



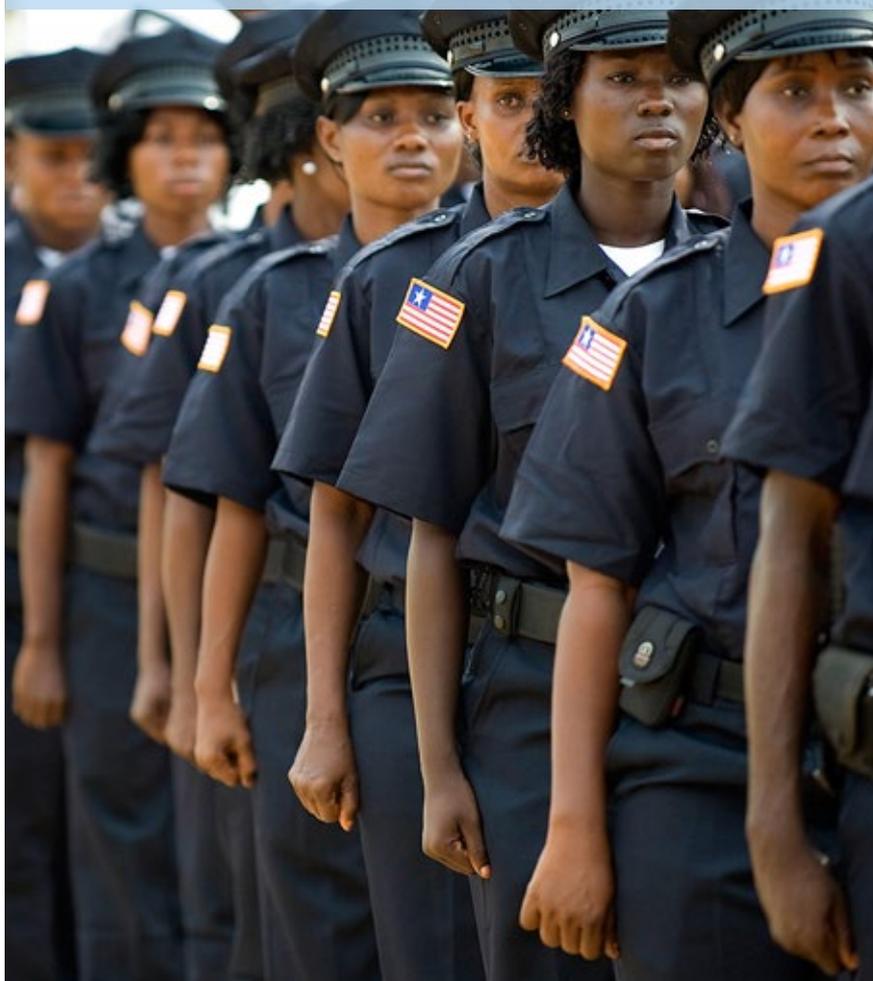
Development
Progress

Case Study Summary

Security

PROGRESS IN SMALL STEPS Security against the odds in Liberia

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Graduates of the police academy in Liberia. Photo: © UN / Christopher Herwig.

- Liberia experienced civil war for 14 years, between 1989 and 2003, when 250,000 people were killed and at least a third of the population displaced. Four out of five people consider themselves victims of this conflict.
- Since 2003, large-scale organised violence has stopped in Liberia. International data suggests that improvements in personal safety have been the largest of any sub-Saharan Africa country since 2000.
- Relative political stability, linked to President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's successive election wins, has reduced violent conflict. This has led to improved expectations for Liberians: in 2011 a population survey showed 78% or respondents believed that safety would continue to improve for the foreseeable future.
- Stability has in part depended on UN peacekeepers and the continued influence of political actors associated with the war. This raises questions about the sustainability of Liberia's peace, which is compounded by Liberia's socio-economic woes: it remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

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Why explore security in Liberia?

In this case study summary, we focus on Liberia's progress in security since 2003, after 14 years of civil conflict. We define personal security as *personal safety from physical threat and fear of physical threat*. Our findings suggest a mixed picture.

Liberia has avoided a return to civil war, and instances of state-led, collective and political violence have declined. Successive elections in 2005 and 2011 and the gradual drawdown of the UN peacekeeping mission have taken place without major outbreaks of collective violence, fuelling international expectations that Liberia is increasingly stable and able to take on responsibility for providing security to its citizens.

However, violence and crime remain genuine threats in the daily life of many Liberians. Crime rates, particularly in Monrovia, are high, and sexual violence remains commonplace. Despite this, most people's perceptions of the police have improved, but concerns remain about widespread allegations of corruption and low capacity to respond to security incidents.

This mixed picture also appears to shape people's perceptions of security. Some studies indicate improved perceptions of individual and community safety (Vinck et al., 2011; SAS, 2011; Blair et al., 2011) while our interviews highlight increasing fear about the future of peace in Liberia and growing disillusionment with the post-conflict development process. The current Ebola crisis is a powerful reminder of the weaknesses of Liberia's institutions and vulnerability to crisis in different forms. Liberia, as a case study, presents all the complexities that demonstrate why progress on security is difficult to assess and often contested.

What progress has been achieved?

Liberia experienced two civil wars between 1989 and 2003. It is estimated that, during that time, 250,000 people were killed by the conflicts, and one million were displaced out of a total population of approximately three million (GoL, 2009). The roots of Liberia's conflicts can be traced to widespread political, social and economic exclusion of indigenous ethnic groups by the freed slaves who settled in Liberia in 1847, known as Americo-Liberians.

The widespread violence and insecurity during the civil wars destroyed infrastructure and institutions, displaced and damaged the social fabric of communities, eroded individual and household assets and disrupted service delivery. The fighting also wrought havoc with Liberia's development prospects. A former middle-income country, Liberia saw its gross domestic product (GDP) fall by over 90% between

Box 1: Data difficulties

In Liberia, as in many other post-conflict countries, there are major difficulties in obtaining reliable and up-to-date data on personal security. Much of the available data was collected a number of years ago, and therefore may not reflect more recent changes. Even basic demographic data are hard to find, and the census carried out in 2008 was the first in over twenty years. Little data exists on the levels, patterns and drivers of conflict in Liberia, as well as on Liberians' perceptions of the security sector, particularly in areas outside the capital where there is limited UN or police presence (Blair et al., 2011: 1).

'There is improvement in personal security... if you understand where we came from before 2003... there is remarkable improvement. We are good at forgetting where we used to be, expectations are so high, but there is progress' (Head of NGO based in Monrovia)

1987 and 1995, one of the largest economic collapses worldwide since 1945 (Radelet, 2007: 1).

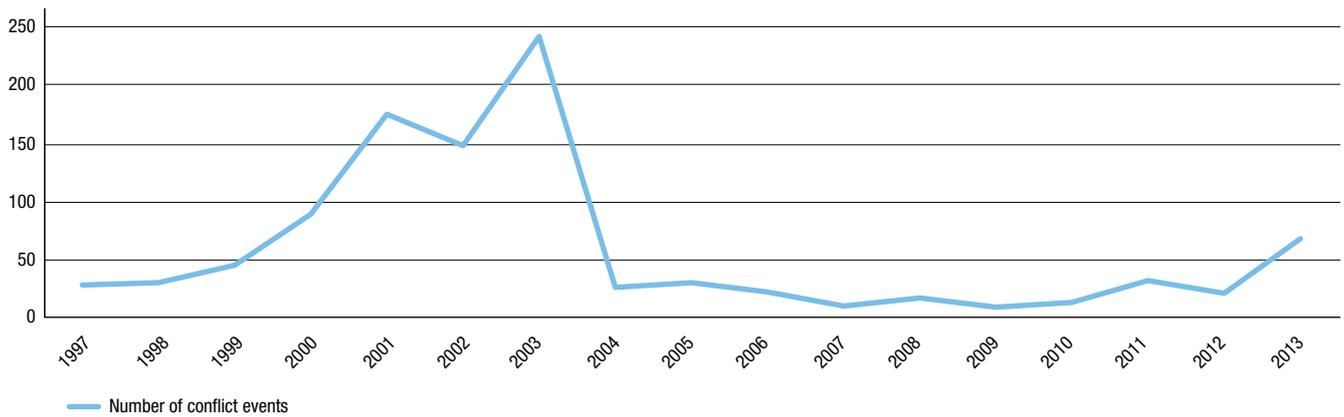
Since the end of the civil war in 2003, Liberia has witnessed some key improvements in personal security. We identify three crucial areas of improvement, as follows.

1. Decreased armed conflict and political violence

Most notably, with the signing of the comprehensive peace agreement (CPA), armed-conflict-related and political violence declined significantly. UN Peacekeeping reports suggest that riots, bombings and other politically motivated violence, formerly commonplace, have become almost non-existent. This is supported by the Armed Conflict Location and Events Dataset (ACLED), which highlights a major decline in conflict events since the end of the war (Figure 1).

'We've come a long way since the civil war. Security has improved; people were being arrested off the street... There has been much improvement in freedom of speech, citizens can... freely speak on air. During the days, it is safe' (Civil society leader, Monrovia)

Figure 1: Number of conflict events reported in Liberia, 1997-2013



Source: ACLED data.

Importantly, the two recent post-conflict elections in Liberia have been relatively peaceful, despite some minor incidents. However, some recent protests, also largely peaceful, reflect an apparent growing dissatisfaction in the country.

2. People feel safer and more secure despite continued crime and violence

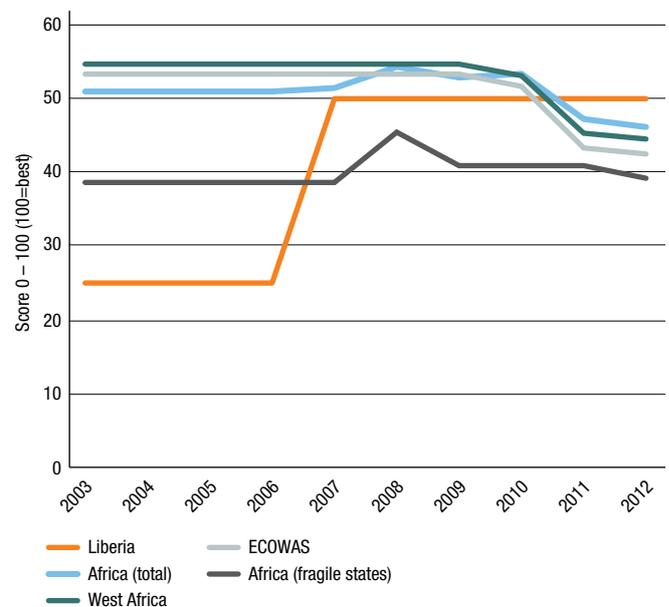
The decrease in conflict, political violence and to some extent violent crime is reflected in Liberians' perceptions that their personal security is improving (Vinck et al., 2011; SAS, 2011). Some perception surveys recorded decreases in the number of violent incidents and crime reported between 2009 and 2010 (Blair et al., 2011) and increases in the proportion of people never fearing crime between 2008 and 2012, both rurally and in urban areas and among men and women (Afrobarometer, 2008; 2012). Data from the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) show a considerable reduction in levels of violent crime between 2006 and 2007. These improvements were sustained between 2007 and 2012, placing Liberia well above other African fragile states (Figure 2).

However, overall, the picture remains mixed, with insecurity a concern in many urban areas, particularly Monrovia. Liberians tend to be more pessimistic about both past and future improvements in security in the southeastern part of the country that suffered repression and marginalisation and was worst affected by the armed conflict. There is a significantly higher crime rate reported in Monrovia compared with rural areas (Afrobarometer, 2008; 2012; LAVO, 2012). One of the most troubling manifestations of inequality in security provision in Liberia relates to the widespread incidence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women and girls.

3. Generally improving perceptions of the police

Historically, the Liberia National Police (LNP) has been a source of insecurity, committing murder and rape, not

Figure 2: Change in levels of violent crime across Africa, 2003-2012



Source: data from IIAG (2013).

least through Charles Taylor's infamous 'Anti-Terrorist' Unit (Friedman and MacAulay, 2011: 2). Now, most reports available indicate that LNP officers are rarely seen as perpetrators of mass violence, and, despite concerns about corruption, there is a desire for the police to play a role in security provision (Reeve and Speare, 2012).

There is little doubt that Johnson Sirleaf's two terms have been marked by decreasing involvement of political authorities in violence. This has contributed to improving the role of the police in security provision for Liberian citizens. In one survey (Afrobarometer, 2012), 76% of the

urban population said that they would first go to the police for assistance if they were the victims of a crime. While the number is significantly smaller in rural areas (33%), with 53% preferring to go to customary leaders or courts, this still indicates a certain degree of preference for the police as a key security provider – remarkable in the context of the LNP’s history of violence.

What are the factors driving change?

A range of factors led to the end of Liberia’s civil war. International pressure, Charles Taylor’s indictment by the Special Court of Sierra Leone for his involvement in supporting conflict there, and the fact that two key rebel groups were advancing rapidly on Monrovia – all resulted in Taylor accepting an offer of asylum from Nigeria in August 2003. This led to the official end of the conflict marked by the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on 18 August 2003 and the formation of the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL).

The signing of the CPA and subsequent deployment of UN peacekeeping troops marks the beginning of Liberia’s improvements in personal security. However, Liberia’s peace may not have been possible without the tentative regional stability forged in the Mano River region over the last decade. Here, we outline the five factors we understand as having been crucial in Liberia’s post-war security progress.

1. A plurality of actors providing security at the local level

There are both formal and informal elements within Liberia’s security architecture. In addition to the police and government, local-level security actors include customary leaders, community security groups, vigilantes, women’s groups, business protection groups and secret societies. Despite greater prevalence in rural areas, informal actors and particularly customary institutions are also prominent in urban areas. These local-level actors have been particularly important in preventing the escalation of conflict and reducing crime and interpersonal violence within and between communities.

2. The role of UNMIL

While the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) did not arrive in Liberia until two months after the end of fighting on 1 October 2003, after which no subsequent major battle events were recorded, it is still widely credited with contributing to the end of the armed conflict in Liberia, and sustaining and consolidating relative peace over the last decade. Arguably, the physical presence of UNMIL is the strongest reason why violence has ended, rather than any ‘changes in the military and political set up’ (Mehler, 2012: 63-4). This view is supported by a study of the perceptions of urban Liberians early in 2005, which showed that more than 75% of respondents believed UNMIL to be the main actor guaranteeing security, and that ‘UNMIL is here to bring peace’ (Smith-Höhn, 2007: 92).

UNMIL was an important stabilising factor during the elections of 2005 and 2011. More generally, UNMIL has demonstrated itself capable of responding to incidents where local-level conflicts escalate beyond a certain level. Largely through the UN police officers (UNPOL), UNMIL has also contributed to improved personal security in Liberia by supporting reforms of the national police force. Although evidence suggests that the peacekeeping troops have rarely played a role in mitigating local conflicts, our interviews suggest that UNMIL’s presence has been important symbolically, as part of the international commitment to peace, while also forming a deterrent to armed groups instigating conflict.

‘The way politics works in Liberia might not be the way that the West would want the state to be run, but it is what is creating stability in this context’ (Academic expert)

3. Relatively stable political settlement

The underlying problems relating to the division of power across the elites and between Monrovia and the rural areas were not resolved with the signing of the CPA. This meant that maintaining political stability has required careful navigation of formal and informal interests and grievances. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf – first elected in 2005 – has enjoyed considerable international political capital as a result of being the first democratically elected female African president and a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Yet the reality of governance in Liberia does not fit a Western ‘liberal’ model.

Johnson Sirleaf has negotiated the competing demands and interests of power-holders across the formal and informal political landscape. This has resulted in integrating many of the main war-time power brokers, including senior associates of Charles Taylor, into the government patronage networks. This is clearly in contradiction to the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which called for 49 people, including Johnson Sirleaf herself, to be barred for 30 years from holding public office (ICG, 2011). The elite bargain has also influenced responses to corruption at national and regional levels. Although Johnson Sirleaf has instituted some high-profile reforms, these are not comprehensive and are criticised as too superficial to constitute a genuine move towards increased accountability and transparency (BTI, 2014; ICG, 2011).

Despite this, the elite bargain is legitimised by a government that promotes a liberal reform agenda, thus garnering the support of the international community. The government’s reform agenda is accompanied by a commitment to promoting economic growth and improved public financial management. This reflects the belief that equitable growth to benefit all Liberians would, in part,

tackle some of the grievances associated with the past conflict, thereby mitigating the likelihood of future conflict. However, while the national-level macroeconomic picture looks positive, equitable economic development is not being realised. Liberia remains among the poorest countries in the world. The networks led by ‘big men’ have been the main beneficiaries of the recent economic growth and stability. From a pragmatic and short-term security perspective, this approach appears to have been useful in terms of containing potential spoilers to the peace. However, greater political change and growth that is more equitable will likely be required to sustain Liberia’s progress.

4. Security sector reform

Wholehearted success stories in security sector reform (SSR) are few and far between, and the case of Liberia does little to remedy this. While there is still clearly much need for continued reform, and concerns about the Liberian National Police (LNP) are undoubtedly justified, the LNP is an important dimension of personal security in Liberia. There are indications that security sector reform (SSR) has contributed to shifting practices and perceptions, and the international community has invested heavily in training and capacity building of the LNP. According to one UN official, ‘for good or ill, the LNP is largely a UN creation’.¹

There are increasing numbers of female police officers and mechanisms for investigating allegations of misconduct are being developed (Downie, 2013: 5). There has also been significant investment in strengthening police responses to gender-based violence through the creation of women and child protection units and codes of conduct for all officers. As SSR continues and the LNP continues to build up its size, geographical coverage and capacity, there is potential for it to play an increasing role in contributing to decreased violence and increased perceptions of safety and security.

5. The role of donor financing

The international community has provided the necessary financial and technical capacity for the Liberian government to implement security-related reforms, as well as political capital to enable Johnson Sirleaf’s government to maintain the current political and economic stability. Donor financing and technical support to the security sector, largely led by the UN and the US, has focused predominantly on the police and army as the two core state security actors. As Figure 3 illustrates, security was a clear priority of donors in the immediate post-war period. Through training, mentoring

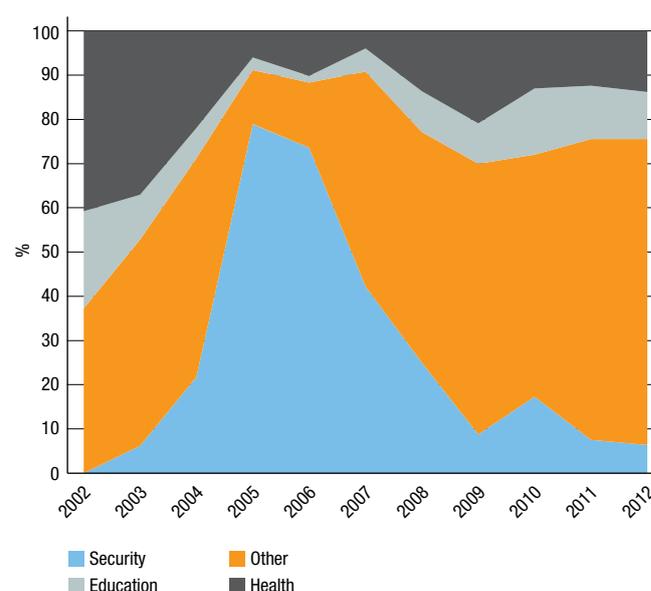
and high-level political discussions, the international community has had considerable input into the development of policies and strategies for security reform. While donor funding has been essential to Liberia’s reform process, it has also created tensions.

What are the challenges?

1. Addressing potential conflict triggers

There are many unaddressed conflict triggers, presenting a challenge to improving security throughout Liberia. Some of these are linked to the causes underlying the civil wars. Unequal socioeconomic development remains a significant challenge. While we argue that the *promise* of economic growth is an important stabilising factor in Liberia’s peace, this promise is beginning to fade, and, importantly, the lack of trickle-down benefits from economic growth is creating resentment. Equally, exclusionary land acquisition and tenure systems (particularly in relation to large-scale mineral and agricultural acquisitions) continue to present problems.

Figure 3: Composition of total ODA to Liberia by sector



Source: OECD-DAC (2014) *Fragile States*.

‘There has been a lot of progress [in security] but there is still a lot more to be done... the root causes [of conflict] are there: land, political marginalisation, ethnicity. They all remain and need to be addressed’ (Member of local early warning conflict network)

¹ Interview, Monrovia, 6 March 2013.

Other conflict triggers concern peacebuilding processes. The disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and rehabilitation (DDRR) process was beset by challenges. While it was reported that 100,000 ex-combatants went through DDRR (Nilsson, 2009: 32-33), comparatively few weapons were recovered. This has led to concerns about remaining caches and the possibility that fighters could be easily re-armed. Some researchers have argued that the wartime command and control structures have not been fully dismantled, and could be reinstated, particularly if popular grievances escalate (Utas, 2008).

The failure of Johnson Sirleaf's administration to implement the TRC recommendations could be seen as a pragmatic approach to maintain short-term political stability and ensure that the reconciliation process does not exclude those who could become spoilers and threaten the peace. However, it could also act as a source of grievance for citizens who increasingly realise that they have not benefited from a 'peace dividend'.

2. The gap in financing for security issues due to UNMIL drawdown

Based on UNMIL beginning their withdrawal in September 2012, it was estimated that Liberia faced an estimated financing gap of \$86 million between 2012 and 2019 (Downie, 2013: 8; World Bank, 2013). The financial constraints are likely to damage the sustainability of

what limited progress has been made in SSR, with serious concerns about the ability of the Liberian government to maintain the police at current strength, let alone increase it. A further challenge will be responding to the need to increase police pay, considered essential in tackling corruption and improving citizens' perceptions of state security services (HRW, 2013).

3. Implementing security sector reform

It is not yet clear whether the Liberian government will manage to take control of security provision throughout the country, and to continue the reform process. International policies flowing from donor-driven SSR have tended to duplicate international standards without addressing issues of sustainability and local spending capacity. In addition, there has been a mismatch between donor funding and local perceptions of what has contributed to security. Specifically, donors have focused on formal state structures (the army and police) at the expense of informal and community-based approaches. Justice reforms are lagging significantly behind. A general lack of oversight and accountability is the legacy of an over-centralised and patrimonial political system. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are increasingly beginning to hold government to account, but there is a need for much more systematic engagement between CSOs and the Liberian government.



UN peacekeepers near Bomi Blue Lake, Liberia. Photo: © jbdodane.com.

Lessons learned

- **Political settlements in post-conflict countries will be unlikely to perform in a way that proponents of liberal democracy would wish.** It may be that ‘inclusive-enough’ coalitions are required, alongside mechanisms to signal reform commitment and galvanise support for change. What we see in Liberia could be termed a form of ‘illiberal peacebuilding’, combining security, reform and patronage. In the short term, this securitised patronage model combined with some reforms has led to improvements, at least in state–society relations. The critical question, however, is how this settlement will change over the longer term to become more inclusive.
- **While peacekeeping missions can play a vital role in supporting stability, both symbolically and practically, there is a risk of encouraging dependency.** The peacekeeping intervention in Liberia has succeeded in supporting the post-conflict peace and growing security. But the sustainability challenges in the wake of its departure draw attention to the need for more planning around how a country can transition to its own security leadership. The Liberian government faces massive challenges in bridging the financing gap as it takes over leadership on security provision from the international community. The dependency cannot be addressed merely by increasing the scale and capacity of state security actors to meet the levels of the departing peacekeepers; it requires deeper and sustained engagement with the plurality of security actors that exist throughout the country.
- **Gains made with short-term focus on security may not be sustainable in the long run, particularly when they come at the cost of other development dividends.** Insecurity is not simply the by-product of a violent state or a lack of security provision, but is due to a multitude of underlying conflict factors. In Liberia, these includes issues that have historically underpinned major grievances among the population, such as resource exploitation that fails to benefit the masses, disagreements over land, elite governance and corruption, and youth unemployment. While Liberia’s approach thus far has resulted in a fragile stability, the consequent ramifications and trade-offs may yet be felt over the longer term.
- **We need to think of SSR in a more modest and locally relevant way.** The approaches and achievements of donor-led SSR are often criticised in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, largely for being over-ambitious and failing to be context-sensitive. In the case of Liberia, this can mean that minor gains in professionalism in a context where the police have historically been a militarised and violent force, should be, but are not always, recognised and built upon. Thinking in a more locally relevant way, and working with the plurality of security providers in Liberia, is critical.
- **Understanding experiences and perceptions of personal security is crucial to building strategies for sustainable peace.** Security is not merely an objective condition but is subjectively experienced. As a result, measurements of security should ensure that they capture not only objective changes in levels of violence or protection against it, but also citizens’ perceptions of how safe they feel. The value of perception data is even greater in data-poor, post-conflict contexts such as Liberia.

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