestions as to how these strategies might be developed further. The discussion begins with a closer look at the organisation and strategies of current aid programmes, followed by an outline of the local political environment.

2. Post-war reconstruction

With the cessation of hostilities, Sierra Leone began to tap into the $640 million of aid pledged by multilateral and bilateral donors just before the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) coup of May 1997. Sierra Leone's chief donors are the EU, the African Development Bank (ADB), DFID, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and UN agencies. The World Bank is also a prominent player. Its Sierra Leone portfolio totalled $190.5m in March 2002, much of this taken up by energy, infrastructure and economic reform projects (World Bank, 2002). The World Bank also chairs an in-country Donors' Group that sits on the National Recovery Committee (NRC), set up by the Sierra Leone government in July 2001 to coordinate reconstruction assistance and the re-establishment of state authority in the provinces. On 19 March 2002, the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced their support for debt relief of $600m for Sierra Leone under the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Later the same month, proposals for significant new lending to Sierra Leone under the World Bank's Transitional Support Strategy were announced. These plans reflect the Bank's pleasure at the 'remarkable progress' Sierra Leone has made on the peace front. But their implementation is also conditional upon the 'continued commitment by Sierra Leone to the financial and economic programs supported by IDA' and the 'completion of a fully participatory poverty reduction strategy paper' (IMF, 2002).

Substantive assistance to Sierra Leone is currently concentrated in five sectors: the rehabilitation and social reintegration of ex-combatants, IDPs and other war victims; food security; water and sanitation; shelter; and the reconstruction of basic government, health, educational and transport infrastructure. Delivery is organised through a labyrinthine network of Sierra Leone government ministries, commissions and committees, multilateral and bilateral funding, coordination and monitoring agencies, international NGOs, local NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs) and private businesses. A large project may tap into several funding streams and bring together many NGOs and private businesses as implementing partners. Some of these agencies may sub-contract to an even wider range of NGOs, CBOs and local contractors.

UN agencies feature prominently in the coordination of this assistance. At present, the leading agencies are the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which provides relief for refugees and IDPs and manages resettlement projects, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). OCHA personnel interviewed in March 2002 reported that all but the remoter districts of northern and eastern Sierra Leone had now passed from 'emergency' to 'recovery' status – a change marked by the return of refugees and IDPs and the resumption of health and education services. OCHA coordinates needs assessments, monitors NGO activity and produces district-level recovery plans. The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) collates socio-economic data and monitors agricultural inputs at the national level,

while the World Food Programme (WFP) serves as one of Sierra Leone's four main food pipeline agencies (the others are CARE, Catholic Relief Services and World Vision International) and coordinates an Emergency School Feeding (ESF) programme for the whole of the country. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) commissions and coordinates primary health care, HIV awareness and school rehabilitation programmes, while the UN Development Programme (UNDP) is waiting in the wings for the start of the 'development' phase (marked by the re-establishment of civil authorities, the police and other state agencies) armed with governance reform and poverty-reduction policy strategies.

All of these UN agencies are represented on the NRC and operate under memoranda of understanding with the relevant government ministries. However, the Sierra Leone parliament has transferred primary responsibility for monitoring and coordinating the post-war reconstruction effort to two frontline agencies answering directly to the president: the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR), and the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA), formerly the National Commission for Reconstruction, Resettlement and Rehabilitation (NCRRR). Substantial donor funds are channelled through both agencies.

2.1 The National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration

The NCDDR was established in 1998 to facilitate the disarmament and demobilisation of all belligerent groups (including the disbanded government army). The first DDR phase was initiated in June 1998 in the wake of the ECOMOG intervention against the AFRC junta. A second phase began after the signing of the Lomé Accord in July 1999. In these initial phases, disarmament (assembly, interviews, weapons collection, verification and registration) and demobilisation (reception and orientation, demobilisation screening interviews, reintegration interviews, pre-discharge orientation and discharge and transportation) were followed by payment of the first instalment ($150) of a Transitional Safety Net Allowance (TSA). Upon discharge, ex-combatants were to be driven to areas of their own choosing, and were expected to register at a local Reintegration Office to benefit from 'targeted counselling, training and employment creation efforts' (World Bank, 1999). After three months they were to receive the second instalment (also $150) of their TSA. Former child soldiers were handed over to UNICEF for transfer to Interim Care Centres run by international NGOs.

Both of these early DDR phases were disrupted by the resumption of hostilities and re-mobilisation. But it was always apparent that many (especially RUF) ex-combatants were either unable or unwilling to rejoin rural communities practising smallholder agriculture and that there was little chance of providing them with meaningful jobs until the post-war recovery process was well under way. Many donors were reluctant to commit funds for vocational training while there was still a chance that ex-combatants would simply take the money and return to the fray (International Crisis

Group, 2001). When DDR 'phase three' was initiated in May 2001, concerted efforts were made to link the post-war reconstruction programme with jobs and vocational training for ex-combatants.

According to a British employee of Crown Agents interviewed in February 2002, NCDDR had received $11m from three funding streams since April 1999: $1.5m from the Sierra Leone government; $7m from the World Bank, out of the $33m Community Reintegration and Rehabilitation Project (CRRP) loan approved in December 1999; and varying amounts from a Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF), as and when donors honoured pledges amounting in total to just over $30m. The MDTF has been a source of contention among donors. Managed on behalf of the World Bank by a Financial Management and Procurement Unit (FMPU) – a joint venture by PricewaterhouseCoopers and the International Procurement Agency – the MDTF has been run on a 'development' model with a standard tender period of 12 weeks. It was apparent to all observers at the start of the third phase of demobilisation that the NCDDR would not cope with the flood of ex-combatants unless it could access funds more quickly. The British government was due to contribute £2.5m to the MDTF, but withheld payment in an attempt to prompt other donors into reviewing MDTF tender procedures. Nothing came of this effort except the exhaustion of MDTF funds at the end of July 2001. As a result of this impasse, the UK government brought in Crown Agents to act as an Emergency Response Team (ERT) to oversee instant disbursement of its £2.5m contribution. This unilateral initiative, so the interviewee claimed, had finally enabled NCDDR to 'fast track' the DDR process and achieve all of its targets.

The apparent success of disarmament and demobilisation has enabled the NCDDR to turn its attention fully to the problems of reintegration. At first sight, DDR 'phase three' has assimilated lessons from earlier phases. Ex-combatants are treated as individuals who are, as the Crown Agents interviewee put it, 'being given an opportunity to compete in the job market on level terms with everyday folk'. Under DDR 'phase three', ex-combatants only receive a single payment (now known as Reinsertion Benefit) of $150. The aim is to give them greater incentive to take up the educational and training opportunities on offer at Reintegration Offices. Many of these opportunities are offered by NGOs engaged in post-war reconstruction, and range from agriculture and construction to vocational training. The NCDDR frequently lends financial assistance to NGOs employing ex-combatants, and also has contracts with more than 120 local schools. Opportunity schemes last from three to nine months depending on the type of training offered, during which time the trainees receive a salary of $30 (60,000 Leones) per month.

The process is controlled by plastic identity cards and a computerised tracking system. An ex-combatant's card is punched on receipt of Reinsertion Benefit and again on registration for an opportunity scheme. NCDDR fieldworkers check that ex-combatants are attending the courses for which they registered. The closing date for registration for reintegration opportunities was 30 June 2002.

According to the Crown Agents interviewee, only 60% of verified ex-combatants actually registered for reintegration opportunities. However, the ERT assumes that many ex-combatants will simply 'self-reintegrate'.

2.2 The National Commission for Social Action

The original mandate of the NCRRR (now known as NaCSA) was to 'be responsible, on behalf of Government, for the overall planning, programming, co-ordination, supervision and monitoring of all humanitarian, reintegration, resettlement and reconstruction work in consequence of the rebel war', and 'to co-ordinate the activities of all Non-Government Organizations engaged in relief, rehabilitation, resettlement and reconstruction work in consequence of the rebel war' (NCRRR, 2001a). The commission's early phases of operation focused on the coordination of emergency relief for IDP and refugee camps and the implementation of a national resettlement strategy. The central element of the latter was the provision of 'start-up' support for registered IDPs and refugees. This included transportation to designated drop-off areas, food rations for two months and the provision of plastic sheeting, kitchen utensils and other essential domestic equipment. IDPs and refugees lacking a registration card were deemed ineligible for such support, but it was expected that, like non-displaced populations still suffering hardship as a result of the war, they would:

benefit from community-based support being provided in the area of resettlement. This could include, for example, entry onto seeds and tools programmes and/or other employment based safety net/income generating schemes, as well as gaining benefits from community-based initiatives supporting the rehabilitation and reconstruction of basic services and the resuscitation of the local economy (NCRRR, 2001b).

NCRRR documentation states that returnees and other vulnerable rural groups might be employed in public works projects – especially those qualifying for WFP Food for Work and Food for Agriculture assistance – but no specific reference is made to vocational training and education except in relation to resettlement in urban areas.

In respect of community-based support, the plethora of regional and national committees coordinating the various sectors of humanitarian assistance in the provinces are all expected to report to a consultative forum chaired by the NaCSA commissioner. Furthermore, all NGOs engaged in post-war reconstruction are required by law to register with the commission. With the assistance of OCHA, FAO and the food pipeline agencies, the commission seeks to ensure that NGOs working in the same sector do not overlap in the same area. The chiefdom remains the fundamental unit of day-to-day administration in Sierra Leone's provinces, and the chiefdom section is taken as the minimum unit for allocation of NGO responsibility.[2] NaCSA has an office in each of the 12 provincial districts, and in theory all agencies working in the same sector in a particular district meet fortnightly at these offices to coordinate their activities. The

chairman of each sector committee then reports to an inter-agency meeting chaired by the NaCSA regional supervisor.

NaCSA has also been trying to establish liaison committees at the chiefdom level. Their purpose, as the NaCSA District Supervisor for Kambia put it when interviewed in March 2002, is 'to empower the people to take part in development activities'. The aim is that, as chiefdom administrations become operational again, they will provide a voice for local communities in post-war reconstruction and provide humanitarian agencies with valuable feedback – especially in respect of gaps in programme coverage. Each chiefdom section is expected to send four representatives (including the section chief and at least one woman) to the liaison committee. The paramount chief chairs the committee and the treasury clerk provides secretarial support. As of 1 April 2002, Bramaia and Thonko in Kambia district were the only chiefdoms in the country to have established NaCSA committees.[3] The inaugural reports of these committees to the Kambia district inter-agency meeting of 20 March 2002 are discussed later in this study.

The change of name from the NCRRR to NaCSA was effected in November 2001 to herald the re-incorporation of the commission as a social fund designed 'to facilitate a transition from relief to sustainable development and … to cater for communities which do not adequately benefit from NGO presence in their localities' (Sesay, 2002). In its original form, the commission had four donor-supported Project Implementation Units (PIUs), each with its own rules of tender. Under NaCSA, these have been unified under one management umbrella to create three 'funding windows': community-based programmes, public works and micro-finance. To quote a senior NaCSA official interviewed in March 2002, NaCSA is now a 'government NGO'. Here, the eagerness of the Sierra Leone government to raise its profile as a service provider seems to have coincided with pressure among the major NCRRR donors (the World Bank, ADB, UNDP and the Islamic Development Bank) to shift the focus of humanitarian intervention from 'relief' to 'development'.

3. Chiefdoms and their politics

Implicit in the post-war reconstruction strategies outlined above is the assumption that ex-combatants are modern, individuated agents who require education and training in order to develop into responsible citizens, while refugees and IDPs are members of traditional rural communities (and thus governed by chiefs) and require assistance to re-establish primary food production. While there are indeed grounds for such an assumption, it tends to recapitulate rather than resolve a source of rupture that lies at the heart of the recent conflict. Political economy analysis helps to bring this issue to the fore.

Sierra Leone's three provinces are currently administered through 149 chiefdoms coordinated by 12 district offices. Chiefdom land is inalienable except for mining rights controlled by the government, and chiefdoms are also the primary jurisdictions of rural courts dealing exclusively in

matters of customary law. The chiefdoms also employ their own force of security guards and bailiffs (the chiefdom police) separate from the state police. Paramount chiefs hold office for life. Local councils, mainly comprising village headmen and elders, elect paramount chiefs from candidates put forward by recognised ruling families. Here, in essence, is an old colonial system of 'indirect rule' preserved by post-colonial governments because it suited their political interests. Under colonial rule, the Sierra Leone Protectorate was a sphere of British-supervised 'native authority'; it was not united with the former Sierra Leone Colony under a single constitution until 1951. It was only then that politicians representing the majority of voters in the former Protectorate had an opportunity to overturn the long dominance of the Freetown Krios in national political affairs. But this ambition could not be realised without the support and cooperation of paramount chiefs. Chiefs' intimate contact with the local populace – many of the chiefdoms inherited by the Sierra Leone Republic in 1961 had populations of less than 20,000 – put them in a powerful position as political brokers. In the first decade after independence, national politicians often found it necessary to involve themselves in factional rivalries at the chiefdom level in order to win electoral support. Such involvement provided opportunities for local politicians to harness national issues and party affiliation to their struggles for chiefship. This *quid pro quo* has continued ever since (Kilson, 1966; Barrows, 1976; Tangri, 1978).

The vast majority of rural Sierra Leoneans still obtain primary rights of residence, land use and political/legal representation as 'natives' of chiefdoms, rather than as citizens of the state. It is the prerogative of chiefs (village, section and paramount) to recognise and guarantee 'native' status; 'non-natives' (since 1972 this category may include anyone a chief deems to be a 'stranger') are required by law to take out a government lease to build, farm or otherwise conduct business on chiefdom land. Dependency on chiefs has long rendered rural Sierra Leoneans vulnerable to exploitation. Popular protest against the levels of tribute and labour service demanded by chiefs began to raise concerns among British colonial officials in the 1920s. It became apparent even then that modernisation, particularly the expansion of wage employment and urban migration, might undermine the power and authority of chiefs. Structural reforms introduced in legislation in the 1930s were not enough to prevent a spate of violent protests against perceived abuses of power by chiefs in northern Sierra Leone in 1955–56. The subsequent commission of inquiry reported (prophetically) that these riots were tantamount to 'a civil war rather than a disturbance'. However, the report on the testimony of witnesses also highlights the dilemma facing these protesters:

The chiefdom was a 'natural' unit which commands the loyalty of its inhabitants; most witnesses made it clear that they still had great respect for the office of chief, if not for its holder, and that what they objected to was the illegal extra taxes, license fees, and fines which the money economy had made it possible for the chiefs to extort from them (Cox, 1956).

While chiefdom administration may indeed appear to be 'natural' and rooted in indigenous culture, it has in fact been shaped by regimes of colonial governance. Foremost among

these is the registration of villages for the annual poll tax. In practice, 'native' status is a privilege conferred by membership of land- and title-holding groups and attached to the registered villages in which chiefs reside. Chiefs are habitually selected from among those who best embody the historical precedents that serve as the local yardsticks of 'native' status (Fanthorpe, 1998). But the long-term effect of village registration has been to fix the points on the landscape at which rural people obtain that status. In recent times, the population that is obliged to attach itself to a village in order to obtain land, a vote, a tax receipt, and other privileges of *de facto* citizenship, has far exceeded that which is actually resident (and economically supportable) at any given time. Older men of higher inherited status tend to reserve these privileges for themselves, leaving young people and women clinging to attenuating orders of precedence. This is a source of social exclusion that may have greatly exacerbated the rupture generated by state recession and the contraction of patrimonial networks. Modernised, educated and individuated youth, once jettisoned by contracting patrimonial networks, may have had little opportunity, let alone desire, to return to rural communities governed by chiefs. Readily recruited by belligerent groups on both sides, they were already primed to sow chaos by their double alienation (Fanthorpe, 2001).

Chiefs were repeatedly targeted by the RUF during the war, but the conflict also exposed deep grievances among rural populations who continue to support, and depend upon, the chiefdom system. For example, in late 1999 a post-war local government restoration project supported by DFID began a series of consultations in chiefdom headquarters to gauge local opinion on the prospective return of exiled chiefs.[4] People spoke up with disarming frankness about alleged abuses of power at all levels in the political hierarchy. Many felt that they had no voice in government. Party interference in the affairs of paramount chiefs was also seen as a perennial problem. Furthermore, section chiefs, town chiefs and chiefdom councillors had often been appointed from above, rather than elected from below, and rarely paid any heed to the local taxpayers whose interests they were supposed to represent. The formal tax system had long ceased to function effectively, and salaries of chiefdom staff had not been paid for years. As a result, chiefs were in the habit of imposing fines and levies on a resentful populace. The local courts had been reduced to revenue-generating instruments in which 'justice' went to the highest bidder. Chiefs, moreover, were accused of reserving aid agency benefits for themselves or their favourites. One consultation report records the following observations of local youth in respect of the heavy fines levied by chiefs:

This is an age-old problem in the community and is one of the main factors underlying the war. These heavy fines cause deep-seated grudges as well [as] force young people to flee as they are unable to pay. The chiefs in the community are not paid… Therefore, they find their living from conflict and the fines that it produces. Combining this practice with other malpractices that chiefs enjoy has made chiefs a target for victimisation by armed youth, as they themselves feel victimised by the authorities.

Steve Archibald and Paul Richards have reported similar local grievances following their assessment of CARE International's food security projects in southern Sierra Leone (Richards, 2001; Archibald and Richards, 2002).

Even so, an earlier national consultative process, initiated by the Sierra Leone government in partnership with the UNDP, reported that:

It was evident that throughout the country, the relationship between traditional rulers and their subjects had become strained over the years. Contributing factors as expressed include the open partisan affiliation and the manifestly unprogressive character of some chiefs. The cry for reform in aspects of the institution of chieftaincy was overwhelming. This was, however, tempered by the desire to see that the institution regained its former glory and respect and that chiefs are empowered to play their roles as vehicles of development and progress in their chiefdoms (Government of Sierra Leone and UNDP, 1999).

It would seem that the dilemma highlighted in the above-noted report on the 1956 disturbances is still very much alive. There is also a dilemma here for aid agencies. Fear of the consequences of a post-war governance vacuum in rural areas prompted DFID to design a programme for restoring paramount chiefs. This was enthusiastically supported by the SLPP government, which was keen to re-establish political control over the countryside. These concerns and interests have so far overridden efforts to reform chiefdom governance in the light of the grievances voiced in the above-mentioned chiefdom consultations. Another problem facing aid agencies is that the war has left a legacy of fear and distrust across all social sectors. Agencies are often inundated with grievances relating to the conduct of their staff, intended beneficiaries and other members of local communities with apparent power and influence. Sifting through these grievances and deciding which are genuine and which are disingenuous is not easy, and always leaves agencies vulnerable to the accusation that they are dabbling in politics. Nevertheless, some agencies working in Sierra Leone have attempted to promote good governance at the local level through discussion, role-play and other forms of demonstration. But such lessons are always likely to have a limited impact due to the complex interdependencies between chiefs and populace. Aid agencies may be tempted to adhere rigorously to their own standards of accountability and practice in order to insulate themselves from these political pressures. The costs and benefits of this strategy are considered in the examples that follow.

4. Research findings

Fieldwork began with a round of interviews with NGO staff and Sierra Leone government officials in Freetown. This was followed by fieldwork in Kambia district in north-western Sierra Leone. The objective here was to observe how the policy and programming strategies of NGOs worked in practice. Kambia district was chosen for two reasons. First, the area suffered considerable displacement of population and destruction of infrastructure quite late in the war, and has since become a hive of NGO activity. Second, extended research on rural livelihoods had already been undertaken in the area (Longley, 2000; Longley and Kamara, forthcoming), and an opportunity was seen to build upon that work. Community Action for Progress (CAP), a Sierra Leonean-staffed NGO based in Rokupr, provided accommodation and transport during the fieldwork. Most of the data presented below was acquired using ethnographic techniques. It is basic procedure for an ethnographic researcher to accompany people about their daily routines, and then take cues from those routines in order to initiate conversation.

The following account is largely based on interview data. In a few cases, it was possible to verify informants' accounts with reference to written reports, correspondence and conversations with third parties. However, opportunities for verifying accounts were limited by the time available. For this reason, the names of individuals and agencies are omitted unless they are needed to clarify a particular aspect of the account.

4.1 Distant bureaucracies

A striking feature of current aid agency interventions in Sierra Leone is their intense and self-conscious effort to achieve efficiency, accountability and equity. Agencies go to considerable lengths to ensure that local needs and vulnerabilities are properly assessed, that inputs are properly procured and distributed, that these inputs actually reach the targeted beneficiaries, and that there are no accidental overlaps in the distributions managed by different agencies. However, planning, tendering and decision-making functions are heavily concentrated in the capital. Even now that Sierra Leone has been declared safe, many agencies are reluctant to deploy senior (often expatriate) staff in the field, despite having budgets to do so. For assessment and monitoring purposes they are heavily reliant on local field staff and implementing partners. Yet very little information is accepted from these sources without independent verification.

For example, a local NGO serving as an implementing agency on a seeds and tools project will be given strict assessment guidelines: whether the household head is male or female; the number of their internal and external dependants; whether they are ex-combatants, IDPs, unregistered returnees, or members of the host population; the level of destruction of their homes (assessed with reference to a sequence of numbered diagrams illustrating greater degrees of destruction) and looting of their property (assessed with reference to a checklist of domestic items); whether the

person made a farm in the previous year (and if so, how many bushels of seed did they sow), and what type and variety of seed they require. Vulnerability scores are then allocated with reference to a donor-approved Poverty Assessment Tool.

Once the data has been processed, the local NGO will be subjected to a number of monitoring and assessment visits. These will vary depending on the number of agencies involved in the project, but tend to include representatives of the regional food pipeline agency, NaCSA, the FAO and perhaps a foreign consultant hired by the FMPU acting on behalf of multilateral actors. These monitors will not only attempt to verify the data by meeting a sample of prospective beneficiaries, but also assess the logistical capacity of the local NGO in respect of storage facilities and transport and distribution capability. Often, the volume of inputs released by the pipeline agency will be tailored to the latter assessment, rather than the original household vulnerability assessment. Since no two agencies supplying the same kind of assistance are allowed to work in the same chiefdom section in any given year, vulnerable households' access to aid often becomes something of a lottery.

One means of bypassing this problem is for the implementing NGO to subcontract, although this tends to happen only with infrastructure projects whose output is easily monitored. Even here, however, the worries of commissioning NGOs about the capacity (and honesty) of their sub-contractors has sometimes seen two entirely independent operators digging adjacent latrine pits in the same village, each with their own engineers, community liaison officers, labourers, vehicles and tools. In one instance, a bilateral donor cut the budget of a small project on the grounds that donating one rather than three rice mills to a large population of poor farmers was more likely to ensure that the machine would be used by its intended beneficiaries.

Another problem with this management and distribution system is its glacier-like responsiveness to new information, including that pertaining to errors and omissions in previous assessments. Kambia district, for example, has seen a considerable turnover in population and administrative and security apparatuses since the RUF relinquished control over the area in May 2001. The majority of public buildings and much private housing were destroyed by a combination of RUF terrorism and cross-border bombardment by Guinean forces. The RUF had also rendered many minor roads and bridges impassable to motor traffic. In June 2001, three multi-sectoral teams, led respectively by the NCRRR, OCHA and UNHCR, undertook a two-day assessment of needs in the district. Thirty-one settlements were assessed, and the results extrapolated to create an overview of priorities for humanitarian intervention, due for update every three to four months (Inter-Agency Assessment Committee, OCHA and NCRRR, 2001). The working draft of the first update (circulated in October 2001) begins with a plea for 'more detailed disaggregated information to support planning and coordination'.

However, the problem is not whether agencies receive updated information, but how they interpret it and act upon

it. For example, in his report to the inter-agency meeting at Kambia on 20 March 2002, the Chief Education Officer (CEO) for Kambia district noted that the extreme patchiness of the WFP's ESF programme in the district was creating considerable difficulties. Children were leaving the schools omitted from the programme and attempting to enrol at schools that were benefiting from ESF. The WFP representative admitted that the original assessments had been done many months before, and had not covered areas still considered unstable and/or physically inaccessible to motor vehicles. Yet he insisted that no school could be included in the programme until it was established that it satisfied WFP's criteria of inclusion, and that new assessments were in progress. The representative was nevertheless faced with a barrage of complaints about the continuing omission of one of Kambia town's five primary schools from the ESF scheme. This issue appears to have generated copious correspondence, but the WFP representative was at a loss to explain why no rectifying action had been taken.

In a subsequent interview, the Kambia CEO explained how he believed the error had occurred. The education services in Freetown had supplied the WFP with a list of schools in Kambia town soon after the RUF withdrawal. But the school in question was one of two government-assisted primary schools in the town, was not centrally located and took its name from a town ward, rather than the town itself. A hurried assessment might easily miss the school. The CEO went on to detail another case where, in an isolated part of the district, two separate schools (Christian and Islamic) shared the same set of buildings; one school assembled in the morning and the other in the afternoon. The assessment team overlooked that fact, and only put the morning school on the ESF programme. This error had also been awaiting rectification for a considerable length of time.

4.2 Politics of grievance and issues of governance

Gaps in the coverage of NGO assistance, whether due to actual or presumed shortages in the logistical capacity of frontline agencies or errors and omissions in assessments, generate considerable local resentment. These resentments tend to mesh with political interests and grievances within the community at large. For example, one rural trader interviewed complained that his chiefdom had seen very little NGO benefits because it had not yet succeeded in placing a local person – a 'son of the soil' – in parliament. All the NGO benefits that should have come to his chiefdom were, he claimed, regularly diverted to chiefdoms and towns with better political connections. A woman present at the same meeting endorsed this view, adding that young men on motorcycles would often visit her village to register people for benefits and to collect fees for such registration. Chiefdom authorities would likewise collect money and food for the entertainment of 'VIPs' (i.e. politicians, district administrators and NGO representatives). Yet, she claimed, her village had never received any outside assistance since resettlement more than a year previously.

Complaining of exclusion from aid disbursements is a political weapon of the weak, and carries greatest force when

implicating aid agency staff in corruption or other immoral practices. For example, there were allegations that the first schools to benefit from school feeding programmes would be those attended by girlfriends of members of needs assessment teams, and that any school left off the list would most likely have as a pupil a girl who had once spurned the sexual advances of one of these fieldworkers. Another case is that of a well-known Sierra Leonean civil rights activist who visited an IDP camp near Freetown. Shocked to hear the inmates complain that they had received no food or clothing for weeks, the activist broadcast these allegations in the Freetown press and on local radio, taking every opportunity to chastise both the international aid agencies and the government. These allegations provoked considerable anger among aid agencies that had in fact been supplying the camp on a regular basis, but the damage to their reputations had already been done.

Chiefs have also been known to use allegations of corruption as a political lever against NGOs. In one reported case, a local NGO, working in partnership with a food pipeline agency, did a round of needs assessments while the local paramount chief was still domiciled, for security reasons, in Freetown. The bags of rice were first delivered by truck to the chiefdom headquarters, checked off by representatives of the chiefdom committee and stored temporarily in the local courthouse (*barri*). The paramount chief arrived on a visit just in time to see the bags being loaded onto pickups for transport to the villages of the registered beneficiaries. The chief complained that he had to support several households of starving IDPs, and brought a list of names that he demanded should be added to the register. He was politely informed that it was too late to change the register on this round. The matter appeared to be closed, but articles soon appeared in the Freetown press alleging that NGO field staff in this particular chiefdom regularly forced beneficiaries to pay for seed rice supplied by relief agencies. These allegations generated a lengthy investigation, which failed to substantiate any part of them. However, none of those involved were left in any doubt about the message the chief was trying to convey.

Current needs assessment regimes, which tend to place chiefs and other local government functionaries at the bottom of vulnerability tables, have done little to improve relations between aid agencies and chiefs. The inaugural reports of the two above-noted NaCSA chiefdom liaison committees to an inter-agency meeting at Kambia are noteworthy in this regard. These reports contained a litany of complaints against NGOs: that they were signing off contracts with people who were not the legitimate representatives of local communities; that they were initiating aid distributions and building projects without even bothering to inform chiefdom authorities; that they were bringing in outside labour and building contractors rather than hiring local people, and that these outsiders were stealing from local stocks of building materials. The representative of the NGOs named in these reports adamantly refuted these charges, and the general view from the floor was that chiefdom authorities always want to control aid inputs as they see them as an opportunity both for personal enrichment and for rewarding political supporters. However, the NaCSA District

Supervisor intervened in the discussion to remind the meeting that, unlike the wartime local administrations set up by both the RUF and the Civil Defence Force (CDF) militia, chiefs were legitimate local authorities whom NGOs providing aid inputs had a duty to consult. A number of NGO representatives then acknowledged that some of their projects had started before the chiefdom authorities had returned after the war, and went on to request instruction from NaCSA on matters of protocol regarding the signing of contracts. Yet even then, the general view was that a 'local authority' with whom a contract has been signed, not the NGO, should be responsible for informing the paramount chief.

Chiefs have a deservedly poor reputation among aid agencies working in Sierra Leone. One NGO fieldworker who had previously been employed as a liaison between international relief agencies and NARICOM (the National Relief Committee of Sierra Leone, a forerunner of the NRC) stated that, when rural IDPs began to arrive in Freetown in large numbers in the mid-1990s, it had been widely assumed that exiled chiefs would take responsibility for the welfare of their displaced subjects. Many were contracted to conduct censuses of IDP populations in the capital and to organise the distribution of relief. The results, apparently, were extremely disappointing. Investigations by the relief agencies revealed that the census figures had been grossly exaggerated, and that food distributions had often been diverted from the most vulnerable people to other beneficiaries the informant described as 'certain interest groups close to the chiefs'.

While chiefs may have earned the distrust of aid agencies, nothing at present alters the fact that they are legitimate authority holders with a right to be consulted by these agencies, if not actively involved in the management of rural aid distributions. Matters are further complicated by the Sierra Leonean government's strong support for the chieftaincy system. The government's entirely legitimate rationale has been to re-establish proper institutions for civil administration and the maintenance of law and order in rural areas. Even so, longer-term political calculations may also be at work. The latter are apparent in the management of Social Action and Poverty Alleviation (SAPA), a major NaCSA programme supported by the African Development Bank. In principle, SAPA is a micro-credit scheme targeted at non-combatant civilians. Each beneficiary receives 100,000 Leones ($50) to be repaid over nine months at 15% interest. The repayments are supposed to service other beneficiaries. Chiefdom administration was the government's mechanism of choice for disbursing these funds when the scheme started in October 2001. It was left to NaCSA regional offices to oversee the appointment of a Micro-Credit Chiefdom Committee (MCCC) and loan collector for each chiefdom. The MCCC comprises the paramount chief (as chair), all section chiefs and one female representative from each chiefdom section, and is responsible for assessing and registering the chiefdom's 'vulnerable poor'. According to a NaCSA loans officer interviewed in March 2002, the government insists that the beneficiaries should be 'law-abiding chiefdom citizens who respect chiefdom

authorities'. A high proportion of each disbursement is supposed to go to women and young people.

According to the NaCSA interviewee, the scheme is widely abused. People permanently domiciled in Freetown often return to their forefathers' villages to register, collect the advance and return home. Section chiefs often try to service their supporters ahead of the truly vulnerable, or sometimes try to register all their young children as beneficiaries. Furthermore, defaulting on repayments is common because, as the informant observed, people tend to see the money as compensation for their sufferings in the war – a civilian counterpart to the DDR scheme – rather than as a loan. Some members of the government seem to have encouraged this view. SAPA funds are apparently disbursed as a lump sum to chiefdom treasuries, and at least one cabinet minister has been known to arrive with the cash and announce to a grateful populace that the government has arranged a benefit expressly for them. A growing chorus of complaints from rural people claiming to have been overlooked by the scheme, and recurrent reports that paramount chiefs have siphoned off as much as 25% of initial SAPA disbursements for their own use, prompted action from the minister chairing the cabinet sub-committee for micro-credit. In January 2002, the minister circulated a letter that reminded chiefdom authorities that SAPA is a credit scheme and warned them not to embezzle the funds. The effectiveness of this particular message is unknown. However, NaCSA's recent announcement of a 'demand driven' funding policy, which involves by-passing NGOs in search of direct tenders from 'communities', seems to indicate where the Sierra Leone government's priorities currently lie.

Recurrent evidence that chiefdom authorities cannot be relied upon to manage aid distributions transparently and fairly may encourage agencies to take a more interventionist approach to ensure that aid benefits the most needy. For example, the food pipeline agency for Moyamba district has experimented with a rights-based humanitarian approach. The pilot study took place in ten villages in the district, and the project has now entered a second phase. Part of the rationale is to tackle recurrent inequities in aid delivery created by corruption among chiefdom authorities. It operates on the principle that anyone who wants to farm has a right to do so. Instead of giving out 40kg bags of seed to household heads, individuals are invited to register for a small package (5kg) of high-quality seed. But the major aim of the project is to encourage debate about the moral example established by this method of distributing aid. As the project designers put it, 'the debate about equitable access to NGO inputs is the catalyst for a discussion of broader issues related to community-level development, rights and governance' (Archibald and Richards, 2002). Debate is facilitated through six-monthly village meetings called Peace Days. As the project designers state:

The aim of the Peace Days is to get functioning, democratic community representation in place and ready to engage with the agencies of governance reform, the human rights community and government or non-governmental development agencies. To this end, the Peace Day communities are electing committees of women, young people and elders which they hope, eventually, will act as mechanisms

for representation, regulation and enforcement at local level, and also to represent their respective issues at 'higher' levels within the chiefdom and district structures (Archibald and Richards, 2002).

While this project is both innovative and highly principled, it raises a number of questions. First, if the above-noted reports of chiefdom-level consultations are anything to go by, popular experiences during the APC era and the subsequent civil war have generated acute rights awareness already, and in that regard the project may be preaching to the converted. Second, the in-country project manager reported in January 2002 that household heads tend to welcome the project because it relieves them of some of their responsibility for feeding dependants. There is a danger that the agency will be nudged into taking increasing responsibility for the social welfare of its registered beneficiaries, and that the Peace Days will become, in some eyes, instrumental to that purpose. Third, a project of this kind is limited in scale by its labour-intensiveness, and its overall effectiveness will depend upon the level of uptake of its methods and findings by other agencies – the Sierra Leone government included.

A second example – a house-building scheme in Kambia district – illustrates again the labour-intensiveness of community-focused projects. Kambia is estimated to have suffered 80–90% housing destruction during the war. In 2001, money was sourced from the Swedish International Development Association (via UNDP) for housing provision for war-affected communities in the district. Two international NGOs won contracts to build houses, one allocated 250 units and the other 150. A strong community focus was designed into the smaller of the two projects. It was planned at first that communities would provide local building materials (i.e. sand and timber) and unskilled labour; provision was also made for training ex-combatants in building skills. But the fundamental problem facing the project was that it was only going to build 150 houses in an area of acute housing need, and that the beneficiaries would be individuals and not 'communities'.

After narrowing the focus to pockets of greatest housing destruction (Kambia town and parts of Gbinle Dixing chiefdom), the project was still left with the problem of selecting beneficiaries. The original idea was to hold a ballot. But consultations with the inhabitants of the selected areas showed that, while chiefdom authorities approved of the idea, others did not want wealthy individuals, with the means to rebuild their homes, enjoying the same chance of benefiting as those in greater need. The NGO asked local people to form their own action committees, which would liaise with chiefdom authorities and report back with a better plan. At first it was suggested that houses should be built wherever there was a substantial gap between intact buildings, but eventually it was decided that building should be concentrated in one or two streets, leaving others untouched. The rationale for this was to minimise the risk that future assessments would underestimate the level of housing need in the town. It was also decided by these committees that female-headed households should be given priority in choosing beneficiaries. With these arrangements in place, the NGO found itself having to undertake a further round

of consultations in order to secure local agreement for its plans regarding the division of responsibility for various inputs. The chiefdom authorities insisted on dropping the idea of training ex-combatants, and instead supplied a list of young unemployed locals for building training. In the end, the NGO found itself having to draw up a separate memorandum of understanding for each labour gang, as well as each beneficiary. These consultations delayed the start of the building phase by several months. However, the agency considered the effort worthwhile; it had engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, which had helped win the agency a good name in an area where a great deal of work awaits for many years to come.

While requiring considerable expenditure in human resources, community-focused projects facilitate more rapid responses to the errors and omissions that often arise in needs assessments. Here, the onus is on local field staff and implementing partners. They not only have to comply with the professional and ethical standards demanded by international agencies, but also deal on a daily basis with a highly politicised populace with its own set of moral arguments and understandings.

4.3 Whose standards?

As some of the cases considered above reveal, international agencies will sometimes claim credit for rule-bending and corner-cutting if these are seen to bring desirable results. But attitudes can be very different if a local NGO tries to emulate such practices. In one case, from mid-2001, a local NGO discovered a large group of IDPs sheltering on an island in the upper reaches of the Little Scarcies river. This discovery was reported immediately to the district food pipeline agency, and a project proposal to supply these people with seed rice and fertilizer was rushed through to the NCRRR (NaCSA). The NGO obtained verbal approval from the NCRRR Regional Coordinator to procure seeds for these desperate people while the proposal was being processed. The NGO went ahead and procured rice wherever it could; it purchased some from Freetown wholesalers, borrowed some from local farmers and took the remainder from its own stores. It was now seriously out of pocket, but had to wait until three separate monitoring visits (made by representatives of the NCRRR, the World Bank and the FMPU overseeing NCRRR disbursements) verified that the seeds and fertilizer had indeed reached the intended beneficiaries. Finally, a letter arrived from an accountant at the FMPU informing the NGO that its contract had been aborted on the grounds of its 'mis-procurement' of rice. By neglecting to advertise its requirements for seed and fertilizer in the local media, the NGO had, apparently, contravened the World Bank's rules of competitive tender.

The same NGO was contracted on another occasion by an international NGO to dig water wells on several sites. The contract was signed during the rainy season, and the local NGO advised its commissioning partner that it would be impossible to complete the wells until the water table subsided in the following dry season. The delay in sinking the wells was accepted verbally by the commissioning NGO. However,

when the time came for payment the international NGO deducted 30% of its implementing partner's fee as a penalty for delaying completion of the work according to the terms of the original contract.

Such heavy-handedness can also suppress much-needed feedback on the sociological assumptions written into aid projects. Such feedback is urgently needed. In one case, a project managed by an international agency attempted to deliver $300 grants as start-up capital for small (especially female-managed) businesses. The beneficiaries the NGO had in mind were market traders and artisans in one- or two-person operations. But the Sierra Leonean implementing partner distributed some of the grants to an isolated village where it had previously set up farmers' associations to manage disbursements of seeds and tools. The members of these associations had pooled their grants to set up a rotating credit arrangement. Two expatriates who visited this village to monitor the performance of the project were at first extremely suspicious of this pooling arrangement, not least because both of the women's associations receiving grants had male treasurers. However, all the financial accounts proved to be in order and the local women, who were interviewed by this author in the company of the expatriate monitors, appeared happy with the arrangement. Indeed, they stated that they had to employ men as treasurers because no literate women lived in the village, and that they were proud of their new-found ability to contribute to the construction costs of the (unregistered) village school that their daughters would now attend. They also stated that local credit associations had helped to alleviate their dependence on local produce traders, some of whom were now shunning the village in a fit of pique.

The DDR programme is another case in point. The programme works on the assumption that ex-combatants will become individuated competitors on a 'job market'. In this respect it contrasts with the approach of many frontline agencies, which tend to assume that their beneficiaries are 'communities'. Indeed, as the aid effort in Sierra Leone begins to switch from 'relief' to 'development', it is becoming standard practice for NGOs to organise beneficiaries into self-governing CBOs in the interest of improved oversight and sustainability. The assumptions of the DDR programme carry weight because the RUF tended to abduct rural youths and subject them to political indoctrination and combat training in isolated forest camps, thereby taking them away from their communities. Yet the picture is complicated by

the fact that the CDF tended to recruit among men who were vetted by chiefdom authorities and deployed in defence of their home areas.

Interviews conducted among 91 ex-combatants on DDR schemes at Rokupr Bush College and the Magbema Cashew Farmers Association plantation in Kambia revealed many differences between these two groups. Most of the ex-RUF group were young men and women, mainly unmarried, who said that they were desperate to learn a trade and were willing to go anywhere to find work. The ex-CDF group mostly comprised older men, already married with families and farms. All respondents among this group expected to return to their villages as soon as the scheme ended. Indeed, it was said elsewhere that ex-CDF people often opt for school enrolment because they are already relatively secure, both socially and economically, and the school schemes provide an extra three months of Reinsertion Benefit. A few ex-CDF women, mostly wives of men registered on the same schemes, were captured by the survey. Only one of these (an intelligence gatherer who had worked behind enemy lines) admitted to having had weapons' training.[5]

Further investigation revealed even greater complexities. On the one hand, it was found that local youths in Rokupr resent the opportunities DDR provides for ex-combatants; some stated openly that they intended to join the fight next time around. One local NGO, which runs the Rokupr Bush College, has won donor approval for a project to provide places for local young people, but these are few and the funding only covers equipment; the NGO is forced to charge attendees fees of $7.50 per month. On the other hand, many ex-RUF combatants on the scheme are former abductees and now simply want to find a community – any community – to call their own. By March 2002, some had drifted away from the DDR scheme in Kambia to sift local river gravel for diamonds. Although it is easy to be critical, there is no doubt that the donor-driven rush to 'process' ex-combatants through the DDR scheme has taken little account of the differing training needs and *de facto* reintegration opportunities of a socially complex population of former fighters. The social reintegration of ex-combatants, post-DDR, remains a concern for international donors, but the NGO, like many similar small agencies attempting to provide vocational training for ex-combatants and local young people, is still awaiting an opportunity to brief international project designers.

5. Conclusions

Attempting to repair social fabric by providing training and education for ex-combatants and seeds and tools for everyone else, targeting the most vulnerable for aid inputs on the basis of one's own assessment criteria, resisting demands from widely distrusted local authorities for greater control over aid projects, and punishing implementing partners for not conforming to one's own standards of accountability and practice – all are political acts. However morally defensible some may be (although there is no justification for holding implementing partners to the letter rather than the spirit of contracts during a complex emergency), they are based on value judgements and implemented from positions of power. Indeed, when aid agencies rigorously adhere to the highest standards of professional practice, they are tacitly acknowledging political engagement. But such rigour may prove counter-productive if it isolates aid agencies from the communities they are attempting to help. As the examples discussed in this study show, such isolation can easily lead to a breakdown in communication and trust, undermining the efficiency and effectiveness of aid delivery. While donors and commissioning INGOs fret about the veracity of needs assessments supplied by field staff and implementing partners, vulnerable people may go hungry or lose educational and employment opportunities.

Political economy analysis helps to bring home this message, but its greatest value lies in helping aid agencies to understand the political environment in which they have become engaged. Patrimonialism is entrenched in Sierra Leone's politics, and tends to generate intense grievances. There is every indication that grievances against chiefs were in circulation long before the recent conflict, and that they are likely to persist even though peace is returning. For reasons already noted, this does not necessarily herald the imminent demise of the chieftaincy system: people continue to rely upon chiefs to guarantee local citizenship and property rights. Furthermore, when viewed from below a patrimonial political system is not just about getting one's own people into high places, but also about doing whatever seems necessary to attract the interest and patronage of the rich and powerful – including airing grievances about one's current patrons. These political tactics may be misunderstood by well-meaning aid agencies sensing an opportunity for social engineering. The danger with such exercises is that they may create a kind of 'virtual governance reality' that, while attractive to metropolitan-based donors, diverts attention from the deep political interdependencies established by local regimes of citizenship and property rights.

The benefits to aid agencies that derive from a better understanding of local political dynamics are legion: better targeting of beneficiaries, better organisation of delivery, better understanding of risks, better prediction of a project's likely impact, and refined sociological assumptions written into project design. Information is the key, and there is no substitute for consultation and dialogue. Some of this information may be had from beneficiaries, but there is no group better placed to supply it than locally domiciled professionals, including NGO fieldworkers and implementing partners. Given Sierra Leone's current predicament, Sierra Leonean professionals with good connections in the aid community are likely to be sought out by the rural poor as political patrons. Herein lies a dilemma for aid agencies. On the one hand, political economy analysis prompts greater understanding of the social and cultural pressures local professionals face; on the other, fraud and embezzlement remain crimes wherever they are committed. But there is no reason why senior NGO staff cannot discuss these issues with their Sierra Leonean staff and partners, build up trust, and arrive at strategies for overcoming these problems. The potential dividends for aid programming are huge, and do not necessarily require formal training schemes for either expatriate or local staff. After all, the problem to be overcome lies in institutional culture rather than skill deficiencies on the part of individuals.

A related point refers to the value of analytical frameworks and models. These lend intellectual coherence and vision to aid programmes in the competitive world of funding applications. But they may be counter-productive if they are based upon unrealistic foundations. The very first interviewee in the fieldwork for this case study, a country director for an international NGO, began by voicing his suspicion of models. His preference was for a reactive approach, assessing needs as they arose and giving the voice of all potential beneficiaries equal weight. For him, the critical issue was training field staff to make sure that they are both sensitive and responsive to the voices of different stakeholders. Nonetheless, analytical frameworks and models can have value in preparing agencies and their staff to operate effectively in complex social and political environments. A political economy approach may help agencies to understand why endemic uncertainty and vulnerability generate extreme political sensitivities within post-conflict populations – sensitivities that may sustain a politics of grievance that is difficult for foreigners to unravel, and that may see aid agencies played off against weakened local authority structures such as the chiefdoms. Dialogue with the widest possible range of local stakeholders seems fundamental to the success of post-war reconstruction in Sierra Leone. To that end, aid agencies have no choice but to treat their local staff and implementing partners with more trust and respect than they currently display.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

[1] The civilian administration of Sierra Leone's Northern Province did not deploy from Freetown until August 2002.

[2] Sections are administrative sub-divisions of chiefdoms, commonly organised territorially (but sometimes along ethnic lines) and ranging in population from a few hundred to several thousand. Large chiefdoms may have ten or more sections, each the responsibility of a section chief reporting to the paramount chief. Village headmen comprise the bottom tier of the chiefdom administrative hierarchy.

[3] At first, these NaCSA committees were distinct from pre-war Chiefdom Development Committees and chiefdom-level committees set up by the NRC and other agencies. However, it was soon realised that the same people tend to serve on all chiefdom-level committees. The Sierra Leone government is now encouraging chiefdoms authorities to nominate a single Chiefdom Development Committee to liase will all development agencies.

[4] This was the Paramount Chiefs Restoration Project (later, the Chiefdom Governance Reform Programme), located in the Governance Reform Secretariat of the Sierra Leone Ministry of Presidential Affairs.

[5] The rituals of initiation into the CDF specifically exclude women, yet some women appear to have been accepted on to the DDR scheme on the grounds that they had provided logistical support to frontline units.