

# Everyday sovereignty: International experts, brokers and local ownership in peacebuilding Liberia

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## Abstract

The present article investigates how sovereignty is performed, enacted and constructed in an everyday setting. Based on fieldwork and interviews with international embedded experts about the elusive meaning of ‘local ownership’, we argue that while sovereignty may, indeed, be a model according to which the international community ‘constructs’ rogue or failed polities in ‘faraway’ places, this view overlooks that these places are still spaces in which contestations over spheres of authority take place every day, and thus also spaces in which sovereignty is constructed and reconstructed on a daily basis. Local ownership, then, becomes our starting point for tracing the processes of the everyday enactment of sovereignty. We make the case that sovereignty should not be reified, but instead be studied in its quotidian and dynamic production, involving the multiplicity of actors reflecting the active production of the state beyond its presumptive existence as a homogeneously organized, institutionalized and largely centralized bureaucracy.

## Keywords

Brokers, failed state, global governance, peacebuilding, sovereignty, state, everyday

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## Introduction

Although Jean Bodin first used the term in its modern sense in 1576, the concept of sovereignty did not become the object of much debate and dispute in International Relations (IR) until the late 1980s, when scholars began challenging its fixed character. In this article, we draw on these constructivist and post-structuralist contributions to understanding sovereignty, and make the case for sovereignty as an *everyday construction*. Post-conflict states are not spaces devoid of or with little sovereignty, we argue; nor are they spaces from which sovereignty has been withheld by the international community. Such a view, we argue, runs the risk of misrepresenting the everyday struggles over the limits of political authority that are inherent to any post-conflict state. Rather than being spaces ripe for technical interventions by agents of global liberal governance, these spaces are political and rife with struggles over sovereignty. We make the case for understanding peacebuilding settings through the politics of sovereignty by bringing the discourse on sovereignty to bear on the policy of local ownership, through fieldwork in Liberia and interviews with young expat experts working for Liberian ministries under the Scott Family Liberia Fellows Program.<sup>1</sup>

With the burgeoning of post-positivist approaches in IR making sense of sovereignty turned away from the sphere of more formal definitions of the concept as ultimate authority or self-determination, taking into account not only how sovereignty in practice has differed from its formal statements (e.g. Krasner, 1999), but also how it is constructed and changes over time (e.g. Bartelson, 1995; Biersteker and Weber, 1996). Once the *sine qua non* of statehood, many scholars today hold that sovereignty is no longer inalienable, but can, in fact, be suspended. In such a view, sovereignty has become conditional upon the exercise of responsible statehood or the ‘prize of rightful conduct’ (see the discussion in Bartelson, 2014: 83).<sup>2</sup> As the understanding of sovereignty in question here is that of the recognized right and capacity for self-determination, one could argue that the conceptual discussion has gone full circle — away from constructivist perspectives and back to its Bodinian roots as an attribute of statehood.

Practices such as peacekeeping and peacebuilding, in such a view, have become institutionalized tools in a broader process in which sovereignty has become governmentalized (Aalberts, 2014; Andersen and Sending, 2010; Bartelson, 2014; Zanotti, 2011), itself a tool for restoring order in areas where ‘forms of political authority still refuse to be squeezed into the symbolic form of sovereignty’ (Bartelson, 2014: 89). No longer absolute, but contingent upon ‘proper’ state behaviour, sovereignty today becomes the prize of good behaviour, but also the blueprint or prescription for how to craft polities coming out of longer periods of protracted conflict (Andersen and Sending, 2010). According to such a view, sovereignty as autonomy is withheld from the rogue state, before it can be produced and then once again vested into the rogue-turned-responsible state.

Such a view, we believe, is too narrow in that it overlooks the fact that in these places, sovereignty is still wrestled with, constructed, reconstructed and performed on a daily basis (see Narten, 2008).<sup>3</sup> State weakness or failure does not automatically translate into lacking sovereignty. Sovereignty is more than a right granted by the international community. Sovereignty is present in these settings as the product of the quotidian wrestling between actors representing different spheres of authority. No matter how rogue, failed or even ‘peacekept’ these states or spaces are, they are rife with contestations over the

demarcations of legitimate political authority. As a social process brought about through the interaction of actors involved in a range of policy processes, sovereignty is all around.

We seek to showcase this through examining the role of international experts of a specific kind — the Scott Fellows — in Liberian ministries, and the role they play as mediators on the sovereign boundary. Brokers between two worlds, we argue, they also bring to life and reproduce that specific boundary that they are meant to help overcome. The Scott Fellows interviewed in Monrovia were expats — young American graduates from top universities — whose work in and for Liberian ministries was funded by a US foundation in collaboration with the office of the Liberian president. Policies aimed at enhancing local ownership and the work of the Scott Fellows, then, serve as a prism through which we explore notions of sovereignty. Although the imperative of local ownership is a policy advanced and implemented by international actors, using it as a lens to make sense of the Liberian context *in practice* offers a window into a conception of sovereignty that is not ascribed through preconceived (European) binoculars, but more attuned to the multifarious realities of post-conflict African statehood. While our aim is not to generalize, it is our hope that taking sovereignty in practice in the Liberian context as a point of departure may also contribute to a rethinking of sovereignty in general terms on the basis of an (usually perceived as peripheral) African experience.

By means of an ethnographic account, we argue that while the policy of local ownership may be an important way for post-conflict states to ‘practice’ sovereignty before ‘perfecting’ it, more important than the policy of local ownership itself for shaping sovereignty is its local and daily performance, negotiation and circulation in humdrum Liberian politics and relations with the international actors involved. In short, these everyday negotiations between people in different offices, representing and relying on different spheres of authority, structure sovereignty on an everyday basis. In order to illustrate this, we concentrate on specific individuals, specific knowledge brokers, who navigate between different fields of authority. Importantly, these expat international experts are simultaneously on the ‘inside’ of the sovereign state by virtue of their work *and* on the ‘outside’ by virtue of being expats and by cultural affinity. Yet, in their daily interactions with and circulations between these spheres traditionally seen as exclusive, they offer a unique prism through which we can understand the quotidian scripts and practices from which sovereignty emanates on an everyday basis.

In so doing, we take up Oliver Richmond’s call for more context-sensitive approaches to local ownership: ‘Local ownership as it is often seen by key actors’, he writes, ‘is neither “local” nor ownership.... It is telling that though international actors claim to be interested in local ownership, there is little if any documentation that discusses it in such nuance’ (Richmond, 2012: 371). To Richmond’s (2012: 372) call for ‘an ethnographic and sociological perspective’ on local ownership to contest the hegemony of overly rigid approaches emphasizing liberal rights and marketization as local ownership, we offer an account based on in-depth interviews on site and extensive fieldwork in Liberia. However, against the anticipation of such approaches to have strong emancipatory potential and remedy the ‘failure of most internationals and donors to understand the implications of local ownership’ through a less instrumental deployment of the concept (Richmond, 2012: 373), our approach suggests that such a move may hold more analytical than political promise. While our approach may be a counterpoint to overly rigid approaches to local ownership in policy circles, we also demonstrate how a context-sensitive approach need

not reify the local as the traditional, but can instead uncover local ownership as a site of contestation and wrestling over the boundaries of different spheres of political authority.

Where Richmond (2012: 371) claims that the concept of local ownership 'is actually shorthand for the exclusion of many post-conflict societies', we offer a more nuanced depiction of the agency of 'locals', which helps understand how authority is framed and structured through everyday interactions. It is not the case, we argue, that '[o]wnership, like sovereignty, removes process from peacebuilding' (Richmond, 2012: 372). Instead, by bringing a post-structural understanding of sovereignty to bear on the field of peacebuilding, we show how sovereignty itself is in continuous negotiation (cf. Devetak, 1995).

As alluded to earlier, our empirical elaboration relies on interviews with Scott Fellows, young expat graduates who were employed to work *in and for* Liberian ministries.<sup>4</sup> While the Scott Fellows programme came to focus more on Liberian returnees later on, at the time of the interviews in 2010, only one out of our interviewees was originally from Liberia. The Scott Fellows worked in key positions in Liberian ministries *not* as international experts, but as 'local' staff. We concentrated on them as they appeared to be at the heart, and somehow to be the epitome, of the everyday representation and negotiation of sovereignty. They represented a type of translator or broker between different spheres of authority, riding as it were the everyday boundary of sovereignty: being at the intersection between the 'local' and the 'international' and bridging them; witnessing the complex network of socio-political organizations involved in the production of statehood in Liberia; and translating and negotiating between international, national and local forms of policy ownership.

While unusual, the Scott Fellows programme is not unique. Since 1963, for instance, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has placed over a thousand young graduates to work as local civil servants in development countries (Lepistö et al., 2018: 75–76). An earlier example was the Africa Fellows programme of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which sent MIT graduates in business and law to work in ministries in a number of developing African countries. Reflecting the discussion earlier, it is interesting to note that a report on Carroll Wilson, the programme's founder, noted that he 'is said to have considered it the highest compliment to the program when the U.S. ambassador to Uganda complained that the African Fellow in Kampala was acting as if he were working for the Ugandans. "He is," Wilson agreed' (Lepistö et al., 2018: 76). These programmes of embedded experts accountable directly to the local bureaucracy have recently come to the attention of policymakers as these have searched for alternative and more effective ways of building state capacity in the wake of the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan. A report from the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (2011: 23), for instance, notes that 'Too often, our aid programs assume that building capacity can only be done through hiring international experts to provide technical assistance. The Scott Family Fellows program suggests an alternative model from which to draw best practices'. Yet, despite this attention, as a recent contribution acknowledges:

within international development policy circles ... no major comprehensive study has been done to enumerate all such efforts, much less to analyse them systematically.... Nor is there much publicly available documentation on the process, challenges, tensions and lessons learned from such efforts at embedding employees within local government institutions. (Lepistö et al., 2018: 76)

To summarize, the *first* contribution of this article relates to this empirical focus. By focusing on the Scott Fellows and international capacity-building, we explore the tensions alluded to earlier within the context of Liberian post-conflict reconstruction. In doing so, we offer a more nuanced picture of the effects of this type of programme. *Second*, by focusing on the everyday dimension of the politics of ownership, we demonstrate that while the sovereignty of post-conflict reconstruction states may be compromised, this does not amount to a wholesale absence of sovereignty, and that sovereignty as a social construction still retains its analytical purchase. *Third*, building on the tension between local and international levels, we explore how sovereignty is manifested through struggles over ownership. While acknowledging the tension between local/national and international levels in peacebuilding has become commonplace (see, for instance, de Carvalho and Schia, 2009; Lie and de Carvalho, 2011; Schia and Karlsrud, 2013), we move beyond this mere acknowledgement and explore how this tension is negotiated and wrestled over in practice. This tension between local and international levels serves as our point of departure for exploring how its everyday instantiations structure political authority. While the fluidity of ownership has been addressed (for an overview, see Narten, 2008), the explicit introduction and discussion of sovereignty in relation to peacebuilding and local ownership is novel (a notable exception being Andersen and Sending, 2010).<sup>5</sup> *Finally*, by moving beyond the understanding of sovereignty as autonomy and self-determination prevalent in the peacebuilding literature, not only do we highlight the myriad of actors involved in struggling over ownership and sovereignty, but we also hope that our explicit conceptual focus on sovereignty can contribute to make the approaches to peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction attuned to more comparative perspectives, including historical ones.

The purchase of our approach, then, is to bring approaches to sovereignty that recognize its (continuously) constructed character to bear on the politics of local ownership and peacebuilding, highlighting how the (sovereign) boundaries of political authority manifest themselves through their everyday performance. In so doing, we resist the move towards understanding peacebuilding as the wholesale imposition of a liberal Western agenda, which implies the withholding or denial of full sovereignty of the post-intervention state. While seeing sovereignty as the ultimate prize that is restored upon good behaviour (see, e.g., Bartelson, 2014) may help us understand processes of global governance, it does less in furthering our understanding of the challenges of peacebuilding — as sovereignty is assumed to have been suspended, taken out of play, so to speak. Nor does such a view bring new analytical purchase to discussions of sovereignty — as sovereignty itself is (again) reified as autonomy, self-determination and supreme authority. Complementing this move, then, we put sovereignty back into play, gauging how the concept may help us better understand post-conflict and post-intervention reconstruction, and exploring how these settings can be generative of new insights into the workings of sovereignty.

The article proceeds in five parts. We start with (1) a discussion of sovereignty and local ownership, followed by (2) everyday sovereignty. The three following sections link these to local ownership and the Scott Fellows through our fieldwork. Starting with (3) problematizing local ownership, we turn to (4) the everyday production, performance and construction of sovereignty before discussing (5) the tensions inherent in implementing policies of local ownership.

## **A note on method and context**

As Bøås, Jennings and Shaw (2006: 70) have noted, ‘despite the prevalence and endurance of these complex conflicts and emergencies, almost no one has recognized and confronted the myriad issues that arise around whether, when, and how to undertake development research in such situations’. As such, to the IR scholar, undertaking such research involves a fair amount of learning on the job. Additionally, post-conflict settings are notoriously opaque and difficult to navigate as outsiders. While most of the people we met with were willing to talk with us, finding the right people — or finding people at all — proved difficult at times. In fact, undertaking fieldwork in Liberia in 2010 was only easy if you stuck to interviewing United Nations (UN) personnel or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) — as most studies of post-conflict environments do. It was a challenge for us to identify, to locate and to contact the Scott Fellows in the many ministries we visited. Either they were not in or they would not talk to us. One fellow, for instance, told us that ‘I’m a corporate lawyer, so most of what I do isn’t relevant to your questions.... You know.... Well.... It’s corporate law’. Or we could not find their offices. One of the ministries was situated within the Samuel Kanyon Doe Stadium, which we had to circle for quite some time before locating the office.

This made a systematic study challenging, and the most appropriate method to collect data was what ethnographers call snowball sampling, where one interview leads to another (see Pouliot, 2010: 84). In consequence, our article here is more exploratory, its aim being to probe an argument rather than to pronounce on it. We have chosen to include context and reflections in the text rather than presenting quotes only. While it could be argued that some of this is anecdotal, we believe such an inclusion to be the best way to contextualize the argument, to make explicit our method and procedure, and to disclose how our own preconceived notions encountered the field and changed during our fieldwork.

## **Sovereignty and local ownership**

With roots in development aid (see OECD DAC, 1996, 2008 [2005]; UN, 2008), the policy of local ownership has become a key feature of international interventions, to the point of being considered ‘the gold standard of successful peace and statebuilding’ (Dursun-Ozkanca and Crossley-Frolick, 2012: 251; see also Ejodus and Juncos, 2018).<sup>6</sup> The policy has come to denote a process through which ‘recipient countries help to design and implement their own development programs in accordance with national priorities, aspirations, and capacities, with international actors in a supporting role’ (Von Billerbeck, 2017: 29–30). While some authors have pointed out how the policy is part of a process of liberal global governance (Kurki, 2011; Neumann and Sending, 2007), others have sought to demonstrate how it can serve as a ‘rhetorical cover for imposition’ of liberal Western values (see the discussion in Ejodus, 2017a, 2017b; see also Chandler, 2010; Krogstad, 2014). While local ownership in peacebuilding may, indeed, initially have been a way to overcome the perceived legitimacy deficit of the UN (see Fukuyama, 2005; Leonardsson and Rudd, 2015), critics have pointed out that, in practice, local ownership largely meant having developing states do what the international community would have liked them to do without having to tell them to do so.

Against critiques of the overly neo-colonial or Western character of international interventions (Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2009), however, the UN has come to favour post-conflict solutions anchored in local or national processes.<sup>7</sup> Yet, for all its centrality, the meaning of local ownership ‘remains underdeveloped’ (Donais, 2009; see also Mac Ginty, 2015; Von Billerbeck, 2017: 4) and its implementers fail to make sense of ‘the local’ in a meaningful way (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013; Lie and de Carvalho, 2010).

Of interest to our present purposes, the debate around local ownership, while being in essence all about sovereignty, seldom links the two explicitly (a notable exception being Andersen and Sending, 2010), leaving the meaning of sovereignty in those contexts largely unquestioned.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the African state is largely marginal in conceptual discussions of sovereignty — save for in discussions of when sovereign states can be ‘acted upon’ (Dunn, 2001a: 3, emphasis in original; see also Ikegami, 2000). As Dunn (2001a: 4) points out, this taken-for-grantedness of sovereignty is ‘problematic, if not highly dubious, when applied to Africa’. Against this, we seek a different point of departure by exploring the concept of sovereignty through articulations of ‘the local’ or ‘local ownership’ through the everyday practices of people *in situ*. Rather than our focus, local ownership is the starting point for tracing processes of the everyday enactment of sovereignty.

While we rely on the traditional understanding of sovereignty as demarcating the spatiality of states and conceptually creating the main units of international politics (the ‘inside’) and simultaneously producing the international environment (the ‘outside’),<sup>9</sup> we also draw on approaches emphasizing the processual character of sovereignty. As Walker has reminded us, the state is not ‘a formal and almost lifeless category’, but is ‘constantly maintained, defended, attacked, reproduced, undermined, and re-legitimised on a daily basis’ (Walker, 1993: 168; see also Linklater, 1998). The quotidian presence of sovereignty is the result of what Roxanne Lynn Doty (1996: 124; see also Devetak, 1995) calls ‘sovereignty effects’, that is, the ‘relatively successful production of such foundations’. Such production can be studied, as it generally has been (see Bartelson, 1995), via discourses — whether of political theorists, legal scholars or states themselves (see de Carvalho, 2016) — but it can also, and we argue should, be studied in its quotidian and dynamic production (see Solhjell, 2015). This, we hope, will allow us to follow Dunn (2001a, 2001b) and others in exploring how practices in Africa can be generative of experiences that can help us understand international politics (see Grovogui, 2001; Hagmann and Péclard, 2011; Migdal and Schlichte, 2005).

## **Everyday sovereignty: Practices, liminality and brokers**

Given the number of international actors involved in everyday politics on the African continent, local ownership is an important dimension of the current discursive construction of the sovereignty of African states. To analyse it requires us to focus on the sites in which it is claimed or performed, and to highlight their sovereignty effects. Such an everyday focus aims to identify ‘the ways the meaning of sovereignty is negotiated out of interactions within intersubjectively identifiable communities; and the variety of ways in which practices construct, reproduce, reconstruct, and deconstruct both state and sovereignty’ (Biersteker and Weber, 1996: 11). However, as ‘neither state nor sovereignty

should be assumed or taken as given, fixed, or immutable' (Biersteker and Weber, 1996: 11), our focus must be on the specific liminal contexts in which the sovereign demarcation is enacted — contexts that cannot necessarily be distinguished as exclusively 'local', 'national' or 'international' (see Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011).

The everyday dimension is central to understanding the workings of any bureaucracy, but is crucial in analysing how local actors meet demands formulated by international actors (see Lie, 2015; Sabbi, 2016). The emphasis thus far, however, has been on understanding the imposition of the international framework of good governance (e.g. Richmond, 2012) rather than the dynamics at work between the two worlds. Our contribution attempts to fill that gap in engaging with specific actors positioned precisely at the intersections of the two worlds: international 'embedded' experts. With everyday sovereignty, we aim to complement the more formal analysis of sovereignty with a focus on how quotidian experiences interplay with global structures and concepts. Through ethnographic and autobiographic approaches, the concept of 'the everyday' has become part of the conceptual landscape of IR over the past years (Guillaume, 2011a; Kessler and Guillaume, 2012; Seabrooke, 2011). Stemming from a variety of theoretical engagements (Gardiner, 2000; Highmore, 2002; Hviid-Jacobsen, 2009; Moran, 2005), a growing literature in IR has emphasized how a focus on the everyday — the more quotidian, mundane or humdrum practices of actors not generally seen as central to the 'high' politics of IR — can reveal how everyday life and practices not only relate to global structures, but may, in fact, play a key role in sustaining them (see Acuto, 2014; Davies and Niemann, 2018).

As Jesse Crane-Seeber (2011: 450) has argued, 'What makes an occurrence or practice "everyday" is the extent to which it is unremarkable, taken-for-granted, or ostensibly natural'. By breaking with the traditional or idealized narrative about international politics as 'the realm of exceptional events conducted by states and statesmen, or their proxies', as Guillaume (2011b: 459) puts it, the everyday contributes to illuminate key concepts from a different perspective that highlights the extent to which the international cannot be construed as a discrete, delimited space, but needs to be approached as a 'processual phenomenon' (Guillaume, 2007). In so doing, we hold, a focus on the everyday shows the extent to which key international practices, concepts and representations rely on their routine enactments in everyday settings. As Mark Salter (2011: 455) has argued, 'The everyday is a crucial part of the construction and reification of an "international"' and plays out '[b]etween the discourse of international relations, and the knot of ideas that separate the domestic from the international, the inside from the outside'. Key features of sovereignty would be missed if we only focused on the international level 'proper' (see Kerkvliet, 2009).

Our focus on brokering agents or intermediaries dovetails with our focus on the liminal dimension of sovereignty — everyday practices on the sovereign boundary.<sup>10</sup> Our account of what we term 'everyday sovereignty' is an attempt at understanding how these brokers negotiate, balance and translate local ownership between multiple actors and spheres of authority, thereby 'producing' or performing the sovereign distinction on a daily basis. The Scott Fellows were a window into these everyday scripts and practices. Focusing on the everyday actors, as Lewis and Mosse (2006b: 10) have argued, 'opens up the study of intermediary actors or brokers operating at the "interfaces" of different world-views and knowledge systems, and reveals their importance in negotiating roles,



relationships, representations'. Focusing on brokers allows us to understand specific interplays between these spheres and how the (international) outside relates to (inside) domestic politics.

From our first meeting with the Scott Fellows, we realized that these fellows blurred the sovereign distinction between inside and outside. This raised a number of questions: 'What function did they play?'; 'How essential were they, and for whom?'; 'Were they the embedded agents of a global process of liberal institutionalization, or were they simply doing the work we could have expected any Liberian bureaucrat to do?'; 'What were the implications of these embedded international bureaucrats for sovereign political processes in Liberia, and what kind of policy ownership can national ministries have, we asked ourselves, if "local" policy is produced by "internationals"?' The answer, we found, lay in neither of these dichotomized camps, but somewhere in between, on a boundary balancing act.

By virtue of their position as insiders from the outside, the Scott Fellows acted as brokers and translators of the scripts and practices at the heart of the everyday boundary-drawing processes between the local/national 'inside', on the one hand, and the international/global 'outside', on the other. By understanding the role and function of these international fellows, we have tried to understand and fleetingly capture how the boundaries of Liberian everyday sovereignty were performed and manifested themselves, for sovereignty is seldom explicitly articulated in the everyday. Instead, it is through its operationalization as 'ownership' that it can be captured (see Andersen and Sending, 2010: 3, 13). Investigating how sovereignty is performed, played out and structured requires taking into account its everyday instantiations.

## **Locating local ownership and the production of everyday sovereignty**

We had started our fieldwork in Monrovia trying to understand what local ownership meant to the UN's counterparts: local and national authorities, in short, Liberians. Our initial assumption had been that in order to understand the perspective of 'the locals', we could interview Liberian ministers and ministry staff on the matter and get 'the Liberian take' on local ownership. Yet, the map did not fit the terrain, and our search for local ownership became blurred the moment we started our inquiry. We had called the office of a deputy minister, whom we had been recommended by an NGO. 'Ownership of what?', we were promptly asked. We realized that, as researchers, we had taken the concept of local ownership for granted to the point where we were unable to articulate a coherent, practical and concrete description on what the concept entailed. 'Policy processes', we replied after a few seconds. The minister would not be available for interviews, we were told. After numerous phone calls, we realized that our project would not be feasible as we had set it up.

Unable to talk to people on the 'inside', we turned to the 'outside' — the world of international agencies and NGOs. 'Who writes policy documents in Liberian ministries?', we asked. 'We can tell you that; it's the international consultants', was the answer we got. An NGO staffer continued: 'In a meeting, the Minister of ... admitted that he hadn't read the policy of the ministry because "they hadn't written it". It wasn't written

by ministry staff'. Emanating from the 'outside', the primary impression we had of Liberian policy processes was one of little local ownership, with international experts leading the way. In one ministry, we were further told: 'UN staff have written most of the policy'. In one of the County Support Teams, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) had stood for most of the ministry's policy.

The NGO workers we spoke with in Monrovia seemed somewhat upset. As they explained to us: 'Generally, they say that they [Liberian ministries] write policy, but it is always written by international consultants. And not a word or mention of having received any assistance'. Rolling their eyes, they told us of a Liberian minister who had had the audacity to publicly accuse international NGOs of being self-centred, being present in Liberia solely for their own benefit and with no impact on the population. The only thing that NGOs cared about, this minister had asserted, was to 'put up signboards with their logo'. Such accusations clearly did not go down well with the NGO community. International experts in Liberian ministries also seemed to have an impact on the funding of the ministry. As we were further told, it was the ministries with most international secondments — like the Ministry of Gender and Development and the Ministry of Health — that tended to get the most funding.

For instance, we heard of a ministry that had managed to secure funding from a US foundation for one of the ministry's *own* projects. Once the funding had been obtained, the ministry was no longer interested in sharing information with the NGOs. This, we were told by an NGO staffer, was problematic because some ministries were already suspected of having received funding from many different donors for the same project. Among the NGO community, we encountered a clear disapproval of how Liberian ministries were practising their 'local ownership': 'The system today is so corrupt', we were told, 'that direct aid to the government would just not work'. The NGOs saw themselves as effectively central in making the wheels of ministries turn. We got a clear impression that they saw their role as ensuring the ministries delivered their 'local ownership' in accordance with international norms and expectations.

Our first interviews with NGOs left us with the clear impression that 'local ownership' was a term that concealed the actual phenomena at work — the struggle for ownership, the ongoing politics that involved negotiating the boundaries between different spheres of authority, everyday sovereignty. While the international NGOs were depicting an everyday process with little local ownership, they seemed to long for even less of it. Yet, 'local ownership' did not seem to describe where and by whom policies were produced. Capturing the negotiations over 'local ownership' seemed to be the key to understanding the process through which the sovereign limits of authority crystallized on a daily basis. To understand the process, however, we still needed to engage with someone on the 'inside'. We started searching for the Scott Fellows.

## **The everyday production of sovereignty: Liberian ministries and the Scott Fellows**

Our first encounter with the Scott Fellows had been a year earlier (in 2009), working on a different project. Back then, we had been lost inside a ministry. Although we had called ahead, our appointment was not present. Then, Fellow A appeared and dragged us with

her to another deputy minister (the one we *actually* wanted to talk to, she said, because the other one did not *really* have anything to do with our research). Observing Fellow A's interactions with different bureaucrats and the deputy minister, we realized that we should have interviewed Fellow A herself. To our untrained outsider eyes, she seemed to know the ministry better than anyone else and to be one of the principal conduits of knowledge and information between the multiple worlds interacting within the ministry.

A year later, we did not initially know how to locate Fellow A, but we had been given the number of another former Scott Fellow, now working for the Liberian government on a cooperation programme between the latter and the UN. We started there. 'The UN says there is a need for local ownership, but it does something else', was the first thing he told us. He was himself a Liberian, trained abroad. Throughout the interview, Fellow C was uneasy in describing his position and role. On the one hand, he was a Liberian national who had been in Liberia throughout large parts of the hostilities, but, on the other, he was now partly an 'outsider': he had studied abroad and was now paid by a generous US foundation to work in a ministry of his home country. Was Fellow C 'local' or was he an 'international'? Was he both, or was he neither? 'The UN structure is untouchable', he told us; 'There are lots of untouchables'. While many Liberians would be qualified for various posts within both the UN and the NGO community, they are seldom considered, he told us. While the issue of local ownership and capacity building was at the heart of the UN and international discourse, it seemed to us that the international community thought that they knew best what local ownership was in Liberia.

It seemed impossible to clearly dissociate the 'local' from the 'international'; the dichotomy made increasingly less sense. The circulation of knowledge and the production of local ownership were more complex and fluid in practice, and did not fit the neat distinctions deriving from the traditional understanding of sovereignty as self-determination. Having now finally managed to retrace Fellow A from a year earlier, she confirmed as much: 'The Liberian government speaks of local ownership as anchored in the counties, whereas the international community wants the Liberian ministries to want the same as them'. She explained the workings of a Liberian council as an example of how she thought local ownership ought to be understood and practised: representatives for each county were elected as leaders, and whenever the ministry had a project or funding proposal, they discussed it with the local leadership structure. Then, the monitoring of these projects was carried out in collaboration with local leaders. Fellow A added: 'those programmes are going exceptionally well'.

These people were accountable to each other, she explained: 'they wouldn't accept a project not in line with their needs'. Discussing her role as a Scott Fellow, what emerged was her role as broker between local/national authorities, who were supposed to take the lead in political processes but often lacked the capacity to do so, and an international network of states, international organizations (IOs) and international NGOs (INGOs). While these were eager to spend money, they were often unable to justify it in terms of national priorities, not knowing what was needed.

We came back to the ownership of policy processes. Fellow A paused: 'The ministries don't own the policies they produce ... they don't'. She started by giving some examples:

The ministry ... has been trying to write an important strategy for a few years. The UN has supported this, hired consultants who worked closely with the ministry. But in the end, the ministry was not ok with it. The *spiel* is gone to the counties, done the consulting with the population etc., but the ministry can't use *anything*.

The 'local' strategy produced by a UN expert on behalf of the Liberian government turned out to be impossible to implement. She told us how the ministry had wanted to produce a shorter, more 'useable', version. The UN agreed but wanted to bring in the same consultant who had done the job in the first place. When the ministry refused to have the same consultant, the UN had said that they 'refused to have someone else come in and redo all we've paid for'. The UN was appalled by the fact that the ministry had gone ahead and passed its own strategy. They complained that the ministry had done it without them, Fellow A told us. The result was two different strategies: a full policy with no local ownership — which, in effect, remained in the drawer as it could not be used by the ministry — and an abridged policy with local but no UN ownership — which was useful to the ministry. Why could all the ministries not just go ahead and produce national policies themselves, we wondered. The answer lay in the staffing of the ministries, Fellow A explained.

'Below very intelligent and good ministers, there is no one qualified' to deal with the IOs and INGOs world, she told us. International experts are therefore crucial as they are 'able to help ministers speak the UN or partner language'. National authorities may have had the capacity to formulate policy but not to word it in the language of the international actors. As Fellow A explained: 'Ministers have few people who can critique a proposal. The Scott Fellows break up huge documents, summarize them, make it possible to fulfil the duties of a minister'. The Scott Fellows were filling a specific cog in the quotidian negotiation of Liberian policy ownership. Straddling the boundary between local/national and international by virtue of who they were and where they worked, they provided national authorities with a way of dealing with the international bureaucratic language of the UN and INGOs. The Fellows were 'hundred percent government', Fellow A explained; 'The UN hated me ... 'cos I pushed against them. I gave the minister ammunition to back up what the minister was fighting for'. 'Local ownership', she explained, 'is not possible without expertise'.

She recognized the paradox: international fellows seemed to make local ownership possible. Put bluntly, the production of Liberian sovereignty rested on its negation. The paradox was an uneasy one. What made it possible for such experts to work so closely with a minister was largely the fact that they were foreign. Outside of the bureaucratic echelons, they were not seen as a threat by the rest of the ministry. We were told of two Liberian former Scott Fellows who had been appointed as deputy ministers; they were perceived as a threat by colleagues in the ministry. However, the foreign Fellows occupied their own uneasy position. As Fellow A explained, the UN and other expats would not consider her a fully fledged member of the Liberian ministry: 'They would go straight to us [the Fellows] and ask for "shit" or dirty laundry on the ministry'. Was it easier to talk to the Fellows because most of them were Western, she wondered. Being, by function, part of the national political structure and, by virtue of being foreign, a part of the international governance network, the activity of these Fellows continuously negotiated and produced the sovereign distinction between inside and outside that they straddled.

## Implementing local ownership: Tensions, loyalties and everyday sovereignty

The idea of local ownership is straightforward: whatever the policy, it should be formulated by locals or nationals, reflect the preferences of locals or nationals, and be put into work through local or national institutions — in partnership with international partners. In practice, however, as discussed earlier, the implementation of strategies emphasizing the primacy of local and national ownership is a lot messier and reflects the process of constant negotiation between different spheres of authority, multiple actors, allegiances, affiliations and interests. Fellow C was illustrative of this. We asked whether working in a Liberian ministry and having his salary paid by a US foundation put him in a tension. ‘Sometimes’, was the answer. For instance, a key priority of an important US foundation doing work in Liberia was adolescent girls. It was therefore seen as desirable for Fellows to work with issues pertaining to adolescent girls. However, as Fellow C explained, ‘the ministry’s priority is not adolescent girls, so to speak, but “youth” as generic’. Fellow C could not always prioritize work with adolescent girls as he had to do what the ministry wanted him to do. Pushing the issue even more, we were told about the dilemmas, and constant negotiations, facing the ministry in trying to address problems specific to Liberia but that were in tension with international standards, which emphasized the need for the government not to interfere. We also encountered this tension in our interview with Fellow E: ‘As most projects are funded by international donors, is there ever going to be truly local ownership?’ As she explained: ‘the financial aspect compromises local participation’.

Fellow D was involved in coordinating an international programme within his ministry. The programme was a long-term programme implemented by the government of Liberia through the ministry. It was supported by international donors and governments, and its budget was administered by a UN agency. As he explained, the ministries have many programmes with international donors. These programmes are funded outside the budget of ministries, but add to the ministries’ budget line. Who was in charge of this programme, we wondered, who makes the decisions? A large part of his job, he told us, was to ‘keep the [international donors and administrators] on top of stuff, but ultimately the ministry is in charge’. These programmes between the government and the UN were based in many ministries and included a wide range of activities. Each of these programmes had a coordinator who, although based at the ministries, was salaried through a UN organization (in fact, often had a UN business card with an address at one of the ministries) and reported to both the ministry and the UN. The idea behind these programmes, Fellow D told us, was to serve as a catalyst bringing actors together, and channelling funds towards areas that both the government and the UN had prioritized for coordinated action.

One of the problems Fellow D identified in such programmes was that often ‘the UN knows more about what happens in the programmes than the government does’. Yet, that was not necessarily the rule, Fellow D added. In his own programme, the minister was ‘involved in every single question, including minutiae. The minister was the one who went out and said “We want this!”’ As the minister seemed to be in full control of the programme, we wondered, why is someone like Fellow D needed to coordinate the programme? He replied:

the fact that they have me in this position is because of the onerous procurement process of the [international agencies]. The ministry knows a lot about the project, but ministers seldom have the time ... to make sure that the reporting is formatted according to international standards.

At work here were precisely the negotiations through which everyday sovereignty is reproduced on a continuous basis: a series of different actors negotiating their spaces, sometimes through intermediaries like the international Fellows, negotiating the boundaries of sovereign statehood. It was not a matter of capacity, Fellow D assured us: 'The ministry just did a policy thing. They did it all. All ministry. No international experts. The minister of ... has this group of amazing people around that are just crazy awesome!' Fellow D described a fluid and strategic relation between the 'local', on the one hand, and the 'international', on the other, which resonates with neither the traditional understanding of sovereignty as an attribute of statehood (Hinsley, 1986), nor the understanding of sovereignty as governmentalized (Andersen and Sending, 2010; Bartelson, 2014) — the former because of its rigidity, the latter because it does not give enough theoretical purchase to the local/national sphere in defining the outcomes of these negotiations. As Andersen and Sending (2010: 34) argue: 'the actual power of external actors to effectively govern or change extant power relations and political dynamics is beside the point'. While the latter view may, in fact, help elucidate processes of global governance, it is less helpful in making sense of sovereignty.

The fluidity of ownership resonated with Fellow B as well. Almost without hesitation, he started on a long monologue, punctuated only by small breaks for opening the windows: 'Local ownership is difficult. Firstly, can the country identify its needs? Secondly, can donors understand these priorities, or do they impose their own?' The example we discussed was a recently drafted Long-Term Plan. The process of writing the plan had taken ministry staff around the country to county meetings and consultations. Still, the question remained whether this plan was something that the people wanted, or something imposed by the UN. The plan had been drafted by the central office of the ministry ('with help from experts') before 'the people' had been given the chance to comment. The problem, of course, was that many Liberians are illiterate, so commenting on the plan made sense only if it could be presented in a way that could be circulated at county-level meetings and consultations, we were told. In the end, Fellow B said, it was 'very difficult to assess the extent of local vs. international content'. He concluded that 'The key question, of course, talking about ownership, is whose agenda is it?'

Fellow B also made it clear that there was 'no interference in terms of *what* to do in the ministry' from the international networks of IOs and INGOs, but then again, people in the ministry were not always able to get so involved in projects with outside funding. He therefore felt that it was clearly expected of him to work as a counterpart to international funders, helping the ministry to negotiate its ways with the latter. Fellow B had a formal background in a relevant field, and therefore felt relatively at ease in his role, despite giving us the impression of not being quite sure as to what that role really was. Was it to be an integral part of the ministry, we thought? Or, was his main function that of a go-between?

Our conversation took us back to the Long-Term Plan. What role had international experts played in its formulation? 'The [plan of a similar country] had been previously

written, and was used as a template', we were told. An IO working for another international agency that worked closely with the ministry had been responsible for the leg-work. An expert from a liberal think tank had written one chapter. In the end, did the document capture what the minister wanted? 'Yeah. To a large extent.' We poked a bit more at the issue of 'technical support', which he argued was the main function of embedded international experts from IOs. What did it really refer to? 'Work plan implementation, procurement, tender processes, budgeting, economists', Fellow B paused; 'Yeah. Technical support is a very broad catch-all'. Fellow B, however, seemed to accept the dichotomized view that local ownership was about letting 'them' be: 'Generally, they [the ministry] identify the need, and they get the technical help from us'. 'They' referred to the ministry for which he was himself working, and 'us' to the international experts embedded in the ministry. 'It shouldn't be necessary to have people like me come and show people that they can'; the problem, he argued, was that:

So many departments have been neglected for so long that they don't really feel that they have a stake anymore. What I want is for Liberia to *own* its process, and that there won't be a need for people like me anymore.

Our next Scott Fellow was working for a ministry centrally located in Monrovia, and we planned to meet her in the afternoon. We had never met Fellow F, and could therefore not describe her at the front entrance. Nobody had heard of any Fellow F in the ministry, and it was not until someone shouted '[F], the white lady?' that we thought we might have a chance to get to her. The 'white lady' was, indeed, our Fellow F. We had started off our conversation in one of the meeting rooms in the ministry but Fellow F was not comfortable talking about our topic when others in the ministry could hear, so we moved to a nearby cafe. Fellow F saw the issue with local ownership as a capacity issue. While Liberians often wrote the policies to begin with, she explained, they had no capacity to take an idea and turn it into actual steps. For instance, the Liberian Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), which had been touted by all actors involved as the piece of local ownership *par excellence*, was an epitome of that issue for Fellow F as 'The problem is the PRS wasn't written by Liberians'. She told us that she had spoken to many internationals who had taken a lot of pride in their contribution to the PRS: 'There's definitely a lot of *international* ownership to it'.

However, what about her own position? 'I act like I'm part of the ministry, but I'm *noot* part of the ministry.' For instance, she recalled a meeting where the seating was arranged so that ministry people would sit together in the middle:

I was placed at a table for ministry people in a meeting, but that wasn't *right*. Other [Scott] Fellows were placed there too, but they were Liberians. But at the same time, I would have felt slightly out of place sitting in another place, 'cos I'm not a donor either.

She continued:

It's weird, because a lot of donors will come to me to have access to the minister, because they assume that I'll be more sympathetic to them than others in the ministry — which I *am* because they make sense to me — *gosh*...! — I'd rather work for USAID!

We continued talking about her role as both outsider and insider and asked her if she ever felt part of the ministry, or if she always felt like an outsider:

The only time I feel like I'm part of the ministry 100 percent is when NGOs ask me to do stuff that the minister should sign off on; when expats try to take advantage of my position assuming that I'll be more on their side by virtue of being Western.

She alluded to the potential for the Liberian diaspora ('repat's'<sup>11</sup>) to hold similar positions: 'They don't agonize — like I do — about whether or not they dilute local ownership 'cos everything is "cultural". But sometimes things aren't cultural; they're just *inefficient!*'

Our search for what local ownership meant to Liberian counterparts to the international community had started with the assumption that it was a defined policy position that we could easily access by talking to Liberians working in national ministries. While this assumption clearly had to be abandoned as the abstract language of local ownership itself made little sense in a practical setting, and borrowed too much from formal notions of sovereignty, we had not assumed that our search for sovereignty 'in practice', or everyday sovereignty, would be so detached from an understanding of sovereignty as clearly defined boundaries of authority between 'inside' and 'outside'. While we soon came to grasp that everyday sovereignty was different altogether from Hinsley's textbook sovereignty, we were still surprised to meet a different understanding of the boundaries and negotiations of national authority in almost every ministry we conducted interviews in. By focusing our research on a conceptually important, albeit numerically rather insignificant, group of people, however, we were able to tease out insights into how the everyday processes of negotiating the boundaries between spheres of authority did not fall neatly along either side of the sovereignty divide; rather, the sovereign boundary was performed and produced on a daily basis through the processes of negotiation between different spheres of authority.

## Conclusion

Our account of the everyday negotiation and production of different spheres of authority, of sovereignty, could have fitted nicely into the ongoing literature on the governmentalization of sovereignty, which makes the point that sovereignty is no longer a precondition for a polity to act, but the ultimate prize granted to a 'failing' state once it has shown itself worthy of it through good behaviour — the ultimate carrot, so to speak. Indeed, our account is one of international experts who come in and perform sovereignty on behalf of Liberian ministries, international experts *being Liberian*, so to speak, in order for Liberia to learn to act as a sovereign state. Yet, as our account has also shown, such a view runs into difficulties because of a number of issues. First, the Scott Fellows programme was not a programme initiated by the international community in order to help Liberia in the responsible running of its sovereign duties towards its citizens; rather, the programme was initiated by the Liberian government itself in order to strengthen its hand vis-à-vis the international presence in Liberia. Second, as we have shown earlier, the Scott Fellows often promoted policies that ran counter to those of the UN agencies



and other NGOs in the country. In so doing, we have highlighted how the actual distinction between inside and outside — the frame or *parergon* that Bartelson (1995) speaks of — becomes tangible only through investigating the sets of everyday practices and discourses aimed at producing, fixing, negotiating and changing the boundaries between different spheres of political authority.

Through the article, we have sought to make four main contributions. The first one is to show that while the experience of embedded graduates within ministries has been successful on many accounts, it also generates new challenges and tensions. As our interviews made clear, the distinction between this inside and outside at the heart of the ownership–sovereignty nexus was put into question by the work and position of the Scott Fellows. We have sought to show the extent to which go-betweens like the Scott Fellows, whose brokerage work tied together different spheres of authority by making them intelligible to each other, simultaneously upheld these practices of the demarcation of boundaries on an everyday basis. Local ownership thus depends not so much on the distinction between local and global being fixed, as on how porous that boundary is, and the type of translators at work. The central role played by Scott Fellows in Liberian ministries was less one of ‘missionaries’ of the international onto the local, but rather one of helping translate contexts *between* the two. As we were told by a Liberian NGO worker familiar with the Scott Fellows programme, the fellows ‘are able to translate questions — it’s not like we have dumb ministers or anything, but they help the minister respond in a way that is in the best interest of our country’. The presence of brokers in Liberian ministries, as we have shown earlier, in some cases, allowed the ministries to be better attuned to the aims of international agents and organizations. This allowed them to be more successful at securing funding, but also to be perceived as more successful in their implementation, since they were able to report back in the ‘international *lingo*’. While we cannot generalize based on our narrow material, it is tempting to speculate on whether these practices contributed to the perception of Liberia’s relative success in its post-conflict reconstruction efforts, and whether their absence would have yielded similar results.

Second, our focus on *everyday* sovereignty provides a corrective to accounts of peace-keeping and sovereignty that see the struggle over sovereignty in post-conflict spaces as one over state autonomy or self-determination. As we demonstrate, sovereignty as the distinction between inside and outside emerges through the humdrum of everyday politics and bureaucratic activity, while the idea or blueprint of a specific constellation of (inside/outside) exclusive spheres of authority simultaneously structures the way in which authority is wrestled over. Implicit notions of sovereignty — if not the explicit term — very much condition the actions of a multitude of actors in theatre. This focus allows us to nuance Bartelson’s (2014) recent comprehensive take on sovereignty, in which he distinguishes between sovereignty as a blueprint used by the international community and the governmentalization of sovereignty — where sovereignty has become the ultimate reward for good (liberal) behaviour. Furthermore, we seek to attenuate the assumption that sovereignty is absent in or suspended from post-conflict states. As we show, sovereignty is (still very much) in the hands of local and national actors.<sup>12</sup> As we have sought to argue, the argument about the governmentalization of sovereignty paradoxically relies on an understanding of sovereignty as a fixed attribute of states, as autonomy and self-determination. The cost of this move, as we have sought to

demonstrate, is a partial loss of the analytical purchase of the constructivist and post-structural approaches to sovereignty.

Third, exploring the tension between local/national and international levels opens up post-conflict reconstruction settings as productive spaces in which sovereignty is wrestled over, shaped and reshaped on an everyday basis. As such, our argument dovetails with the argument of Arjun Chowdhury and Raymond Duvall (2014), who elaborate on how to make sense of sovereignty in spaces where there is expected to be little of it. As we argue, perceiving sovereignty is also a matter of perspective on sovereignty. By moving beyond the reified understanding of the concept, we showcase how sovereignty in post-intervention peacebuilding efforts is 'all around'. Our argument also provides a corrective to Stephen Krasner's view of the prevalence of 'shared sovereignty' in post-conflict reconstruction settings. To Krasner (2004: 108), although sovereignty as autonomy is violated, post-conflict states still retain the ability to enter voluntary agreements. In light of our argument, such a view still owes too much to a neat and formal understanding of sovereignty to account for the complexities of peacebuilding settings.

Finally, by taking on board the constructivist and post-structural warnings against a reified understanding of sovereignty, we demonstrate how the largely self-contained policy field of local ownership can be understood from multiple perspectives and how this, in turn, allows us to understand how the struggles taking place over authority in peacebuilding contexts contribute to shape post-conflict sovereignty in specific ways, and how foreigners acting as brokers contribute to this negotiation. This can have broad implications for how we analyse peacekeeping and peacebuilding today. An explicit conceptual linkage with sovereignty and the role of foreign experts and expats, for instance, provides a platform for further exploring peacebuilding and peacekeeping in new ways, by broadening the conceptual and historical space to include studies that do not bear directly on these activities, but that could be highly relevant for making sense of the challenges of peacebuilding. Arguably, the experiences with building state capacity in the wake of independence in former colonies may be a fruitful ground for comparison. In terms of our argument here, an example that comes to mind is Lauren Benton's (2002: 244) study of the role of foreigners in formulating sovereignty in 19th-century post-colonial Latin America, a process that, in a similar vein to the present article, involved foreigners 'that simultaneously undercut and reinforced aspects of state sovereignty'.

Although conceptually important, relying on a traditional idea of sovereignty, as we have shown, is less helpful in understanding how the negotiation between different spheres of authority takes place in practice. Our inquiry into what we have termed 'everyday sovereignty' shows the production of sovereignty alongside different spheres and how the limits or frames vary according to the policy areas or actors involved. Better understanding this variation is a matter for further empirical research, but we hope that our inquiry into everyday sovereignty in post-conflict Liberia is a conceptualization that can contribute to debates about the workings and boundaries of political authority well beyond the Liberian context.

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## Notes

1. Fieldwork and interviews were undertaken by Benjamin de Carvalho and Niels Schia in Monrovia, Liberia, between 19 and 25 January 2010. We met with nine Scott Fellows, and conducted six in-depth interviews with them. In addition, we conducted a number of shorter background interviews with international workers. A preliminary rendition of the fieldwork was made available in working paper form (de Carvalho and Schia, 2011). All our interviews were given on the condition of anonymity, and recorded in writing. Where characterizations are less flattering, names and ministries have also been anonymized at the insistence of the interviewees.
2. Consider, for instance, the debates around the Responsibility to Protect in the wake of the intervention by Francis Deng et al. (1996) about ‘sovereignty as responsibility’. For earlier debates about sovereignty and responsibility, see Glanville (2014) and de Carvalho and Paras (2015).
3. Peacebuilding situations ‘raise hard questions’, Donais argues (2009: 7), ‘about the character of sovereignty in states emerging from war’. Symptomatically, that is also his only mention of ‘sovereignty’ in that article.
4. Funded through an initial grant from the family of Ed Scott Jr in 2007, the Scott Family Fellows Program ‘recruited young professionals to support the government of Liberia as it recovered from 14 years of brutal civil war. The fellows filled a critical capacity gap and worked in Liberia as “special assistants” to senior Liberian government officials, primarily cabinet ministers’ (CDG, 2007a, 2007b). The programme was further institutionalized as the President’s Young Professionals Program, which is still operating today, albeit with a focus on Liberian graduates (for more information, see: [www.pypliberia.org](http://www.pypliberia.org)).
5. This is not to say that the literature on peacebuilding does not allude to sovereignty; in fact, it does. However, these references are largely *en passant* and tend to limit themselves to sovereignty as state autonomy and self-determination.
6. For an excellent overview of the policy trajectory of local ownership, see Von Billerbeck (2017).
7. This dovetails with the call for a better understanding of local mores and circumstances (e.g. Autesserre, 2010; Gizelis and Kosek, 2005; Lederach, 1997; Mamdani, 2007, 2009; De Waal, 2005).
8. As a case in point, the recent *Whose Peace? Local Ownership and United Nations Peacekeeping* by Sarah von Billerbeck (2017) has only three mentions of ‘sovereignty’ in over 220 pages. It is tempting to see the fact that the discourse on local ownership overlooks ownership as the right and capacity of states — in short, the meaning of post-colonial sovereignty — as well as the conditions of possibility of any meaningful post-colonial agency, as symptomatic of a literature that gravitates around a Western conceptual core (see Sabaratnam, 2013).
9. See, for instance, the seminal definition coined by F.H. Hinsley (1986: 25–26): ‘at the beginning, at any rate, the idea of sovereignty was the idea that there is a final and absolute political

authority in the political community; and everything that needs to be added to complete the definition is added if this statement is continued in the following words: “and no final authority exists elsewhere”.

10. Brokers and translators have become household concepts in the anthropology of development (e.g. Bierschenk et al., 2002; Lewis and Mosse, 2006a; Lie, 2013, 2015). Our take on brokers builds on this work, yet extends it through exploring different types of brokers — international experts. While building on it, we also broaden the conceptual focus of brokerage by identifying a different type of broker. Whereas the anthropology of the development literature has tended to assume that brokers are ‘locals’, (most of) the brokers in the present article are not from Liberia. Yet, they play the part of translation on behalf of Liberian ministries.
11. See Ho (2011), Sinatti and Horst (2015) and Wescott (2006).
12. In so doing, we venture an important clarification with respect to sovereignty in post-conflict settings, namely, that while sovereignty may, indeed, be best understood as a ‘symbolic form’, this argument is not a necessary precondition for the governmentalization of sovereignty to take place.

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