



UNDERSTANDING VIGILANTISM

INFORMAL SECURITY PROVIDERS AND
SECURITY SECTOR REFORM IN LIBERIA

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INTRODUCTION

Time and time again African states have been found weak, non-functioning or even mere territorial frames for hosting its citizens. The formal institutions of African states have failed to gain, or even seek, legitimacy and respect of its inhabitants and proven to be incapable of providing its citizens with basic security. As a result, mistrust in these formal institutions and authorities have made people turn to alternative solutions to cope with their everyday lives and safeguard their basic human security. Yet international donors and others, who aim to contribute to the strengthening of the security context in such African states, have seldom managed to look beyond the official facade of the state and its formal security institutions in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how informal networks operate. As this report aims to show, this western tendency to treat the non-state security context as a negligible factor will unavoidably have serious consequences. By not acknowledging the informal sphere, one undoubtedly fails to recognize the very actors and mechanisms that African citizens, more often than not, rely on for their basic security.

From a donor and western perspective, post-conflict states are often understood as weak and fragile political realities. Conflict is perceived as the main source contributing to the loss of state authority and endemic instability, fostering an internal security environment of anarchy and chaos with regional and international repercussions. It is often assumed that nothing works in these societies and that the institutions that safeguard individuals must be built from scratch. The widely prescribed antidote for conflict affected countries usually involves some sort of measures injecting democratic institutional-building to reconstruct (and at times create for the first time) state capacity. While these processes may be necessary and well-intentioned, they are also lengthy and costly. In fact, various studies point out that post-conflict state building results are less than impressive, particularly in the growing and ever-expanding field of security sector reform.¹ Security sector reform (SSR) strategies are meant to assist the creation of state security institutions that are responsive to the security needs of individuals. Security related state-building efforts have generally concentrated on the apparently obvious (or at least readily discernible) actors and state institutions.² This approach, however, is quite contrary to the admittedly fairly recent and widely recognized argument that state-centric security approaches are insufficient for grappling with on-the-ground realities of security provision. As Bruce Baker argues, current security sector reform practices are based “on two false assumptions, namely: that the post-conflict state is able (or even willing) to deliver policing to a majority of its population; and that [the post-conflict state] is the principal actor in policing provision.”³

¹ See studies such as Gordon Peake, Eric Scheye and Alice Hills. “Conclusions” In “Managing Insecurity. Field Experiences of Security Sector Reform”. Gordon Peake, Eric Scheye and Alice Hills Eds. New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 165; Charles T. Call and Elizabeth Cousens. “Ending Wars and Building Peace: Coping with Crisis.” New York: International Peace Academy, 2007. pp. 8-9; Charles T. Call with Vanessa Wyeth. “Building States to Build Peace”. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2008.

² From a security sector reform perspective, the core security actors include: the military, police, border guards, the executive, the legislative (and its security related specialized committees), relevant government ministries (i.e. Ministry of Defence, Justice, Internal Affairs, Finance), and increasingly some relevant civil society groups.

³ Baker, Bruce. (a) “The Future is SSR is Non-state.” Paper presented at “The Future of SSR”, e-conference organized by Centre for International Governance Innovation CIGI, Waterloo, Canada, 4-8 May 2009.

This report argues that any attempt to reform state security institutions as a means of improving overall security must start with a thorough investigation of the current security context. However, during this process of security mapping, informal actors cannot be neglected. Often this very sector not only exists, but also effectively functions and continuously adapts to contextual realities. One must therefore consider the informal networks of security provision and the recognition of non-state security actors that ordinary citizens, in addition to formal security providers, must navigate on an everyday basis. In doing so it also becomes easier to identify the hidden links between these formal and informal networks that at various levels interact, complement, or even compete with each other. The focus of this report is to explore and describe informal security organizations (mainly community watch and vigilante groups) in modern-day Liberia, a country that at the moment is undergoing security sector reform with major assistance from the international community.

As this report will show, vigilantism in Liberia captures a range of interacting political, social, economic, local and international factors and dynamics. It also seeks to shed light on some of the links between informal security actors and the formal sphere, which are seldom studied. By deepening the understanding of Liberia's complex security setting, vigilante activities can be understood as something neither legal, nor something completely illegal, but rather a dynamic response to a variety of needs, including security. One of the main findings in this report is that these informal groups of security providers, both in urban and rural settings, perceive the state's provision of security as something complementary to their own security provision. In fact, the real gatekeepers to Liberia's criminal justice system are the vigilante groups, not the formal security providers, who apprehend suspected criminals and assess their guilt within the confines of the local communities.

1.1 METHODOLOGY

Given the difficulty of accessing and working with informal networks, some caveats are required to explain the methodology of this report. The data for this report was collected in Liberia during February and March of 2009. The study draws heavily on interviews carried out with informally organized security groups found in various neighborhoods in urban Monrovia, in Montserrado County, and in the rural city of Voinjama, in Lofa County. Respondents were interviewed in semi-structured interviews, either in groups and/or individually, and were asked to answer open-ended questions about their perceptions of who provides security for their communities. Additionally, respondents answered questions regarding the characteristics of their organized security groups, the security threats in their communities, and their relationship to the formal security actors. Furthermore, the study draws on interviews with local NGOs' staff, official law enforcement personnel, and other

official actors intimately acquainted with the reform of the Liberia National Police (LNP) and the security situation in Liberia. Other sources of data include official reports from the UN, NGOs, and daily newspapers and contemporary academic publications on informal security provision in Africa. While the interviews yielded much insight into the diverse views and methods of informal security organizing, they only capture a limited aspect of the nature and function of these organizations. Yet by shedding light on some of these aspects, this report will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex web of formal and informal security networks creating the contemporary security setting in Liberia, which will also provide some critical reflection on the current SSR strategies.

1.2 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

The second section outlines the conceptual frameworks of this study and identifies some important definitions underpinning this investigation. It describes the concept of security sector reform and presents theories on informal networks of security provision. It also describes and reviews current academic knowledge on vigilantism. This section also aims to explain the importance of informality in African countries and how vigilantism often becomes a natural part of the security landscape. The third section briefly traces Liberia's peace process and the reform of the security sector. It provides an overview of the police reform process and the challenges to policing in Liberia. This section elaborates on the strategies employed and provides a context to the formal provision of security. The fourth section delves into the various cases of community organized watch groups and vigilantes, based upon interviews carried out in the areas of Monrovia and Voinjama. Apart from describing vigilantism and self-initiated security provision in Liberia, issues such as violence, legitimacy, and the chains of command, including the positions of youth, elders and ex-combatants are discussed. The final section makes some policy recommendations for security sector reform programming, highlighting how and why knowledge on informal security realities is of vital strategic relevance when planning and implementing current and future security sector reform programs.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

Security sector reform (SSR) emerged as a conceptual and policy tool to address the idea, among other things, that development could not occur without security and justice, and vice versa. Donor states acknowledged that, particularly in post-conflict countries, the sources of insecurity were not only poverty and inequality but also a security system incapable of protecting its citizens. In some of these societies, it was precisely the military or the police that were the main causes of insecurity. Without achieving a basic level of security, reconstruction work (such as building schools and roads) was difficult and thus the basic foundations of democracy could not be established. Hence, SSR emerged as a policy to reform, reconstruct or build security institutions with a 'people-centered approach'.⁴ Over the past 15 years, donor states and international organizations have embarked on ambitious, challenging projects that have tried to shape and support security related institutions into agencies, which are responsive to citizens' needs, and which operate effectively and efficiently, according to principles of democratic governance.

The security system of any given nation is composed of a variety of actors and institutions. In fact, some define it as "all groups in society that are capable of using force as well as the institutions that manage, direct, oversee and monitor them, and otherwise play a role in the development of a country's security policy and the provision of its security."⁵ In theory, these include government oversight bodies (such as the Ministry of Defense or Parliament), judicial and penal institutions (such as courts, prosecutors, correctional services), and non-state security actors (such as private security companies, civil society groups, guerrilla armies, and civil defense patrols). In practice, however, most SSR programs target the core security agencies, particularly two of them: the military and the police. Donors have found that supporting SSR, particularly in new democracies, is a highly complicated process and the challenges are varied. Laurie Nathan points out that supporting SSR is affected by a multitude of factors including for instance, "... a lack of vision, expertise and resources; an abiding tendency to view security in an authoritarian, militarist and secretive fashion; resistance to reform from politicians and/or security officers..."; and high levels of stability and violence.⁶ As a result of this complexity, both donors and host governments find that supporting or undertaking SSR 'programs' have to be limited in their scope and ambition – despite the holistic and people-centered approach defined in the SSR 'definition'.

Obstacles such as the lack of capacity, expertise, and resistance to change in a post-conflict country have challenged the application of the SSR concept. SSR activities often focus on building the state and its institutions, often missing the fact that supporting these institutions does not necessarily lead to security strategies and outcomes that are people-centered. Additionally, the strategy of focusing on the military and the police, contradict the principles of efficiency and economic sustainability, as building these institutions from scratch is an incredibly resource intensive endeavor, particularly for post-conflict states. However, in the context of complexity and continued insecurity, these two institutions stand as the most obvious actors to reform. Experience has also shown that SSR programs are seldom coordinated and that reforms tend to be sectoral rather than all-encompassing of the entire security panorama. Reforms, according to SSR principles, should supposedly be carried out in a way that is complementary to or in line with other sectors. So supporting the development of police services without supporting at the same time the criminal justice system will, for example, have a limited impact on SSR.

There has been significant progress in understanding the fact that SSR programs must take a "multi-layered or multi-stakeholder approach" – based on the insight that the state often lacks the capacity of being the sole provider of justice and security. Recognizing that post-conflict states may have capacity deficits, may not be viewed as legitimate, and "... historically may have never exercised full sovereign authority over its territory," the OECD recognizes that "the design of justice and security development indeed requires a multi-layered approach that provides assistance to a range of legitimate state and non-state providers at the multiple points at which actual day-to-day service delivery occurs."⁷ Despite this, as Baker and Scheye note, non-state systems are routinely overlooked by SSR programs.⁸ There is little available in SSR policy circles describing the actual role, capacity, and interest of non-state security actors. Baker and Scheye add that "more often than not, non-state actors are perceived to be purveyors of injustice and insecurity, though little empirical effort has been made to distinguish between different types of non-state actors."⁹ By not truly understanding the nature or characteristics of non-state security actors, SSR programs have excluded individuals who at times have gained more public trust and legitimacy than the formal security agencies. Hence, opportunities for strengthening functioning security mechanisms are limited when the role of non-state security actors is not fully understood or simply neglected.

⁴ For more on the SSR concept and principles see: OECD. "OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform. Supporting Security and Justice." 2007.

⁵ David Law and Oksana Myshlovska. "The Evolution of the Concepts of Security Sector Reform and Security Governance: the EU Perspective." In "The European Union and Security Sector Reform". David Spence and Philipp Fluri Eds. London: John Harper, 2008. p. 6.

⁶ Laurie Nathan. "Obstacles to Security Sector Reform in New Democracies." Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management Aug 2004. <http://www.berghof-handbook.net> p. 2

⁷ OECD Handbook on Security System Reform, 2007. pp. 67-68.

⁸ Bruce Baker and Eric Scheye. "Multi-layered justice and security delivery in post-conflict and fragile states." Conflict, Security and Development Group 7:4, December 2007, p. 505.

⁹ Ibid.

2.2 INFORMAL NETWORKS OF SECURITY PROVISION

In western democracies, the implied assumption is that security and safety are a public good, and it is up to the state to 'deliver' this service. As power and authority rests with the state, mapping out security provision is a fairly straight-forward task of analyzing state institutions and bureaucracies. However, using only this perspective to analyze security provision in many non-western states poses the risk of misunderstanding complex power relations. One can claim that in African states, as in many other parts of the non-western world, official state structures and institutions may often be only one of the relevant players within a multi-actor, multi-faceted security configuration. In fact, the state and non-state actors may share the distribution of 'public goods'.¹⁰ As Baker argues, in this context, the state "has to share authority, legitimacy and capacity with other structures."¹¹ Hence, any analysis of the security setting must thereby also take the 'informal' reality into account.

In Western Africa, most activities are shaped by informal networks made up by a multitude of actors, inter alia: politicians, military, businessmen, NGOs, national and international organizations, secret societies, religious leaders, warlords, trade unions, etc.¹² Support and authorization of these informal networks often enable the formal mechanisms to function and operate.¹³ It is within the informal sphere that the security landscape is defined. In examining security providers in the Mano River Basin area, Jörgel and Utas claim that the informal structures make up about 80 percent of all security providers and they determine the nature of the formal institutions and how they are used. According to them, actors within the informal structures navigate the formal structures and use them as a vehicle to further their own political and economic interests. In real political terms, the formal structures thereby become a mere shadow image of the informal reality.¹⁴

Mapping informal networks – in particular, informal security networks – is often a challenging task. As Jörgel and Utas have pointed out, these structures cannot easily be unraveled, traced or understood – as they are a complex, ever changing web of links. Moreover, actors operating within formal spheres, who often have links to informal structures and non-state security actors, wish to keep these ties hidden. Having connections to security actors outside the formal state apparatus is not considered a suitable picture to present to the western donor world.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the security panorama remains incomplete if the legal and 'illegal' providers of security are not properly considered.

2.3 UNDERSTANDING VIGILANTISM

As has been pointed out by Bruce Baker, organized activities, whether by the state or non-state groups, that seek to ensure the maintenance of communal order, security and peace in Africa through elements of prevention, deterrence, investigation of breaches and punishment are surprisingly largely understudied. What is evident from his studies is that policing in Africa is not a monopoly of the state police. Policing is carried out by formal and informal agencies outside the realm of the police and often outside the realm of the state.¹⁶ Yet, 'non-state policing,' as Baker calls this type of informal security provision, is a valuable asset for advancing safety and security among the poor,¹⁷ especially since poor communities tend to be excluded from formal security provision.

In fact when it comes to security, African citizens have a range of alternatives and actors (state and non-state, legal and illegal) that they must navigate in order to secure their everyday protection.¹⁸ Moreover, evidence also points to the fact that African citizens rarely see formal and informal security provisions as mutually exclusive categories. Baker, for example, argues that as people move about their daily business or as the time of the day changes, people also move from one sphere of security agency to another one, which may be better suited for their protection at that very moment.¹⁹ In this sense formal and informal security providers are all part of a complex pattern of overlapping actors that from a citizens' point of view interact and complement each other, rather than appearing as incompatible alternatives. In that light it is interesting to see under what circumstances people choose one alternative over another. Nevertheless, it is precisely this analysis of the multiplicity of choices that is often neglected when initiating security sector reform processes, as reforms to security actors solely focus on state agencies.

One form of non-state policing that is often cast aside, although it plays a significant part in the security context, is vigilantism. While there is no precise scholarly definition or understanding of what vigilantism exactly is, generally it is understood as a form of protection by organizations or movements, which seek to provide security for their local communities. More precisely, Abrahams' comprehensive definition describes vigilantism as "an organized attempt by a group of 'ordinary citizens' to enforce norms and maintain law and order on behalf of their communities, often by resorting to violence, in the perceived absence of effective official state action through the police and courts."²⁰ Vigilante-type organizations have existed in many cultures, in past and present times, in both rural and urban settings.

¹⁰ Baker. (a).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Magnus Jörgel and Mats Utas. "The Mano River Basin Area – Formal and Informal Security Providers in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone", FOI Defence Analysis, 2007, p. 8.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.12.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Bruce Baker. "Multi-Choice Policing in Africa". Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2008, p. 100.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁸ Some of the choices include mob violence, religious police, civil defence force, etc... For a detailed list of multi choice policing see Baker, 2008, p. 79.

¹⁹ Baker, 2008, p. 27.

²⁰ R. Abrahams. "What's in a name? Some thoughts on the vocabulary of vigilantism and related form of 'informal criminal justice.'" In D. Feenan Ed. "Informal Criminal Justice". London: Ashgate, 2003. p. 26.

Modern-day empirics suggest that often vigilante outcomes are particularly violent and sometimes lethal.²¹ Various studies also point to the effectiveness of these groups, and there are well-documented cases where vigilante success led to a dramatic decrease in crime.²² Of course, as the literature also demonstrates: “The history of vigilantism is filled with cases of mistaken identity, in which the wrong person was made to pay for someone else’s misdeeds.”²³

Vigilante-type organizations often emerge when there is the perception of increased criminality or social deviance which threatens social order.²⁴ These groups flourish not only in places where states lack capacity to protect citizens from crime, but also where the state itself is believed to be corrupt or untrustworthy.²⁵ Deep mistrust of the state and formal security providers, driven by the inability of the police to provide basic security and protect its citizens’ human rights, further encourages vigilantism. Daniel Nina, for example, has argued that vigilantism arises from the perception that the state is doing nothing to guarantee the safety of a community. Accordingly when communities’ demands on the state to do something are considered to have been ignored, actions of vigilantism occur. The state is thereby seen as a limited player with regard to crime prevention and when it comes to guaranteeing citizens’ security.²⁶ But despite this, as argued by David Pratten, vigilantism can not merely be explained as a popular response to the vacuum left by state collapse, failure or instrumentalized disorder.²⁷ Such connections to the formal sphere are more complex than that. According to Buur and Jensen although vigilante organizations often claim to be based outside and in opposition to an ineffective or even predatory state, they are involved in state-like performances like security enforcement to such extent that it causes a renegotiation of the boundaries between state and society. It thereby becomes difficult to distinguish between what is the state and what is not. Vigilante groups operate at the frontier of the state, blurring the boundaries between the state and what normally falls outside of it. According to Buur and Jensen, authority should be seen as not necessarily lodged in particular institutions but as practices performed by different groups which can employ several and different registers. For instance, state representatives can, and do, sometimes use vigilante organizations for legally sanctioned violence.²⁸ Vigilantism can thus often be accepted at local levels of the state since it addresses issues of security and moral order that are relevant to people living on the margin, beyond the reach of the formal state apparatus.²⁹

The public image of these groups often presents a one-sided picture of vigilante groups. They are often described as mere brutal and undisciplined mobs or crowds consisting of mostly young people without any clear social or political identity and as emotional and spontaneous. However, this simplified image may in fact hinder us from fully understanding the complexity of the vigilante phenomenon. Buur and Jensen argue that vigilantism should be seen as a form of local everyday policing. Even though it should be recognized that vigilante groups, in different ways, challenge the rule of law and the state’s monopoly of using legitimate force and often severely infringe on citizen’s rights, Buur and Jensen suggest that vigilantism cannot be reduced to either expressions of the mob or to mere antidotes to formal law.³⁰ In fact, Pratten argues that often vigilante activities are not solely focused on security; vigilantism serves a range of other functions in a community, such as disciplining children, sponsoring unemployed youth, recovering debts, and screening political candidates.³¹ In line with these arguments, this study recognizes the complexity of vigilantism, and looks beyond the one-sided picture of these movements as brutal gangs. This perspective is crucial in understanding why non-state security provision often is a rational choice for many African citizens. In order to help nuance the picture, it is also important to comprehend this phenomenon in relation to the formal state security provision. Vigilantism and informal security provision cannot be reduced to formal and state controlled security’s antithesis, the relation between the formal and informal is in this sense much more convoluted.

²¹ Mensah Adinkrah. “Vigilante homicides in contemporary Ghana.” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 33, 2005, p. 415; see also F.G. Allen. “Vigilante justice in Jamaica: The community against Crime.” *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 21, 1997.

²² See studies such as Lars Buur. “Crime and Punishment on the Margins of the Post-Apartheid State”, *Anthropology and Humanism*, 28, 1, 2003; Barbara Oomen. “Vigilantism or Alternative Citizenship? The Rise of Mapogo a Mathamaga.” *African Studies*, 63, 2, December 2004; R. Abrahams. “Sungusungu: Village Vigilante Groups in Tanzania”, *African Affairs*, 86, 1987.

²³ Adinkrah, 2005, p. 415.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Suzette Heald. “Controlling Crime and Corruption from Below: Sungusungu in Kenya. *International Relations* 21, 2007, p. 183.

²⁶ Daniel Nina. “Dirty Harry is back: Vigilantism in South Africa – The (re)emergence of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ community”, *African Security Review*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2000.

²⁷ David Pratten, (a) “The Politics of Protection: Perspectives on Vigilantism in Nigeria”, *Africa* 78 (1), 2008, p. 8.

²⁸ Lars Buur and Steffen Jensen. “Vigilantism and the Policing of Everyday Life in South Africa”, *African Studies*, 63, 2, 2004, p. 144.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 139.

³⁰ Buur and Jensen. 2004, p. 140.

³¹ David Pratten. (b) “The thief eats his shame: practice and power in Nigerian Vigilantism. *Africa* 78 (1), 2008, p. 65

A BACKGROUND TO SECURITY SECTOR REFORM IN LIBERIA

In August 2003 in Accra, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed by the warring parties of Liberia, after the two Liberian civil wars between 1989 – 1996 and 1999 – 2003.³² Following the resignation of the former rebel-leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and later Liberian president Charles Taylor, in September of the same year, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was established to monitor the ceasefire agreement and support other aspects of the CPA, including the security sector reform. More specifically, Security Council Resolution 1509 (2003) stipulated that one of the mandates of UNMIL should be to “assist the transitional government of Liberia in monitoring and restructuring the police force of Liberia, consistent with democratic policing, to develop a civilian police training program, and to otherwise assist in the training of civilian police...”³³ UNMIL took the leading role in the reform of the Liberia National Police (LNP) and other civilian security state agencies (such as the Immigration Force, the Special Security Services, and the border patrol), while the United States focused on reforming the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). Security sector reform in Liberia from the outset has presented an enormous challenge. Rebuilding the police, the armed forces, and other security institutions was undertaken in the context of socio-economic and political collapse, fuelled by fourteen years of civil war and a massive scale humanitarian crisis. Among other things, SSR has meant addressing a security sector that historically has been dysfunctional, politicized, and beyond the ruling elite inexperienced in protecting Liberian citizens. Coupled with these issues is Liberia’s weak judicial system, as well as the lack of basic infrastructure and few resources in the courts and prisons.

3.1 THE RIGHT STRATEGY? THE RIGHT INSTITUTIONS?

Liberia is progressively restoring peace and stability, while attempting to also consolidate democracy. The recently produced National Security Strategy³⁴ and Pillar I³⁵ in Liberia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy³⁶ are attempts by the government to comprehensively address security matters, particularly formal security institutions, in ways that are congruent with governance and professionalism. The total recreation of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), according to some, appears to be a provisional success.³⁷ Several military bases have undergone refurbishing with the assistance of American contractors. The vetting and recruitment program of the AFL appear to have been well run, and over 2000 recruits have undergone basic training.

The Liberia National Police (LNP) did not undergo such an effective vetting process, something that will be discussed later in this paper, but has made some other important achievements. To date, over 3,600 officers have been trained by UNMIL, and much of that training in the Police Academy is now being conducted by Liberian officers. Additionally, within the LNP there is a Professional Services Unit, which is increasingly trying to address internal affairs and to deal with cases of police misconduct.

Yet despite some important achievements, the SSR process has been problematic and at times policy has been misguided and not prioritized in dealing with the current security environment of Liberia. Many in Liberia argue that the international community and the national government have focused too much on the armed forces, considering the fact that their budget is disproportionately larger than the LNP’s.³⁸ The lack of resources has detrimentally affected the capacity of the LNP, something that will be discussed below, and as a result citizens are not being protected, especially from crime. Additionally, other security agencies (such as the Ministry of Security, the National Security Agency, and the National Bureau of Investigation) have been virtually untouched. Considering the abusive past of the AFL, it is understandable that reform efforts address the undisciplined and politicized ways of the armed forces and firmly establish civilian control. Upon the signing of the peace accord, Liberia, like many other post-conflict settings, has faced new security challenges mainly in the form of theft, burglary, assault and rape. The increasing number of land and property disputes has also intensified ethnic tensions and resulted in outbreaks of violence.³⁹ Bearing in mind that the LNP is the formally recognized as the primary law enforcement body in the country, one must question whether it has received sufficient attention.

³² For a more detailed account of Liberia’s civil wars and transition to peace see Mary H. Moran. “Liberia. The Violence of Democracy”. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006; Adekeye Adebajo “Building Peace in West Africa. Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau”. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 2002.

³³ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1509. S/RES/1509 (2003) p. 4.

³⁴ Government of Liberia. National Security Strategy of the Republic of Liberia, January 2008.

³⁵ Four main sectors of intervention, or “pillars” were identified in Liberia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper: (I) Security; (II) Economic Revitalization; (III) Governance and the Rule of Law; and (IV) Infrastructure and Basic Services.

³⁶ International Monetary Fund. “Liberia: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper”. July 2008, IMF Country Report No. 08/219.

³⁷ International Crisis Group. “Liberia: Uneven Progress in Security Sector Reform”. Report N 148, 13 January 2009, p. 9.

³⁸ Alloysius David. Liberia: “Police’s Budget Can’t Fight Crime” 7 July 2008, AllAfrica, Available from: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200807071359.html>, Accessed: 13/08/2009 13:05.

³⁹ National Security Strategy of Liberia p. 22. Interview with UN official, Monrovia, March 5, 2009.

The absence of a comprehensive and ‘whole-of-government’ approach to SSR is also evident by the lack of coordination efforts. An example of this can be seen in Liberia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy: while Pillar I addresses security issues, Pillar III addresses rule of law matters. This distinction, evident throughout SSR programs in Liberia, is a setback because the police and the criminal justice system will only be as effective as their counterparts. Thus far, the justice system, the courts, and prisons have undergone limited reform. In fact, corruption in the judicial system is endemic; there are massive case backlogs and prolonged pre-trial detentions, and often suspects are released without ever going to trial.⁴⁰ Hence, successful apprehension of a criminal by the police is often insufficient to keep criminals permanently off the streets. The Ministry of Justice is technically responsible for coordinating security sector reforms. Presently there is no such capacity, although there have been discussions to create such a role.⁴¹

Despite the fact that the reforms have been uncoordinated, they have at the same time, ironically, been centralized and state-centric. Other relevant security actors (such as private security companies, customary chiefs, and to some extent ex-AFL soldiers and former police officers) have been largely left out of reform discussions. Reform efforts, such as the creation of the police’s armed elite Emergency Response Unit (ERU), have mainly occurred in the capital Monrovia and have not taken into account that 40% of Liberians live in rural areas.⁴² There has been a proposal to create County Security Councils and District Security Councils, which would allow local security agencies, civil society and other government agencies the opportunity to discuss and actively participate in national security issues. However, to date, such efforts remain to be implemented. Police representation outside of Monrovia has improved, but is still limited. In rural areas, for example, the number of active police officers at times was merely 30 in Bomi County and 54 in Bong County.⁴³ The Professional Services Unit is based at the police headquarters, and so one must wonder how internal affairs investigations are conducted outside the capital. Similarly the AFL, as of yet, has not been deployed throughout Liberia. UNMIL troops and the armed UN Formed Police Units are still the primary actors safeguarding rural areas when conflicts break out.

3.2 POLICING WITHOUT POLICE

Policing inadequacies in Liberia are most commonly explained by the fact that they are under-resourced. Across Liberia police officers, government representatives, and citizens widely agree that the LNP has funding and logistical problems. It is not uncommon to walk into a police depot and find that there are no radios, computers, office supplies, toilets, or electricity. Officers do not have batons, gas, or handcuffs, and many use their personal mobile phones to communicate with each other and with police headquarters. Vehicles are scarce, as is fuel.

In Lofa County, for example, a deputy police commander said that there was only one vehicle available in an area with about 250,000 inhabitants.⁴⁴ Most often the vehicle was used to transport the police commander to and from Lofa and Monrovia. Without cars, the police cannot respond rapidly. They are not able to transport suspected criminals, nor are they able to patrol. UNPOL officers often report that they spend their time chauffeuring LNP officers. Needless to say, forensic investigation equipment and capabilities are almost non-existent. This often results in not having enough or proper evidence to hold suspects for trial. Important achievements (such as the LNP’s newly formed Women and Children’s Protection Section) are undermined by chronic understaffing and limited resources.⁴⁵

One of the more problematic issues for the LNP is that there are insufficient officers for the security needs of the country, especially since officers are unarmed. The political decision to create an unarmed LNP was not necessarily incorrect, considering its past misuse of power and force. Yet, a completely unarmed police officer faced with criminals armed with machetes or guns is rarely able to stop them or even protect themselves. As a result, there are some areas that the police are unable or unwilling to patrol. Given this, and the fact that police officers take home a pay check of a little bit more than US\$70 per month (after deducting insurance and other fees), patrolling the streets at the cost of risking one’s life is understandably unappealing. Furthermore, since these wages are so low and realistically cannot financially support a police officer, corruption becomes a tool for survival.

3.3 A NEW FACE ON THE OLD LNP, OR AN OLD FACE ON THE NEW LNP?

It is unsurprising that public confidence in the new LNP, while it has improved, is still low. There have been efforts to make LNP into a more effective, people centered-service; however, it is widely recognized that security sector reform is a long term process. The reality is that it will take many years, if not decades, for the LNP to build expertise, consolidate practices, and gain the necessary respect to effectively carry out policing functions. Yet, the increased crime and sense of insecurity only further deteriorates the LNP’s legitimacy and reputation. In a fieldwork survey, 76% of Liberians responded that the most important actor ensuring their personal safety was UNMIL, while only 18% felt the same of the Liberia National Police.⁴⁶ Many interviewees cited cases where the police took hours to arrive to a crime scene and then often were unable to properly investigate or even solve the case. Public perception of the LNP is not just based on its apparent lack of capacity and inability to respond to criminal activities, but also on their assessment of the police reform process. Many believe that the LNP is still made up of ‘dirty cops’. Part of this problem is associated to the vetting process of the LNP – which for many Liberians and international observers was a failure.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ “Liberia. Warnings Against Mob Justice.” Africa Research Bulletin, October 1 -31, 2006 p. 16831.

⁴¹ Interview with Dr. Thomas Jaye, Governance Commission, Monrovia, March 12, 2009.

⁴² Liberia has a population of about 3 million. Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects: The 2007 Revision, <http://esa.un.org/unup/>, Monday, April 20, 2009; 8:09:54 AM.

⁴³ Bruce Baker. (b) “Resource Constraint and policy in Liberia’s post-conflict policing.” Forthcoming, 2009, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Interview with a local deputy police commander, Voinjama, March 2009.

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of State. Liberia. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. March 6, 2007. Available from: <http://www.state.gov/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78742.htm> 2009-04-21.

⁴⁶ Judy Smith-Höhn, “Multi-Level Security Provision in Post-Conflict Societies: Local Perspectives from Liberia and Sierra Leone”. Paper for the AEGIS European Conference on African Studies, “African Alternatives: Initiative and Creativity beyond Current Constraints.” p. 5. 2007.

⁴⁷ International Crisis Group. January 2009, p. 17.

It is widely acknowledged that the vetting procedures did not effectively weed out past perpetrators of human rights. At the same time, some argue that the deactivation process removed too many qualified senior police officers, leaving significant managerial gaps in the LNP, as well as removing proper role models for younger officers. One international police officer, assisting the LNP with internal affairs, believes that an additional problem is the fact that the remaining senior officers that were actually left behind are corrupt and “contaminate” the new recruits.⁴⁸

Liberians also acknowledge that the new LNP does not embody principles of accountability and good governance, as SSR efforts set out to do – in fact the LNP to a certain extent is arguably a politicized security agency. The President of Liberia (Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson) has been directly responsible for the appointment of not only the Inspector General (IG) but also of various police commissioners, only one of which is an actual professional police officer.⁴⁹ The appointment of Beatrice Munah-Sieh, a former New Jersey teacher with no police experience, to Inspector General created great controversy and questioned the direction of the LNP. Moreover, critical opinions of this presidential decision were accentuated, when President Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson ‘punished’ Munah-Sieh for a ‘grave incident’ by granting her a month of training in the United States, despite recommendations calling for her resignation.⁵⁰ One of the latest controversies was the political appointment of an advisor to the LNP’s Inspector General, who was the former Police Director under Charles Taylor’s administration and has a poor human rights record, which is well-documented.⁵¹

There are also plenty of media reports pointing to cases of police misconduct.⁵² This also includes higher echelons within the LNP, who were found stealing fuel or abusing their authority and influence. In many cases, these police officers are inadequately disciplined.⁵³ An American contractor, working on justice reform issues, accounted for cases of severe police misconduct, where the police officers were ‘untouchable’ due to their extensive ties to important and powerful people – ‘big men’.⁵⁴ In one case, the internal investigation was obstructed by other security institutions, including the National Security Agency and the National Bureau of Investigation, which prevented the prosecution of the corrupt officer. Despite efforts to hold the police accountable, misconduct is often treated with impunity and the LNP is a tool for political manipulation to reward and protect a few. To illustrate this belief amongst Liberians, the LNP’s newly formed ERUs (Emergency Response Units) are in Monrovia better known as “Ellen’s Response Units”, after their close relations to the president.

3.4 COMMUNITY POLICING THROUGH COMMUNITY WATCH GROUPS OR VIGILANTES?

Recently, there has been much attention devoted to the use of ‘community-oriented policing’ strategies, particularly in police reform efforts in post-conflict countries. Liberia is no exception. Donor-driven community-oriented policing programs aim at creating improved coordination and communication between the police and those being policed. Through ‘consultative efforts’ in the areas patrolled, police are able to, in theory, discern the needs and priorities of a specific community. In Liberia, in order to both improve policing capacity and public perceptions of the police, Community Policing Forums (CPF) were set up to link police and communities. However, the results of such forums are mixed. Many argue that the CPFs are not sufficiently supported by the police.⁵⁵ In some cases, criminals identified by community members are not dealt with. Additionally, CPF members complain that the forums are run on a completely voluntary basis with little or no assistance from the government – members must also pay for their own stationary, mobile phones, flashlights, etc. Nonetheless, Community Policing Forums have become especially important in Monrovia. Through the CPFs’ channels, the LNP encouraged the creation of community watch groups, with the purpose of apprehending criminals. In the face of growing crime and violence and given the police’s inability to deal with lawlessness, the former Minister of Justice Frances Johnson Morris in 2006 called on Liberians “to organize themselves into community watch teams or vigilante groups.”⁵⁶ Soon after the Minister’s statement, UNMIL’s police commissioner stated: “we have to forget the word vigilante and focus on community policing forums that were created by the LNP supported by UNMIL” and added that people should not patrol the streets.⁵⁷ Despite of trying to take back her statement, the Minister of Justice tapped into a phenomenon that already existed in Liberia: people using self-help solutions to insecurity. The following section provides a description of these groups, their manner of operating, and their status between the formal and informal.

⁴⁸ Interview with UNPOL officer previously stationed in Liberia, Stockholm, February 2009.

⁴⁹ Interview with an international police officer, Monrovia, March 3, 2009.

⁵⁰ This incident resulted in a bloody shoot-out between the LNP and the Seaport Police with apparent knowledge of the Inspector General. See “Decision on Freeport Probe Must be Clear” The Analyst Newspaper, August 7, 2007; James Thomas-Queh. “The Police in Question: A Grave Security Pitfall To be Reckoned With?” The Perspective, Atlanta Georgia, July 18, 2008.

⁵¹ Sorbor George. “Taylor’s Police Director to advise LNP”. Star Radio Liberia, Thursday, 12 February 2009.

⁵² Peter A. Fahn. “Liberia: President Sirleaf Fuels Debate On Police” October 2008, BBC World Service Trust, Available from: http://www.communicatingjustice.org/en/stories/04102008_liberia_president_sirleaf_fuels_debate_police, Accessed on: 8/13/2009 1:14 PM;

⁵³ Interview with an American justice reform contractor. Monrovia, March 5, 2009.

⁵⁴ For a discussion on ‘big men’ and their ability to achieve and maintain power and control through social networks see Jörgel and Utas, 2007.

⁵⁵ Interview with local NGOs working on security issues. Monrovia, March 2, 2009.

⁵⁶ “Liberia calls for citizen vigilantes to fight crime”, AlertNet, 6 Sept. 2006.

⁵⁷ UNMIL. Weekly Press Briefing. September 13, 2006. Available from: <http://unmil.org/1article.asp?id=1630&zdoc=1>, Accessed 07/10/2009 17:50

VIGILANTES IN LIBERIA – LOCAL DEFENDERS OR MENACE TO SOCIETY?

The web of security provision in Liberia is complex and multi-dimensional. At one level, reforms are in the process of creating state-driven central institutions tasked with maintaining security and enforcing law and order. At the same time, the sources of security (and insecurity) in Liberia exist outside formal state structures, at times competing with them, and at times part of a multifaceted continuum of relationships and networks. Whether in rural Lofa or in the inner city neighborhoods of Monrovia, public security occurs beyond the legal authority of the Liberia National Police. In these different contexts, groups of ordinary citizens (usually young men) organize themselves along different structures, sometimes with formal permission from the authorities, identifying themselves as ‘neighborhood/community watch groups’ or ‘vigilantes’.

For this study interviews were conducted with participants from six loosely defined conglomerations of groups that have distinctly organized themselves according to their communities’ security needs and capabilities. Some of the groups were made up of members of the same ethnic groups, but the majority of them seemed to organize themselves according to locality. Three of them, the Mandingo Group, the Loma Group, and the Bazzi Quarter group operated in Voinjama, although the latter had ceased to operate at the time when the interviews were carried out. Voinjama, the capital of Lofa County, is a small city located in the heavily-forested north-western part of Liberia bordering Guinea and Sierra Leone. Situated in Liberia’s rich agricultural and diamond-mining area, the city of Voinjama was a prosperous and booming city before the two civil wars. However, Voinjama was heavily affected by the wars. In fact, it was here the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebels launched its campaign against President Charles Taylor during the second war. Voinjama changed hands several times during the years of fierce fighting. When disarmament finally came in 2004, much of the once flourishing city had been destroyed by the heavily artillery. Today, Voinjama, with the third largest numbers of ex-combatants in Liberia, is now struggling with poverty and high unemployment rates. Many of the bullet-scarred houses are still painted with names of rebel groups, which bear witness to the brutal war that raged here not so long ago.

For this study, three urban groups were also interviewed in the capital city Monrovia: the Paynesville Group and the Congo Town Group operating in the suburbs of Monrovia, and the Sinkor Group operating in the city center (a short distance from the UNMIL Headquarters).

Monrovia, as much of the country, was left in ruins after the two civil wars. During the second civil war, the capital was extensively damaged in 2003 during the major military confrontation between the Liberian Armed Forces and the LURD rebels. Poverty, unemployment, heavy criminality and illiteracy are among the many everyday challenges in the marginalized areas where interviews took place. As this research has shown, young men⁵⁸ both in the urban and rural settings believed the state’s provision of security, at best, to be something complementary to their own security provision. It is evident that these vigilante groups, and not the formal security providers, were the real gatekeepers of Liberia’s criminal justice system and, in some situations, of the corrections system too.

4.1 THE ORIGINS OF LIBERIAN VIGILANTES

The one common trait among all groups studied in this report is that their *raison d’être* is simple and consistent, “The state has failed us; therefore, we’ve taken on the task of defending our community ourselves.”⁵⁹ Since the end of the 2003 civil war, the crime rate has remained high as is typical in post-conflict settings. As one of the informants said, “The houses of our neighborhoods get burglarized almost every night here. The criminals are often organized and they come in armed gangs.”⁶⁰ The most common security issue reported during our interviews was crime in the form of burglary and theft. While spousal abuse, rape, and, to a certain extent, murders are also significant security threats, these were generally less discussed by the informants. In Voinjama, an elderly chief reported that in the past young men would sell marijuana, fostering a climate for further criminality. However, this stopped when the community watch group reported such activities to the police. According to these group members, criminality after the war greatly increased due to poverty and the lack of opportunities for ex-combatants and for those people returning from neighboring countries after the war. In Voinjama, the various group members that were interviewed believed that more than half of all the criminals came from neighboring Guinea in hope of reaping some of the US dollars readily available in Liberia. Another explanation was that criminals in Monrovia often hid in the rural areas (such as those in Lofa County), knowing well that the police with its limited resources would not be able to find them.⁶¹

⁵⁸ In the vigilante or community watch groups interviewed for this study no women were active members. Women could have supportive roles but did not patrol the streets at night time. Nonetheless, young women may actually take a more active part in similar security settings, but are perhaps less visible due to the prevalent gender structures.

⁵⁹ Interviews with vigilante and community watch groups conducted during March 2009 in Monrovia and Voinjama.

⁶⁰ Interview with a vigilante member in Monrovia, March 2009.

⁶¹ Interviews with vigilante and community watch groups in Voinjama, March 2009.

Patrolling the streets then had become a necessity to a non-functioning and absent police force. The young men interviewed expressed their frustration over the fact that the police did not have the capacity, resources, and sometimes even the willingness to prevent burglary, rape, abuse and other crimes in their communities. Despite the creation of Community Policing Forums in some of the neighborhoods where the interviewed vigilante groups operated, many of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the actual involvement and unwillingness of the police to address specific community security issues. Many respondents claimed that it took several hours for the police to arrive to the crime scene, if they showed up at all. In the Bazzi Quarter, a maze-like neighborhood, with narrow alley ways, informants reported that the unarmed police rarely, if ever, entered the area, especially at night. Several group members did hold a general belief that the Liberia National Police had somewhat improved, but not enough to keep them safe. However, all groups reported that police corruption was endemic and in the words of a Mandigo Group informant, "There are still some ugly officers."⁶² Some were believed to harbor criminals or even share dwellings with them. Some, he added, are criminals themselves, often involved in 'gangster' like activities, dealing marijuana and cocaine. The demand of bribes was a regular occurrence, and people almost accepted it as part of the daily routine, knowing well that the police officers were underpaid. In light of these circumstances, the young men felt that they had to organize themselves because the police were not trustworthy.⁶³

4.2 MODES OF OPERATION

Although the modes of action somewhat varied among the community watch groups and the vigilantes interviewed here, there were several similarities. Usually patrols were made up of groups of 10-20 young men who met after dusk (any time from 9pm to 12am) to patrol specific areas until the morning hours (until about 2am or 6am). While these young men patrolled in the strictest sense, or were 'hanging out' with their friends, they kept a vigilant eye on their surroundings and for possible trouble and 'rogues'.⁶⁴ These patrols stopped and interrogated any stranger that entered their neighborhood. Upon asking one of the group leaders how these men know who is a stranger, he said: "The youth know exactly who belongs and who doesn't belong in the community." Some groups claimed to use passwords at night in order to verify that a person actually belonged to a specific community. However, once a person was deemed suspicious, the group would question the individual to find out their motive or intention for being in that area. If they found the explanation acceptable, they would let them go or escort them to where they claimed they were going. However, if the person in question seemed "up to no good," then other actions were taken. "Depending on the nature of the crime, we either punish him ourselves or take him to the police."⁶⁵

The specific course of action taken by different vigilante groups, when faced with a criminal or a potential one, seemed to greatly vary from group to group. Those groups that had approval from the police to operate as 'community watch groups' clearly recognized that "even criminals have rights" and "with power comes responsibility." In these cases, the criminals were then escorted to the police depot, although often without any actual evidence collected except for the testimony given by the vigilante group member(s). However, almost all 'formally registered' community watch groups and vigilante groups interviewed in this study eventually admitted that the captured person was never immediately, and not always, brought to the police. As noted above, an individual's guilt or innocence was often determined on the spot after an interrogation, and sometimes, so was their punishment.⁶⁶

Despite the fact that there is currently no war in Liberia, violence is clearly an everyday reality for these groups, particularly in urban areas. Patrolling the streets of Monrovia is a dangerous undertaking, and group members such as those in Sinkor report that they themselves have often been injured when facing criminals. As a result, they have armed themselves with machetes and iron bars, claiming that the criminals often were better equipped than they were. Consequently they felt forced to respond with armed violence. In his article on Nigerian vigilantes, Baker also touches upon this issue of escalating violence. He argues that the most fundamental response to the use of force is counterforce. Despite the fact that citizens arm themselves, criminals continue their illegal activities while preparing themselves with the intention to meet defensive violence with violence. However, criminal violence not only drives people to defend themselves but also retaliate in anger.⁶⁷ When this happens, the escalation of violence is often unavoidable. The 'defensive violence' of the Liberian vigilantes could thereby be seen both as a response, a consequence, and a contributing factor to the structural and physical violence of everyday life in Liberia.

These aspects highlight that the existence of vigilante groups leads to a number of negative consequences. The most obvious one is when these groups become more of a threat, rather than the defenders of the community. The unpredictable nature of these groups can become particularly exacerbated when the young men patrol the streets under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or when their vigilante ways become profitable; for example, when they resort to extortion or other gang-like activities. On the one hand, there is much evidence that 'so-called' suspects' rights are severely violated by these methods and the manner in which they are apprehended. But on the other hand, one can wonder who is protecting the rights of the community members who live in constant fear from burglary and other crimes.

⁶⁴ This is the term used by Liberians to describe thieves or criminals.

⁶⁵ Interviews with vigilante and community watch groups conducted during March 2009 in Monrovia and Voinjama.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Bruce Baker, "When the Bakassi Boys Came: Eastern Nigeria Confronts Vigilantism", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20 (2): 223-244, 2002, pp. 238, 242.

One pattern that seems to have emerged from the interviews is the issue of escalating violence. As previously noted, the increase in violent methods was not only a reaction to better armed criminals, but also a result of frustration. Almost all of the community watch group members mentioned that they felt a strong sense of frustration about the fact that apprehended criminals were not properly dealt with by the police or the courts, and that in many cases they were released after a day or two. In their defense, the formal authorities explained that often these groups would apprehend a suspected criminal and bring the person to the police without any concrete evidence. They also claimed that the group members were not willing to follow up these cases and/or testify against the suspected criminals in court. In short, vigilante groups seemed more willing to take the law into their own hands, rather than to hand over the suspected criminal to an inefficient, corrupt police force. This clearly demonstrates an area where better communication and increased awareness between the police and the community watch groups could lead to a possible reduction of violence and mob justice.

4.3 ORGANIZATION AND CHAINS OF COMMAND – THE ROLE OF ELDERS, YOUTH, AND EX-COMBATANTS

As mentioned above, vigilante and community watch groups' self-expressed purpose and reason for existing are generally consistent from group to group; however, the organizational structure and chains of command significantly differed between the groups interviewed for this study. In Voinjama, all of the interviewed groups had strong ties to their respective traditional chief. Likewise, the position of elders was also deemed important in these communities. In the Mandingo Group, a relative to the Mandingo chief, had, with police permission, organized his community's watch group. He was an elder or someone who could be described as a "big man", characterized by his close ties to the chief, and a high social status (that is, was married and was able to afford a house, something that was impossible for the social category of youth). Due to his strong sense of commitment for the local community, and his ability to create a network of dependants, he had taken on the responsibility of organizing protection for the community. This form of organization can be understood by the concept of 'big men and networks' used by Jörgel and Utas to explain the logic of patron-client relations in African countries where the mutual dependency between 'big men' and clients determine how social relations are constructed. By creating networks of dependants, a 'big man' is able to manifest his/her power while the clients in return for giving support also receive favors.⁶⁸

Within the Mandingo community this organizational structure provides mutual benefits for the 'big men' and the youth. As the community watch group leader explained, this was also a way to occupy the youth of his area – young unemployed men – some of whom were ex-combatants. In his opinion, getting the youth to participate in the watch group was a way to keep them out of crime and to make them feel that they contributed to the community. The Mandingo Group was highly organized.

This may be related to the fact that Voinjama, as a former LURD stronghold, with many of its fighters from the Mandingo community, still had lingering military organizational structures in place. Not only did the Mandingo group collect fees from families (\$20LD) and shops (\$50LD), but the "Team Head of the Community Watch Group" kept a detailed roster of all the young men involved in patrolling the area. Furthermore, the group had two other additional team leaders – a security advisory and a coordinator.

The young men of the Mandingo group answered to the team head and the other elders, and were not allowed to take any decisions themselves, on what to do with captured suspects. In this case, power and influence are clearly limited by the traditional power structures. Yet during the war these structures had often been eroded when youth rebels suddenly achieved powerful positions. However, this chain of command was often complicated. The team head noted that it was difficult to convince the young men to not take the law into their own hands.

Yet in other settings, the power structures and the group compositions were completely different. Just as the war in some sense had empowered youth and challenged the traditional authority of elders, the vigilante movements could offer young men influential positions in their neighborhoods.⁶⁹ In one of the vigilante groups in central Monrovia, the elders of the community had no direct influence over the group's activities. The young men, from various ethnic backgrounds, who had organized the group had chosen their leader because he was well-respected and popular in their neighborhood – a former and well-known elite basketball player. He and a few young men close to him were responsible for taking decisions and implementing them; that is, they did not need to consult the neighborhood elders first. This group also admitted to cooperating with other vigilante groups, when necessary, especially in light of organized gangs. Vigilantism for many from this group was an 'extra-curricular' activity that they participated in after they had finished their studies or their day jobs.

A former vigilante leader in Paynesville, Monrovia, described yet another structure of organization. He himself had been appointed as the leader of his neighborhood vigilante group by the elders of the community and was thereby responsible for a group of 50 young men. Whenever they arrested a suspected criminal, they were supposed to bring the person to the elders so that they could decide whether the person should be brought to the police or not. However, this did not always occur. Frustration over the fact that the 'suspected criminal' they had captured was often released by the police and seldom prosecuted, drove them to punishing the suspect themselves, without involving either the police or the elders. As the vigilante leader expressed, "We had a rule in my neighborhood: the fourth time a guy was caught committing a crime something really bad happened to him, and if his crime was serious we killed him." These young men, often unemployed or marginalized, could thereby suddenly hold very influential positions when serving as vigilantes.

⁶⁸ Jörgel and Utas, 2007, p. 13.

⁶⁹ As argued by Mats Utas (2005), the Liberian Civil War temporarily created new opportunities for people who had earlier been marginalized. Young people from marginalized backgrounds became field commanders and strongmen in their communities.

Ex-combatants also appeared to have a special position within several of the vigilante and community watch groups. In the Mandingo community watch group in Voinjama a former high level LURD commander held the position of security advisor. With long experience from the Liberian civil wars (first as an officer within the Liberian Army then as a LURD commander), he was well-known in the Lofa County: respected by some, feared by others. Nevertheless, he had significant influence over the community watch groups, as he together with the leader was responsible for choosing, organizing and training the young men. He picked certain men because they were former LURD combatants and already had training; others because he trusted them and had known them since they were children. Even though other vigilante and community watch groups were not mainly composed of ex-combatants, similar structures and chains of command prevailed. Recent research has shown that LURD combatants continued to have a strong influence in Lofa County after the war had come to an end. When villages in the county were repopulated in 2004 and 2005, former LURD commanders assumed policing roles and were assisted by dozens of young combatants. However, these well-armed combatants with little supervision actually became a security risk. Nonetheless, several communities still accepted this security arrangement during this period, probably under the assumption that with former LURD soldiers in the community, they were less likely to fall victim to LURD attacks.⁷⁰

The informants in these groups mentioned both the advantages and the difficulties of having ex-combatants in their groups. As a former vigilante group leader from Monrovia explained, he always needed to have some ex-combatants in his groups because of their fearless attitude and because they were not afraid to use violence when necessary. He further added that having ex-combatants in his group meant that others became reluctant to commit crimes in his neighborhood, knowing well that these young men with combat experience were capable of dealing with criminals. These young men were fearless and others feared them, and thus they effectively deterred crime just by their presence. Such statements were made by members of the other groups as well. Yet, ex-combatants also caused problems for their vigilante groups. Their past experiences from the war and fearless attitude towards violence made them unpredictable and difficult to control, and sometimes under the influence of alcohol and drugs this became even worse. They were often more likely to respond with violence, and could therefore put the entire group at risk.⁷¹

As much of the research has shown, ex-combatants are often one of the most vulnerable groups in post-conflict societies often facing marginalization, exclusion and stigmatization after war.⁷²

In particular, there has been much discussion regarding the fact that the DDR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration) process in Liberia did not adequately address or satisfy the needs of ex-combatants.⁷³ The reintegration phase has been challenging. One group of ex-combatants, during interviews, mentioned that the psycho-social dimension and (re)integration into the labor force have been very problematic for them. As a result, they further added, many ex-combatants in Liberia found it very difficult to make a transition into a life that did not deal, in one way or another, with 'security matters'.⁷⁴ Ex-combatants could thereby easily be mobilized in new security settings as members of chains of commands and structures which often remained after the war. However, their participation in these community watch groups, as shown above, can bring both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, providing job opportunities for the young people in a community, can strengthen the security situation (depending on the situation and the individual), and provide the first step to reintegrating young ex-combatants into civilian life. On the other hand, organized ex-combatants in vigilante or community watch groups can essentially contribute to maintaining rebel structures and chains of commands, further impeding the reintegration process. Another concern given the highly organized structures of some of these groups is the fact that these informal security networks could easily be remobilized if armed conflict would arise again in Liberia.

4.4 LEGITIMATE VIOLENCE? – RELATIONS TO COMMUNITY, CRIMINALITY AND FORMAL SECURITY ACTORS

The community and the vigilantes appear to have a symbiotic relationship. Despite whatever feelings or thoughts ordinary citizens have about these groups, people often resort to them when there is a problem; for example, when their house has been burglarized or when a crime is in progress. At the same time the vigilantes may rely on the community for information on who is doing what, how someone was able to afford a new stereo or television, or who came in sudden possession of money. Some groups appear to have a more formalized backing from their communities, sometimes in the form of food, coffee, flash lights, mobile phones or 'small small money'. Whether these contributions are given out of free will, fear, or pressure is of course difficult to determine. However, this type of support appears to be important for the sustainability of these groups. The Bazzi Quarter Group, for example, claimed to have stopped patrolling because the community no longer wanted to or could support them financially. As previously mentioned, the highly organized Mandingo Group received significant support from their community.

⁷⁰ Richard Hill, Jonathan Temin and Lisa Pacholek. "Building Security Where There Is No Security", in *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2007, pp. 43-44.

⁷¹ Interviews with vigilante and community watch groups conducted during March 2009 in Monrovia and Voinjama.

⁷² See for example Utas, 2005, on the situation of young ex-combatants in Liberia and how they more often faced re-marginalization rather than re-integration in the aftermath of war.

⁷³ See studies such as Kathleen M. Jennings. "The Struggle to Satisfy: DDR Through the Eyes of Ex-combatants in Liberia." *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 14, No. 2, April 2007, pp. 204-218; Richard Hill, Gwendolyn Taylor, and Jonathan Temin. "Would you Fight Again? Understanding Liberian Ex-Combatant Reintegration." *United States Institute for Peace, Special Report 211*, September 2008.

⁷⁴ Interviews with ex-combatants, Monrovia, February 2009.

Our findings from the Liberian context indicate that ordinary citizens generally considered vigilantes and informal security providers as a natural, or unavoidable, part of the security landscape. Although vigilante practices are often officially condemned, local opinions on the phenomenon could be quite different. Other research on vigilantism in Nigeria shows that there is often a sharp division of opinion about the legitimacy of people threatening, or carrying out, vigilante assaults on those perceived as criminals. Therefore, to simply call vigilantism 'deviant' is problematic since the practice does in fact have widespread support.⁷⁵ In Nigeria, a very large number of people do not regard vigilantism as deviant in the way that the federal government and the legal institutions do – that is, as a criminal act. The different views on vigilantism thereby become a struggle over norms of internal security and the right to determine 'proper' conduct.⁷⁶ Moreover, the use of violence by vigilante groups is something that is accepted. As noted by Jensen when researching vigilantism and everyday policing in South Africa, violence occupies a highly ambivalent position in this context since it can be perceived as legitimate if it occurs as a response to an original illegitimate use of violence.⁷⁷ Therefore, the violence committed by the vigilantes is not only justified as a response of counter-violence by the vigilantes themselves but is also perceived as such by the local communities, and thereby as legitimate actions.

Nevertheless, the lines between those considered criminals and those claiming to be vigilantes are often blurred. Pratten describes the case of a vigilante group in Nigeria that had been initiated by a former gang member who claimed to be tired of being blamed for the thefts in his village. He felt he could clear his name by 'turning vigilante'.⁷⁸ Hence, it may be rational for community members, in an effort to gain some form of control over criminal elements, to accept such persons if they 'turned vigilante' in order to keep the 'criminals' on their side.

The relationship between community watch groups and vigilantes and the Liberia National Police is more complicated. The vigilantes at times get into trouble with the police. A leader of one of the groups said that he had been arrested and severely abused by the police after having caught a criminal and 'rightfully' beaten him up. Also, the police are often involved in cases where vigilantes have mistakenly assaulted someone (which happens often). In theory, community watch groups are allowed to exist and operate – provided that they officially register with the police and abide by the law. However, no one in Liberia seems to know the exact rules governing their behavior. According to a United Nations staff member, who works on community policing issues, the community watch groups are not supposed to patrol the streets, but rather just keep a watchful eye over their communities. Additionally, they are not supposed to receive financial or other support from their communities, nor are they to receive any additional resources from the police. However, a senior LNP officer admitted to providing these groups with flashlights, for example.

Additionally, a very high-ranking officer within LNP Headquarters stated that they try to provide office space where the groups can operate and organize themselves. At the same time, most police officers discourage vigilante violence. While these groups do not have any formal clearance for their activities and their actions are illegal, many claim they have the silent approval of the police. What further complicates the issue is that many formally registered and supported community watch groups take the law into their own hands, in the same manner than non-registered groups. These groups are able to carry out the work that the unarmed LNP is often unable to do. As one informant from a vigilante group in Monrovia declared, "They know what we do and they need us – they need our work."⁷⁹

Whether these groups are local defenders acting where the state has failed, or whether they are a menace to society has been debated before. Such questions have, for example, been asked by scholars looking at private initiatives for security in various parts of Africa. As Gore and Pratten argue, vigilantism in Nigeria expresses a lack of confidence in the capacity of the state to offer security, but does not project a revolutionary or anti-state message. Nor is state sponsorship of vigilantes something especially new in this context.⁸⁰ Or as pointed out by Christian Lund, on the one hand vigilantes in Nigeria often portray themselves as the "antithesis" of the state which is believed to be something removed from the local arena, seeking legitimacy for their actions in their non-state status. Yet, on the other hand they often act within the formal structure of the state, as in the case of being 'commissioned' by the state to carry out police matters.⁸¹

Despite the fact that the representatives of state and informal security providers often tried to distance themselves from each other (the former more than the latter), this investigation has revealed that they were both part of the same system. The links between the formal security system and the informal security providers were clearly present even though they appeared hidden whenever the official picture was presented. The vigilantes and the community watch groups, sometimes with formal approval and sometimes without, did the work the police could not or would not do, sometimes with devastating consequences. They were the first to apprehend, judge, and often castigate suspected offenders, with punishments that in the worst-case scenarios could lead to brutal beatings or even death. It was evident that the informal security actors were providing security in areas where the state police never entered, and these networks provided important functions for ordinary citizens. For such citizens – forced to find ways of protecting themselves – having to rely on informal security actors was a risky option, but so, too, was depending on the formal security system.

⁷⁵ Baker, 2002, p. 224.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁷⁷ Steffen Jensen, "Security and Violence on the Frontier of the State: Vigilant citizens in Nkomazi, South Africa", In Ed. Ahluwalia et al. *Violence and Non-Violence in Africa*, 2007, p. 119.

⁷⁸ Pratten, (b), 2008, p. 70.

⁷⁹ Interviews with vigilante and community watch groups conducted during March 2009 in Monrovia.

⁸⁰ Charles Gore and David Pratten, "The politics of Plunder: The Rhetoric of Order and Disorder in Southern Nigeria", *African Affairs*, Vol. 102, 211-240, 2003, p. 232.

⁸¹ Christian Lund, "Twilight Institutions: Public Authority and Local Politics in Africa", *Development and Change*, 37 (4): 685-705, 2006, p. 688.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SSR POLICY: THE HIDDEN SECURITY LINKS

This report shows that vigilantes, like other forms of informal security provider networks, are an important part of the Liberian security context. Unlike other security and justice sectors in Liberia, these groups actually function. Perhaps they do not operate exactly according to western standards, but they act with purpose and motivation to rid their communities of crime. Also, considering the financial, human resources and legitimacy issues of post-conflict environments, community watch groups can perhaps, using fewer resources, do what state institutions cannot. For example, with minimal financial support (e.g., small food contributions or a little pocket money), vigilante groups would be more willing and able to protect their communities, something they might do anyway.

Informal security actors hence present both opportunities and challenges for international donors and aid agencies. On the one hand, they are a constant fixture of the everyday security and insecurity landscape, even though they have not been incorporated into the 'formal' policy on security and policing. Although not often openly admitted, these groups operate with the police's knowledge and silent consent and will continue to do so in light of a poor functioning police and criminal justice system. If donors are truly committed to policies that aim to improve the human security of the local populations, then these groups (and the 'services' they render) must be taken into account. Rather than approach security and justice projects with the perspective of "what does not work" or "what is missing", donors should examine "what exists already" and ask themselves "why is it working" and "how can we support and improve it". Such questions will lead to more sustainable, locally-supported, realistic SSR strategies.

Additional research is needed, particularly to fully understand the role of these groups in various settings. This may mean following the development, on an ongoing basis, of a specific group to better understand how they adapt or change to Liberia's security setting. More specifically, criteria could be developed in order to better assess the function, effectiveness, and interests of these groups. In the cases where these groups effectively work with the local police authority, more assistance could be given to these structures so that they can strengthen their cooperation with the police rather than work against them or impede their work. Such arrangements could also serve to create greater local accountability, transparency, and legitimacy of the local police.

On the other hand, addressing the negative consequences of these groups is more challenging. As this report has discussed, the increased use of violence by these groups is problematic and only serves to further fuel a sense of insecurity and in-

stability. As has been identified, much of this violence (as well as mob violence) has emerged in reaction to the frustration felt with the lack of consequences or punishment given to 'suspected criminals'. There appears to be a lack of information amongst vigilante groups, but even within the larger community, about the criminal justice process. Many of the respondents were under the impression that once a criminal is caught and handed over to the police, then their involvement was over. Despite the fact that there have been public campaigns informing citizens, many are still unaware that they must follow up their cases with the police and/or that they must go to court and testify. Citizen's lack of knowledge about how the security system works simply intensifies the feeling of disempowerment, which only increases frustration and resentment with the local police (the most visible expression of government authority). While the existence of community policing forums may eventually remedy some of these issues, local communities may still feel that they have not been adequately supported or maintained by the LNP. This issue will also need to be addressed.

In addition, these vigilante groups are the most culturally and geographically viable option for addressing a specific community's safety needs and tie better into traditional structures than state-driven policing. This is particularly true if one considers places like Voinjama, where many of the women do not communicate in English and thus are unable to communicate with the local police (who are often men from other parts of the country); the reliance on security depends on such groups. This also illustrates the necessity, or at least relevance, of recruiting police officers and placing them back in their own home communities. While there is a risk that such arrangement could further encourage corruption and favoritism (which is happening anyway whether police officers are from the area or not), bringing officers that know their communities and are willing to safeguard them could facilitate building the legitimacy of the new police service.

In the case of Liberia, it is evident that a multi-layered approach to SSR has not been taken. The focus has been on institution-building, particularly those of the police and the military, while ignoring the role of the poorly understood vigilante and community watch groups. Yet the need to incorporate these groups into the wider conceptual and practical understanding of security service delivery has been echoed by others. For example, the academic and former Liberian President Amos Sawyer argues that Liberia must consider systems of polycentric governance. A polycentric system of democratic governance means that rather than looking at policy and institutional choices in dichotomies (such as centralized or decentralized, formal or in-

CONCLUDING REMARKS

formal), one should look at a variety of institutions and agents “... within the context of certain kinds of things. The analysis should begin by asking what kind of goods and services do we want to provide, and how can we best provide them in a given setting?”⁸² This system considers that there are multiple centers of limited or shared authority at multiple levels of governance, capable of providing and producing a variety of public goods and services. Sawyer argues that while central governments may be more efficient at providing some goods, local institutions, NGOs, and even the private sector may be better at delivering others. The challenge, he notes “is to identify and establish a governing system that allows for a mix of all of these institutional arrangements: local/national, private/public.”⁸³ Finally, Sawyer argues that, “Instead of trying to fit everything into a standard Weberian model, [polycentric governance] provides opportunities to build on what people themselves want to do. Instead of telling people that their ways of doing things is wrong and does not fit into our theory of state, the concept of polycentric governance attempts to evolve a theory of state that is based on the realities on the ground.”⁸⁴

Similarly, Baker and Scheye argue, “If we are interested in improving the experience of justice and security of the end user, it seems misguided to focus the majority of SSR effort on reforming the state security and justice agencies. It would make more sense to recognize the nature and composition of the post-conflict and fragile state without imposing it an idealized Western conception of what the state should be: acknowledge its inherent weaknesses and limitations; accept the ways in which state and non-state actors inter-penetrate, mingle, and merge; and then, attempt to strengthen the performance of those who actually deliver most of the security and justice in addition to building state capacities.”⁸⁵ The implication for donors wanting to support SSR strategies is clear: support programs that may not necessarily resemble western institutions, as well as practices or actors who may not fit into the preferred criteria. This may not mean supporting all informal security actors, but it means carefully identifying and supporting those who can effectively deliver the security needs of the local population, particularly in the short-term when state institutions are deemed illegitimate or ineffective. In turn, this has the potential to improve the overall security environment in the longer run, as well as build support and legitimacy in the formal state security providers.

Vigilante-like groups are just one of the many informal state security and justice actors operating in Liberia. In fact, on a day to day basis most Liberians find themselves navigating a continuum of choices for both their security and justice needs. While this report cannot make definite conclusions about all vigilante groups in Liberia, it has attempted to shed some light on these under-examined security actors. This report has identified a number of issues in relation to non-state security actors that should be further researched in order to improve SSR initiatives. First of all, vigilante groups do not appear to be an isolated phenomenon in Liberia. Since a number of non-state initiatives for creating security exist (like the groups presented in this report), the international community must find ways to identify and map them out in order to lay the foundation for a sustainable and efficient security sector reform. Furthermore these groups need to be included when programs for SSR are planned and implemented. Therefore strategies on the ways to work with, rather than against, these groups within the SSR-programs must be prepared. To enable this, more research is needed to understand how these groups operate and, more importantly, how they are perceived and used by their communities. Additionally, it would be fruitful to better understand how these groups’ perceptions of justice interact with the customary justice system.

As this case has shown, the emergence and existence of these groups is very much context dependent – not only because the Liberian state has failed to secure its citizens, but also because these groups have tangible benefits for the youths that participate in them. This is an important reminder of the inherent link between security and development. The extent to which such contributions are beneficial to the communities should also be studied on a case-by-case basis. If security sector reform programs are to have any lasting impact or success in Liberia, it is evident that they must recognize the reality that security provision in Liberia is carried out by actors that are both formal and informal.

⁸² Louise Andersen. “Democratic governance in post-conflict Liberia - An interview with Dr. Amos Sawyer.” DIIS Working Paper no 2007:20, October 2007, pp. 11-12.

⁸³ Ibid. p. 12.

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 14.

⁸⁵ Baker and Scheye. 2007, p. 514.

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