

# Contextualizing peacebuilding activities to local circumstances – Liberian case-study

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## Summary

The UN mission in Liberia stands out from other UN peacekeeping missions in the way it has managed to integrate the sub-national level through organizational innovations. County Support Teams (CST) were set up in 2006 and the position of the Head of Field Office (HoFO) established in each county in 2008. The HoFo positions were in most cases filled by senior Civil Affairs (CA) officers with experience in the respective county. These organizational innovations equipped the UN with formalized representatives and coordination in each county, which strengthened the decentralization of the mission. A horizontal level of information sharing was introduced, and a central authority on county level was institutionalized. Improvements in the coordination aspect were further reinforced by a joint approach with UNDP as partner, supported by the entire UNCT, and the central role of CA and later the county-level HoFOs.

## Introduction

The report *Contextualizing peacebuilding activities to local circumstances – Liberian case-study*, which this policy brief is based on, is part of a comparative study of UN's local-level peacebuilding in three different countries – Liberia, Haiti and South Sudan. The data of this report were generated during a four-week field trip to Liberia, with fieldwork at UNMIL HQ and four field sites in September 2011. It builds on approximately 80 extended and 20 short interviews. The aim of the project has been to take a closer look at how the UN is undertaking local-level peacebuilding. The entry point for this exercise has been the UN's Civil Affairs section of the DPKO (Department for Peacekeeping Operations). Civil Affairs (CA) is the civilian component of UN peacekeeping missions that is most frequently deployed throughout the host country and has the most substantial presence at the sub-national levels. The research group chose to focus on Civil Affairs in order to see how different missions implement their mandate and how this work is contextualizing international guidelines to national and local circumstances. The project also examined how UN peacekeeping missions organizes its work on the local level and how the organization is working together with local authorities, other UN agencies and development actors. While the report on Liberia describes the role of civil affairs, it also frames this section's role within the broader UN engagement in local-level peacebuilding in Liberia. What is offered is an aggregated account of local-level peacebuilding with a focus on UNMIL and its interaction with the local population, government and society.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The authors are of course aware of the many other national and international actors who are involved.

### Research questions

The report provides a brief overview of Liberia and the challenges to local-level peacebuilding, before it proceeds to sketch the involvement of UN and CA. The following questions form the core of the research:

- What kinds of mechanisms have been used to feed the voices of local state and non-state actors at the sub-national level into political processes?
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- Are local state and non-state actors at the sub-national level able to influence national decision-making processes, and if so, how?
- How are the needs for service provision and political participation dealt with at the sub-national level, and how do these needs feed into decision-making processes?
- Do CA officers promote ownership and effective participation of all stakeholders in national and especially sub-national decision-making processes, and if so, how?
- How can CA officers contribute to strengthen the confidence of the local population in local authorities, and in the support given by the UN and other international actors?
- How does the cross-mission representation role of Civil Affairs facilitate implementation and/or transition?

### Brief overview of UN's Civil Affairs in Liberia

Civil Affairs is the UN component most consistently present in the field in UN peacekeeping operations. It is one of the largest civilian components in UN peacekeeping, with around 800 staff members deployed globally to facilitate the implementation of peacekeeping mandates at the sub-national level.<sup>2</sup> CA officers frequently act as space-makers for other actors to fulfil their roles and peacebuilding activities.

In Liberia, the focus of the CA section has evolved with the development of the mission. It can be divided into three phases:

1. Prior to the 2005 elections CA work centred on the restoration of state authority. In this period, CA officers were often the only civilian permanent UNMIL staff in the counties.
2. After the elections and the inauguration of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2006, CA support turned towards capacity building and logistical support to the newly elected officials, serving as a central source of information to other UN agencies and INGOs that were beginning to develop projects in the counties. The increasing number of actors required a strengthening of coordination, and in

2006 the CSTs were set up, followed by the HoFos in 2008.

3. In 2010 the mission initiated the drawdown phase. This meant that during our fieldwork in 2011 much of the mission's attention, including CA, was on transition and the withdrawal plan. A main CA priority in this phase was to ensure that local governments and non-state actors would be able to continue functioning without the support of UNMIL.

As shown with these three phases, UNMIL, through Civil Affairs, has had a strong presence and represent continuity at the sub-national level. Officers are often present for several years and can establish stable relationships with county authorities in the administrative and civilian sectors. Their focus is on *the county*, on the local circumstances, rather than specific projects and issues.

### Findings

At first sight, many of our findings at the sub-national level seem to contradict the findings of the critique of liberal peacebuilding. Local populations are very much present with their own agendas, interests and voices in the peacebuilding process in Liberia. The local level has been strengthened, and field offices provide an institutionalized infrastructure for contextualizing peacebuilding to local circumstances. The field offices work rather independently of the national level, and sensitivity to local needs is high among local staff. However, global dynamics and donor concerns often impact on local needs, challenging the contextualization to local circumstances.


### Structural innovations – CSTs and HoFOs

A joint UN project 'Strengthening Capacity of Local Administration' (the CST project) was established in 2006 and led by a joint steering committee co-chaired by the UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General / Resident Coordinator (DSRSG/RC/HC) and the Minister of Internal Affairs (MIA). The project focused on three main areas: restoring the functionality of county administrative offices and transportation; developing capacity of county officials; and strengthening data and information management in the counties.<sup>3</sup> The CSTs worked through the local CA staff and later through the HoFO.<sup>4</sup> The SRS Loj approved a new UN field structure 2008. Field offices were strengthened in each county and headed by Heads of field Offices that were direct representatives of the SRS in the counties, in order to ensure a coherent and consolidated UN approach to the specific challenges of the counties, and to support the local

<sup>3</sup> See UNCT's joint programme document 2009.

<sup>4</sup> CA was mainly responsible for the County Support Teams. Management, however, was with UNDP. Humanitarian and Political Section also dedicated staff to support CST coordinators. The HoFO replaced the CST coordinator in late 2008

<sup>2</sup> Including professional national and international officers and UN Volunteers. Information as of January 2010. Interview with UN DPKO Best Practices Officer, New York, July 2010.



government and the Superintendent's office. These attempts were in line with the decentralization strategy of the Liberian government.

This project worked through the local CA staff, but management was with the UNDP. Humanitarian and Political Section also dedicated staff, in addition to the CA, to the CST coordinator roles. CA further turned one UNV per county into project staff under a joint management. This approach added considerable value to UN peacekeeping in Liberia because it provided a county comprehensive, but specific focus to the activities. This was confirmed by CA staff at the national level and staff within the Ministry of Planning and Infrastructure. The joint approach through CST meetings, the field offices in each county and the strong position of the HoFO in the field provided the UN with an organizational framework and a common vehicle for action at the local level. It helped organizations without local representations to extend their reach and deliverance to all counties.

The CST coordinators established in 2006 were further developed, and in 2008<sup>5</sup> the local representation of the UN was enhanced with the SRSG's appointment of Head of Field Officers (HoFOs) to each of the 15 counties.<sup>6</sup> They are formally situated under the DSRSG/RC.<sup>7</sup> The HoFOs were and still are mostly CA officers, but work on behalf of the entire UN family. Their role is to serve as the overall facilitator of the CST process in their respective counties. The Field Offices are supported through the Field Support Team (FST) at headquarters level.

The CST and later the HoFO structure introduced a horizontal level of information sharing and institutionalized a central authority on the county level. Today, all reports from the local section and UN agency representatives are to go through the HoFO. The improvement of the coordination aspect through the jointness of the approach (with UNDP as a partner, with the support of the entire UNCT and the central role of CA and later the HoFO in the counties), was confirmed by all agency representatives we met with in the counties. This new model also represented an improvement with regard to contextualization of the activities. For instance, CA was now receiving and sorting all in-

coming requests to the mission, making sure that they ended up on the most relevant desk. This channelling of requests was valued from both sides: the agencies needed to review only 'serious requests'. Local partners felt that requests channelled through either CA or the HoFO had a better chance of getting funding. As a UNDP representative in Voinjama told us:

*The CA are interacting with the people, so the bulk of the requests goes through them. They look through the requests and make sure that they are complete before they are forwarded to us. The CA is not doing development projects, so when the community requests for instance a hand pump, they come to us and ask: 'Do you have annual provision for that in your work plan?' Then we send a request to Monrovia. And when we get feedback we tell CA who are the ones who will inform the community that we will build a hand pump. The Civil Affairs brings us requests once or twice a month.<sup>8</sup>*

In most field offices, this was institutionalized in 2006 with the introduction of local 'One UN' meetings once or twice a month.<sup>9</sup> All the agencies and sections present their projects and challenges at these meetings and coordinate their efforts. In theory, such channelling and coordination of efforts between UNMIL and the various agencies are central to the task of the HoFO. In practice however, the distribution of tasks is not that clear-cut, and the roles of CA and HoFO tend to overlap, according to our interviewees.

## Conclusion

Despite inherent limitations within the UN system, UNMIL's efforts at decentralization in Liberia have been impressive. The CST joint programme has institutionalized and formalized local-national communication on the side of the government. The programme (re-)builds information infrastructure between local authorities, via the superintendent, to the national government. The success of this programme will be crucial for the transition phase. The programme has not yet been fully implemented, and high priority should be given to further decentralization. It is important for the future of Liberia that basic services are well handled by the Liberian state apparatus when UNMIL withdraws, otherwise considerable efforts and resources may be lost. It is further important to strengthen the voice of local actors in a heavily centralized state. A specific programme should be envisioned to ensure the continued functionality of local CSOs after UNMIL's departure.

Our conclusion thus is a double-edged one. On the one hand, there is a potential for further contextualizing the peacebuilding process to local circumstances

5 Field offices were headed by CST coordinators before 2008. Those were CA officers in most cases.

6 Although most of the HoFO were and still are CA officers, they needed to be given a new rank and were no longer reporting to the CA sections, but directly to the DSRSG. This was necessary because other sections of UNMIL and other UN agencies would not report to CA, but to the County Representative of the SRSG. Nevertheless, many HoFOs still see themselves at least partially as 'CA people'.

7 The UN resident coordinator is the coordinator of UN Agencies in programme countries. In Liberia he is at the same time DSRSG (Recovery and Governance), Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Representative of UNDP.

8 UNDP representative, Voinjama .

9 UN agencies have already withdrawn their permanent staff from some field offices.

within the existing structures in Liberia. And with the organizational measures mentioned above and the many tendencies that point towards success, there are many lessons to learn from Liberia on local-level peacebuilding in post-conflict countries. However, the potential of contextualization has not been fully utilized, and is often not adequately valued at the national level.

### Summary of recommendations

#### On implementation of the mandate:

Local and traditional structures should be better mapped and better understood. On this basis, regular feedback on how to interact in situations of norm conflict could be provided.

Enhance the learning process within the various institutions, to ensure that knowledge is shared between regions and handed over in the case of staff turnover. CSOs should be engaged pro-actively by UNMIL and state authorities as partners in peace building. The role of CSOs in the County Steering Committees should be strengthened.

#### For UNMIL and the national government:

To help ensure a successful transition, UNMIL should continue to support the strengthening of the communication infrastructure between the capital, and the county and the district capitals, building on the ongoing work of the CSTs. CA should continue to encourage and support the set-up and continuity of these structures, but also focus on handing over this role.

#### For the transition:

Before UNMIL withdraws, a national mechanism should be developed to replace the CA presences in the counties. This could be done by building on the ongoing work of the CSTs.

CA should play a supportive role in setting up regional civilian coordination hubs to serve as a continuous county extension of the UN's 'Delivering as One' concept.

CA should encourage and support the government of Liberia in its work in establishing local Liberian monitoring teams that can ensure accountability for and implementation of various development projects. The Peace Committees in the counties, established with the support and the facilitation of CA, represent a first step in this direction.

The various agencies and UNMIL sections should build more on the county-specific expertise of the HoFO and CA.

#### For local-level peacebuilding:

Continue decentralization efforts of national strategies and strengthening the development of county funds and county-specific agendas.

Increase the influence of local consultations on final outcomes in development strategies and similar documents. Strengthen the capacity of local state and non-state actors to produce adequate documents. Provide greater flexibility for local adaptation of national frameworks.

Conduct sector-specific consultations and ensure that all groups are heard through consultations. Move beyond consultations wherever possible, and engage local organizations in dialogue and negotiation of final documents.

The HoFO structure should be seen as an overall success in combination with the earlier foundation of County Support Teams (CSTs). Equally strong coordination should be envisaged for new missions.

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#### About the authors

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