Local and National Ownership in Post-Conflict Liberia

Foreign and Domestic Inside Out?

Benjamin de Carvalho and Niels Nagelhus Schia

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Summary

The paper takes as its starting point the difficulties encountered in implementing policies aimed at fostering local and national ownership in peacekeeping activities. Especially important in this respect are training programmes aimed at sensitizing people working in peacekeeping operations to the inherent difficulties of local ownership in post-conflict environments. The account offered here is an ethnography of local ownership in a specific context. Through such accounts, we argue, training programmes can go beyond emphasizing the difficulties relating to local ownership, and instead emphasize how these can be solved in different contexts, on a case-by-case basis. By offering an ethnographical account of practices of local ownership in Liberian ministries, problematizing the role played by international embedded experts, we argue that where you stand may actually depend on where you sit. In a difficult post-conflict environment, local ownership in the initial phases may not be possible without borrowing capacity from the outside. In the end, the important question may be not who does the work, but whose perspectives underlie the policies that are adopted and implemented.

Introduction

The traditional distinction between peacekeeping and peacebuilding is no longer tenable, as different tasks have become inherently inter-woven. With this change, concepts and tools pertaining to the peace-building agenda – which has traditionally drawn heavily on terms and tools from the development field – have become part of UN peace-keeping. Central here is the emphasis accorded to national legitimacy, sought achieved through 'local' or 'national' ownership. As a way to overcome what many have characterized as a legitimacy crisis of UN peacekeeping, national ownership has increasingly become the an-swer. But what does local or national ownership entail, in a setting where the distinctions between national authorities and the interna-tional community are at best blurred? The present report is an attempt at understanding what different actors understand as local ownership, through an inquiry into practices of ownership in Liberian ministries. By means of an ethnographic account, we argue that while local own-ership may be important, perhaps even more important is the local *perspective*. For, as the literature emphasizes, post-conflict local own-ership may be not only difficult to achieve, but inherently problematic. In many ways, local ownership is why conflicts emerged in the first place. The reason why international peacekeeping operations are mandated to conflict and post-conflict areas is precisely because the local processes have led to violence. As such, the local ownership championed by the international community is not local ownership *tout court* but local ownership of a *specific* kind: the good kind.

The inherently problematic nature of local ownership in post-conflict environments is a key feature which should figure centrally in all types of training programmes preparing people to work in a peace-keeping environment. To be sure, local ownership already has a pre-dominant place in training modules, where the difficulties involved in the concept are emphasized time and again. These modules, however, often fall short when it comes to providing answers for how to over-come those difficulties. Besides stating that local ownership is both important and difficult, little is offered.

Our aim in the present report is twofold. On the one hand we seek to understand how the emphasis on local ownership gets entangled in the practice of peacekeeping operations. We employ ethnography as a way of providing empirical avenues for further theorizing and studies. On the other hand, we offer this emphasis on ethnography as a way out of the impasse facing current literature and training modules with regard to local ownership. Our underlying argument is that ethno-graphical accounts and empirical accounts exemplifying how local ownership is practiced in peacekeeping missions – emphasizing the daily challenges people will meet in these environments and how they

often have to be solved on a case to case basis – may be a way for training programmes and modules to go beyond the limitations of simply stating the inherent problems associated with local ownership. Implementing local ownership cannot be successfully done through general policies, but may have to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. The solution we offer here involves focusing on local perspective as a step towards local ownership.

An Emphasis on Local Ownership

Faced with a wave of criticism emphasizing the neo-colonial and overly Western character of peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities,[1] the UN has come to favour solutions anchored in local or national processes. Whereas some scholars have argued for the need to understand local circumstances when deploying a peacekeeping operation or intervening with peacebuilding activities,[2] others have emphasised how increased sustainability may be achieved as an effect of local actors' engagement and personal stakes in reconstruction activities.[3] As a case in point, Beatrice Pouligny has dealt with peacebuilders' conceptual understanding of the term local ownership and suggests that 'insiders' and 'outsiders' may be a more precise way of discussing conflicts because the use of local ownership often refers to national level rather than local or community level.[4] Increasingly, however, local or national ownership has become the answer to what many scholars perceive as the legitimacy deficit of UN peacekeeping.

To be sure, an emphasis on local and national ownership is nothing new in peacebuilding and peacekeeping activities. Originating in development work, the term *local ownership* was employed by the Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) in 1996, in a document highlighting the importance of locally-owned development strategies (OECD DAC 1996) and defining local people through their relation to donors. The DAC report was later followed up by the World Bank, UNDP and most NGOs, and became one of the principles of the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness.

In the recent UN Capstone Doctrine – a document outlining future principles and guidelines for UN peacekeeping operations – national and local ownership are presented as 'critical to the successful implementation of a peace process' (UN DPKO/DFS 2008: 40). The emphasis on local ownership as enhancing the legitimacy of peacekeep-

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[1] See for instance Paris (2002) and Richmond (2009).
[2] See for instance Autessere (2010), Mamdani (2007, 2009), Lederach (1997, 2002) and de Waal (2005) who argues that international peacebuilding have been blind for local conflict drivers.
[3] Gizelis and Kosek (2005).
[4] Pouligny 2009.

ing operations is explicit: 'Effective approaches to national and local ownership not only reinforce the perceived legitimacy of the operation and support mandate implementation, they also help to ensure the sustainability of any national capacity once the peacekeeping operation has been withdrawn' (ibid.). But a precondition for national and local ownership, UN policy states, is a thorough understanding of the national context, including 'the political context, as well as the wider socio-economic context' (ibid.). In short, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations sees local ownership as crucial to the successful *implementation*, *legitimacy* and *sustainability* of a peace processes.

At the conceptual level, local and national ownership is fairly straightforward; in the case presented here, an emphasis on local and national ownership in policy is all about who guides policy processes, and whose preferences they reflect – the key issue being that the preferences of Liberians (or 'locals') should permeate policies and strategies. In terms of implementation, local and national ownership seems equally straightforward. It emphasizes that Liberians themselves (be they local NGOs or the Liberian government) should implement policy. In essence, local and national ownership emphasizes that, 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 practice, however, the implementation of strategies emphasizing the primacy of local and national ownership is a lot messier – as we came to learn in the course of our research.

The emphasis on local ownership as hammered through by the UN system and international NGOs is a specific concept which veils the substance or the matter of politics. Central questions here include: What is it the international community sees as important to have local ownership over? Which elements are addressed – and which are ignored? What are the consequences of the UN emphasis on local ownership of a given field? Such questions do not figure on the UN agenda. To us it seemed that it was precisely when the UN decided that there should be local ownership over a given field that local ownership over that field vanished. As such, this article argues, the meaning of local and national ownership is not given *ex ante*, but is intrinsic to the set of practices which constitute it.

Searching for Owners

As researchers embedded in the peacekeeping community, we take various terms and concepts for granted. This often leads us not to question their content and practical significance. Amidst the myriads of actors in Monrovia, our search for traces of local ownership soon

became blurred. What did local ownership really mean? Who were these 'locals' and what processes did they run? The map did not fit the terrain, and we had to rethink our approach. After a quick coffee break at one of the many ex-pat hotels in Monrovia, we agreed that a good place to find *local* or *national* people to talk with about *ownership* would be the various ministries. Our assumption was based upon the assumption that *where* your desk and computer are also determines *who* you are politically, and that people working in the ministries, *the insiders*, would represent the citizens of Liberia – as opposed to for instance ex-pats, *the outsiders*.

We started off by calling the office of a deputy minister we had been told would have some interesting views on local ownership. When we introduced ourselves over the phone and requested an interview to discuss local ownership, we were promptly asked, 'ownership of what?' To that we had no immediate answer. We realized that as researchers we had been imbued with in a certain understanding of the concept of local ownership to the point where we were unable to articulate a coherent position on the concept. Ownership of what? 'Policy processes', we replied after a few seconds. 'Aha', came the response. The minister would not be available.

After numerous phone calls, we realized that our project of understanding what Liberian authorities meant by 'local ownership' and the extent of involvement of the international community in Liberian policy processes would simply not be feasible. Either those we spoke with had no interest in our project, or they were not willing to talk about a potentially controversial subject.

As Liberian politicians would not help us understand local ownership, and since we therefore seemed unable to get a glimpse at the 'inside' of Liberian politics, we turned towards the outside: the well-known and 'safe' world of international NGOs.[5] We wanted to know if they had any experience with policy processes in Liberian ministries. More specifically, we wished to find out who wrote policy documents on any specific topic. 'We can tell you that; it's the international consultants', was the answer we got. The NGO officer continued: 'In a meeting, the Minister of Education admitted that he hadn't read the policy of the ministry because "they hadn't written it". It wasn't written by ministry staff.'

The understanding we got of Liberian policy processes was one where international experts were largely leading the way. In the Ministry of Planning we were told further, 'UN staff have written most of the policy.' In the County Support team, the UNDP had stood for most of the

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5   Interview with international NGO, Monrovia.

ministry's policy. The NGO workers we spoke with that day in Monrovia seemed somewhat upset. As they explained to us, 'Generally, they say that they 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 in the press to accuse the international NGOs of being self-centred, present in Liberia solely for their own benefit, and with no impact on the population. The only thing 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 told further, it was the ministries with most international secondments – like as the Ministry of Gender and Development and the Ministry of Health – that tended to get the most funding. 'There is nothing more sexy than to fund GBV projects', we were told. There seemed to be a certain infantilizing of the Liberian ministries. 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, was problematic, because some ministries were already suspected of having received funding from many different donors for the same project. Clearly, the NGOs were watching over the shoulders of local authorities. 'The system today is so corrupt', we were told, 'that direct aid to the government would just not work.'

The NGOs were also central in making the wheels of ministries turn. In order for their projects to be able to run, they need to provide practical assistance to the relevant ministries, including transport and the like. We got a clear impression that the NGOs needed to stay on the back of the ministries in order to ensure that they delivered their 'local ownership' at least somewhat in accordance with the plans of the NGOs.

Our first interview left us with the clear impression that 'local ownership' was a term that conceals the actual content, which is a struggle for ownership. In the present case, what the term seemed to conceal was that what happened within ministries was precisely the opposite of local ownership. The international community seemed to dictate the terms, with the ministries playing along in order to receive funding. If this is the case, we thought, local ownership can no longer be the answer the UN system needs in order to increase its legitimacy in peacebuilding operations.

After that first day in Monrovia, we had a clear impression that local ownership meant international experts embedded in Liberian ministries, making sure the ministries played the UN tune. But that first day also made us want to understand more about the limits of local ownership. If the ministries played along with the UN, and their policies were produced largely by international experts, what then was local ownership? We had also begun to suspect that the case might not be so clear-cut. Liberian ministries, it seemed, did not *per se* represent local ownership. At the same time, they did not represent a global governmental scheme. The distinction between local ownership and global governance processes, we inferred, must be made somewhere *within* the ministries, through a constant process of demarcation. We thus decided to pursue an avenue that we had found by accident a year earlier: Mr. Blonde and the Scott Fellows.

Lost in a Ministry: The Scott Fellowship Programme

On a previous fieldwork, we had been lost in a ministry. And so, it seemed at the time, was everyone else. We had called ahead to set up an interview with a deputy minister to talk about a set of issues, but now that we had arrived for our appointment, the deputy minister did not exist, or he had gone out, or did not work in the ministry, or never had done so. Then Mr. Blonde appeared on the scene like a whirlwind, and dragged us with him down the stairs. He told everyone they were great and were doing a *great* job, before finding our deputy minister (the one we *actually* wanted to talk to, he said, because the other one *really* didn't have anything to do with our research). A few complements later, our new deputy minister had been briefed about the daily schedule and been asked to *please* meet with us because it was *very important* that we talked to someone in the ministry. The person we should have spoken with, we soon realized, was not a Liberian minister, but Mr. Blonde himself. He seemed to hold the ministry together. But alas, now he had vanished.

We soon learned that he was not alone in Monrovia, and that there actually was a large programme designed to ship American top graduates to Liberia to work in the various ministries, appointed by the Liberian president. The name of the programme was the Scott Family Liberia Fellows Program. In February 2007 the Center for Global Development (CGD), a Washington DC-based think-tank, announced the new Scott Family Liberia Fellows Program and that it would be supported by a USD 1 million grant from CGD founder Ed Scott and his family. The new programme was to assist Liberia in managing its reconstruction by providing five to six young specialists each year for three years to work as special assistants to key government ministers and other senior government officials in Liberia. The programme in-

vited applications from young graduate professionals. Since its start in 2007, the Scott Program has employed people to work with the Minister of Finance, Gender, Planning, Health, Education, Public Works, Commerce, Agriculture, the office of the President, the Central Bank and others. Scott Fellows have been given responsibilities for a variety of tasks, but a core objective has been to help 'key ministers and officials with designing and implementing high-priority programmes in the transition from conflict to reconstruction and development' (CGD 2007b). Furthermore, Scott Fellows have been given tasks such as coordinating and communicating within the ministries and agencies, across other government agencies and with major international agencies. Their task has been to provide research, analysis and advice on policy issues, as well as drafting policy papers and speeches. The idea underlying the programme – which emerged as the result of consultations with Liberian officials at the highest level – is to provide Liberia with what is most sorely needed in an interim post-conflict reconstruction period: namely university graduates to staff high-level advisory posts in the ministries. In one word: capacity. In early 2010, the programme linked up with the Nike Foundation, and more than 30 Scott Fellows had been enrolled. They have been employed through the John Snow Inc. Research and Training (JSI R&T), which has coordinated the programme in Monrovia, reporting to the relevant senior government official (CGD 2007a).

What had caught our interest was the function these Fellows performed in ministries. How essential were they, and on whose side? Were they the embedded agents of a global process of liberal institutionalization, or were they simply doings their jobs as we would have expected most Liberian bureaucrats to do? Where did their loyalties lie, and what were the implications of these embedded international bureaucrats for sovereign political processes in Liberia? What kind of policy ownership can national ministries have, we asked ourselves, if policy is produced by internationals? The answer, we found, lay in neither of these camps, but in-between the two. By virtue of their position as insiders from the outside, the Scott Fellows represented the boundary between local/national inside on the one hand, and the international/global outside on the other. By understanding the role and function of these Fellows, we thus tried to understand and capture where the boundary between inside and outside went, and how it was articulated.[6]

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6   See Walker 1992 and Bartelson 1995.

Circling Stadiums and Walking Stairs: Some General Remarks

This work relies on the interviews with international Fellows in a number of Liberian ministries. We visited many ministries, did not always meet with the Fellows, often because we wcould not find them or because they simply were not in. In fact, finding our way in the maze of ministries was not easy, and we had no access to an overview of the relevant Fellows to interview. For instance, one of the ministries proved to be situated within the Samuel Kanyon Doe Stadium somewhere below the seat section. Finding our way in the ministry took some time, but by circling around the stadium we knew we would get there in the end. Other ministries lodge in great buildings of the past, where the lifts do not work, and where any newcomer is bound to get lost. Given that we often did not even know whom we were meeting or where he or she had an office, we were often lost before we got in. In one case, after having gone up and down, asking for the Scott Fellow and getting no satisfactory answer ('Scott Who?'), after being guided from one office to another, and being asked to sit down, leave, and to wait, we were finally brought to the innermost circle of the maze.

Searching for Fellows in the maze taught us two things. First, Scott Fellows were powerful. Time and again we found them by heading for the offices in the inner circles of ministries. Second, Scott Fellows were not the only international experts in Liberia's ministries. In the some of the ministries, UN agencies even had their own section, with a sign and everything – even the type of experts who look at you very sceptically when you poke your head inside their office. On one occasion, the Fellow we met was no longer a Scott Fellow, but had moved on and was now managing a programme between the Governement of Liberia and the UN. His flag was that of the UN, but his colours those of a Liberian Ministry. But we did not have the chance to discuss his true colours, as he wanted to talk mainly about his time as a Scott Fellow.

Liberian Ministries and International Fellows: A Conflict of Interests?

'The UN says there is a need for local ownership, but it does something else', was the first thing that Mr. Blue told us. He was a Liberian, trained abroad. Throughout the interview, we felt there was a certain unease when Mr. Blue was 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 hand he was now partly expat: studied abroad, and now paid by a generous US foundation to work in a ministry in his home country. Was Mr. Blue

'local' or was he an expat? Was he both? Or was he neither? 'The UN structure is untouchable', he told us. 'There are lots of untouchables.' While many Liberian would be qualified for various posts within both the UN and the NGO community, they are seldom considered.[7] The problem with emphasizing local ownership in a peacebuilding operation, we were told, was that post-conflict countries often lack the necessary capacity. As he further explained, UN programmes are run by expats. And when the UN leaves, there will have been little impact and no transfer of expert knowledge. 'The UN structure does not speak to local ownership.' Mr. Blue went on to stress the 'huge disconnect between national and expat staff.' The few locals working for the UN, he said, are largely left to their own devices and not mentored by anyone. The lack of transfer of knowledge was once again brought up. The same applied for NGOs, who leave nothing behind once their programmes are over: 'After the UN and NGOs leave, whose capacity have they built?'

Local ownership was not possible as long as there was no local capacity, was the point Mr. Blue hammered through: 'Local ownership means that an NGO has to remain on the ground, but with a local country director… But that doesn't happen.'

We pushed a bit more on the importance of local ownership, and whether working in a Liberian ministry and having his salary paid by a US foundation – who obviously have special interests and their own priorities – posed conflicts of interests. 'Sometimes,' was the answer. We thought we were onto something here. If the terms of local ownership are dictated by global foundations, NGOs or the UN, can one really speak of *local* ownership?

We were interested in possible conflicts of interest between local ownership and global priorities, between the Ministry of Cisterns and the US Foundation, and talked about a joint programme between the Foundation and international NGO. A workshop had been organized in Monrovia by the programme, and the Fellows were expected to participate. However, due to other engagements at the Ministry of Cisterns, Mr. Blue had not been able to attend – and the organizers had seemed unhappy about this. It was not much of a conflict of interests,

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7   One of our interviewees, referred to as 'Tango Papa' asked us to stress the following considerations after having read through the first draft of our report: 'The UN and International NGOs brought lots of international staff to occupy positions that Liberians are qualified for under the pretence that Liberians lack the capacity needed. However, some of the "expat" end up learning from the national staff they work with. My personal experience […] allowed me to work with some "expats" who did not know common computer applications. Because of this, donor funds end up paying for expatriate staff and nothing tangible is done on the ground to move the local population from war to recovery. Also in terms of salary, national staffs are paid "peanuts" as compared to internationals, although it's the nationals who do most of the actual work.' The conflict Tango Papa refers to was an underlying theme in our interviews, and is an important reminder worth keeping in mind when we discuss the issue below.

we thought, but it gave us enough to think we were on the right track. We circled more.

A key priority of the Foundation is adolescent girls ('Investing in the girl effect: the most powerful force for change'). It is therefore seen as desirable for Fellows to work with issues pertaining to adolescent girls. But as Mr. Blue explained, 'the Ministry's priority is not adolescent girls, so to speak, but "youth" as generic.' Mr. Blue could not always prioritize work with adolescent girls, as he had to do what the ministry wanted him to do. We saw the contours of what we had been looking for, but it was not as clear a conflict as we had been expecting. Pushing the issue even more, we were told about the dilemmas facing the ministry in trying to address problems specific to Liberia, but which were in conclict with international standards which emphasized the need for the government not to interfere.

Leaving the ministry, we thought to ourselves that these Fellows seemed to be playing an important role to the ministries. We also felt somewhat vindicated in our belief that there was a conflict of interest between global agendas and local priorities. Maybe cisterns was one of the fields that had been left to its own devices. Mr. Blue had provided us with a list of other ministries who had Scott Fellows, but with no names. We decided to try the Ministry of Basins.

The Maze of Local and Global Ownership

Knocking on a random door in the Ministry of Basins, we were greeted by a somewhat puzzled young man named Mr. Orange. He was a Scott Fellow.

Mr. Orange had thought about these issues before. Almost without hesitation he started on a long monologue, punctuated only by small breaks for opening the windows – which in addition to admitting outside air also had a tendency to let outside noise in as well. '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 the 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 the *people* want, or if it is 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 simplified before circulating it at county-level meetings and consultations. In the end, Mr. Orange said,

it was 'very difficult to assess the extent of local vs. international content.'

We pushed him on the track which we had left at the Ministry of Cisterns, hoping to get clear vindication of our thesis of international interference in the work of the ministry. He replied that there was 'no interference in terms of *what* to do in the ministry'. But then again, people in the ministry were not always able to get so involved in projects with outside funding. He therefore felt it was clearly expected of him to work as counterpart to international funders.

Mr. Orange 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 part of the ministry, we thought? Or was his main function that of a go-between?

We had noticed several international agency sections in the building, and wanted to understand more about the role of international experts in the ministries. What was their role, as opposed to that of the local staff? Our hunch was that if ministries were stuffed with international staff, could one really speak of local ownership in any meaningful way? International experts, Mr. Orange explained, 'give technical support to the ministry'. What counts as technical support, and what distinguishes it from the substance of politics, we asked. Mr. Orange replied: 'the key question, of course, talking about ownership, is whose agenda is it?' While processes emphasizing local ownership generally rely on donor support, their legitimacy depends upon meaningful political decision-making by national authorities. And, as we were told many a time, the capacity to control these processes is more often than not lacking.

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 international organization working for another international agency which 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 at the issue of technical support a bit more. What did it really refer to? 'Work plan implementation, procurement, tender processes, budgeting, economists'… Mr. Orange paused. 'Yeah. Technical support is a very broad catch-all.'

One of the reason for this, we were told, was the extensive process of consultation. Mr. Orange told us that '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. Just as in our previous interview, there was some uneasiness about the boundaries of local and global involvement, about the distinction between us and them. Was Mr. Orange part of the ministry, or was he an international expert? Mr. Orange was obviously a bit weary of his role too: 'There's an attitude in this country that what the people have here is not good enough. And that's not good. 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.'

Talking to Mr. Orange, we got the clear impression that local ownership was more an issue of rebranding global processes of governance than a reference to any meaningful process. Was it even conceivable to expect Liberian ministries to take the lead in the processes of reconstruction the international community was engaged in, with all the bureaucratic requirements, their own bureaucratic audit and budgeting languages? Was it a good idea to have young expat experts working for the ministries, or did it simply make it easier to push through a global liberal agenda at the local level? Did people like Mr. Orange empower the ministries, did they negotiate between national authorities and the international community – or were they simply making the painful transition to a Western liberal democratic form of bureaucratic governance easier, faster, and more inevitable?

A Deviation: In the Wrong Ministry?
Our next conversation took place in the Ministry of Reservoirs. The person we were meeting was Mr. White who was now involved in coordinating an international programme within the Ministry. The programme was a long-term program implemented by the Government of Liberia through the Ministry of Reservoirs. It was supported by international donors and governments, and its budget administered by a UN agency. The maze did not seem to get any clearer.

As he explained, the ministries have many programmes with international donors. These programmes are funded outside the budget of ministries, but add up 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 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, Mr. White told us, was to serve as a catalyst bringing actors together, and channelling funds towards areas that the government and the UN had prioritized for coordinated action.[8]

During our conversation we learned that while these programmes seemed to have addressed the problem of channelling funds towards prioritized areas, they were problematic because they did not deal with the coordination problems between international actors and the government. The problem, we were told, was that 'the UN knows more about what happens in the programmes than the government does.' UN agencies are represented in the programmes, but those involved in doing the work on the ground were not involved in the meetings. That did not go for all the programmes, Mr. White added. In his own program, 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 program, we wondered, why is someone like Mr. White 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.' It suddenly occurred to us that the reason why expats were needed in national ministries might not have anything to do with the fact that the ministries lacked the capacity to own the political process, but that they did not do it in the specific way the international community wanted them to do it. Mr. White assured us that the ministry did have that capacity: 'The ministry just did a policy thing. They did it all. All ministry. No international experts. The Minister of Reservoirs has this group of amazing people around that are just crazy awesome!'

We got the impression that we were clearly being told that if we were looking for traces of international interference in local political processes, we had come to the wrong ministry. The Ministry of Receptacles, we were told, was really the place to go. There, another US

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8   For more on this, see http://www.unliberia.org/

foundation had been working with them since the beginning, 'embedded on a really big scale.'

Returning to Mr. Blonde

We were not able to meet with anyone in the Ministry of Receptacles. Our next attempts at meeting with international experts in ministries were not particularly successful. This again goes to show the extent to which these experts become part of the environment they work in. We identified a few experts who never returned our calls, or were uncomfortable with talking about their role. When asking a Scott Fellow at the Ministry of Pools about local ownership, we were told 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.' Our only option left was to retrace our steps to where our investigation had started – the mysterious Mr. Blonde of the Ministry of Reservoirs a year earlier.

Local ownership is not a straightforward issue, he told us. 'The Liberian government speaks of local ownership as anchoring in the counties, whereas the international community wants the Liberian ministries to want the same as them.' He gave a Liberian council as an example of how local ownership should be understood and practised. Representatives for each county are elected as leaders, and whenever the Ministry of Reservoirs has a project or funding proposal, they discuss it with the local leadership structure. Then the monitoring of these projects is carried out in collaboration with local leaders. Mr. Blonde added: 'those programmes are going exceptionally well.' These people are accountable to each other, he explained: 'they wouldn't accept a project not in line with their needs.' An idea which should have fallen within the remit of the Ministry of Basins, for instance, came from the Ministry of Reservoirs through the local leadership structure. It had been impossible to get the Ministry of Basins on board.

But who decides what the ministries' projects ought to be, we asked. He paused and looked at us: 'The Minister of Reservoirs is [not new in the game] and probably sick of being told what to do.' But this had not always been the case. 'Initially, no one asked what the minister wanted to do. The ministry was a partner, but would just sign off. The minister felt that signing was required, otherwise money wouldn't come to Liberia.' There was a pause. As if to make the point even more forcefully, Mr. Blonde continued: 'I have worked with the Minister a while, and I know what the Minister would have said, so I can speak for the Minister.' Slowly circling in on his role as a Scott Fellow, we started thinking that maybe these international fellows performed some sort of a broker function between the national authorities

who were supposed to take the lead in political processes and did not always have the capacity, and an international community eager to spend money but not able to legitimize it in terms of national priorities, not always knowing what was needed: 'Often people lacked knowledge of specific processes, but they still needed to be consulted.' He continued: 'I still had to sit down with this guy who had absolutely no idea of what this was actually about.'

We came back to ownership of policy processes. Mr. Blonde paused. 'The ministries don't own the policies they produce… they don't…' He started by giving some examples. 'The Ministry of Reservoirs have 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*.' He 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 the strategy. They complained that the ministry had done it without them, Mr. Blonde 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 couldn't all the ministries just go ahead and produce national policies themselves? we wondered. The answer lay in the staffing of the ministries, Mr. Blonde explained.

'Below very intelligent and good ministers, there is no one qualified.' International fellows and experts are therefore crucial, as they are 'able to help ministers speak the UN or partner language'. We were getting the same point as we had got from Mr. White previously. National authorities may have had what it took to formulate policies, but there seemed to be a disconnect when the UN was the interlocutor, when things had to be written in UN, international agency or partner language. As Mr. Blonde 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.' We felt we were coming close to what we were looking for. Might it be that the reporting procedures and bureaucratic processes of the UN and big NGOs simply do not take into account that there is no one trained in dealing with such processes in national ministries after a prolonged conflict? And are the demands placed upon national bureaucracies by the international community unreasonable in light of

this? Mr. Blonde simply said: 'It is impossible to be minister and your own technocrat.'

This was the space that the Scott Fellows were filling. For these Fellows, qualified from top American universities and working alongside ministers, seem to provide the national authorities with a way for dealing with the international community in its own language. The Fellows were '100% government', Mr. Blonde 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, he explained, is not possible without expertise.' He recognized the paradox: international fellows seemed to make local ownership possible; they seemed to enable it. 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*. They were therefore not seen as a threat by the rest of the ministry. We were told of two Liberian former Scott Fellows who had been appointed deputy ministers. They were perceived as a threat by colleagues in the ministry.

But the uneasy position was not only that of Liberian fellows who were neither entirely national nor entirely foreign. As Mr. Blonde explained, the UN and other expats would not consider him as a full-fledged member of the ministry: 'They would go straight to 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 white, he wondered. Being by function part of the national political structure, and by virtue of being foreign a part of the international community, these Fellows – as we saw it – were daily in the impossible position of having to negotiate the sovereign border.[9] As we would discover, this was a distinction that constantly had to be renegotiated by international fellows employed by the international community to work for national authorities. Winding up our conversation, we asked Mr. Blonde how, given the importance of fellows in ministries, one could rebuild ministries to work in a self-sufficient manner. 'Relying on the diaspora', was his answer. We had come full circle. In order to have a meaningful articulation of local ownership that the UN would listen to, local authorities had to rely on a foreign element.

Ignoring the Local?

The next morning we met with another Fellow, Mr. Pink, who worked for the Ministry of Containers. 'As most projects are funded by international donors, is there ever going to be truly local ownership?' he

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[9]   On sovereignty and the border between inside/outside, see Bartelson 1995. Bartelson speaks of sovereignty as a *parergon* or frame which divides the picture (inside) from the wall (outside), while at the same time being a part of neither.

began to saying. We were in a coffee shop in central Monrovia, the 'only place you can get a decent coffee in the morning. Not espresso. Just coffee.' He talked about a recent survey. Although the ministry had contributed with questions, it was the donor that determined the level of participation and the number of questions.

We turned to the question of international consultants. Could one speak of local ownership in a meaningful way? 'The bigger NGOs and UN agencies provide consultants to ministries. Their advice must be in line with the priorities of the agencies', Mr. Pink answered. Again we returned to the issue of money. Ministries have little freedom, he explained, as UN agencies control the funds. 'There is no real or full ownership of policies.' He pushed the point even further, arguing that it was not likely that the UN would even allow ministries to develop local ownership if it ran counter to UN priorities.

But then again, he said, 'the concept of local ownership is *so* vague and kind of misleading. The idea is that the funding should be international but the ideas generated locally. Local NGOs always draft reports and file them to ministries. But the financial aspect compromises local participation. The policy formulated may not have too much local ownership in the end.' Here too it became clear that ministries suffered from a lack of capacity. In the Ministry of Containers, UN agencies had undertaken a capacity assessment report. The report had been initiated by the ministry itself, but UN agencies had been brought in. The report came out with one recommendation, he told us: to change the staff of the unit in the ministry, for the unit to carry out its work. One of his first tasks had been to find training for ministry staff. But the UN did not want to contribute. Unless the staff were changed, they would not provide training.

But if local ownership is not what we find in national ministries, what should it be? 'Local ownership at the most basic level means taking into account the realities of the country. The problem is that international consultants don't do that. They start with an assumption of internationally accepted universal standards can constantly refer to "in this country we did this, in that country we did that, etc."' The problem encountered in ministries, it seemed to us, was that when local participation is sought, it often seems to clash with international standards brought in by international experts. The funder wins. How do these priorities clash, we asked. 'The UN has an issue with prioritizing. I am *shocked* at what they prioritize.' In the face of the massive problems, UNMIL addresses symptoms rather than causes, he told us. 'The UN is interested in information and contributions to processes, but they don't do anything about it.' Local ownership we thought, rather than giving any meaningful contribution to the legitimacy of

peacebuilding efforts, seemed to be largely a matter of going through the motions.

But what about his own position in the ministry, we asked. Did he not in some way represent those same international standards? 'I'm here in a personal capacity, but the job is facilitated by a foundation – they expect me to do the job of my unit so that they can advertise it on their website – they don't really expect me to work with local employees.' Again, the issue of knowledge transfer and the problematic capacity-building came up. There was little contact between Mr. Pink and national staff, and they did not seem very eager about learning. He felt this was due largely to the fact that many of them thought that the resources brought in with fellows, like transport and internet, would disappear again when the fellow left.

'Mr. Brown the White Guy'

We went back to the Ministry of Containers after lunch. We had never met Mr. Brown, and could therefore not describe him at the front entrance. Nor did we know which section he worked in. Nobody had heard of any Mr. Browns in the ministry, and it was not until someone shouted 'Mr. Brown, the white guy?' that we thought we might have a chance to finish our streak of interviews. The 'white guy' was indeed our Mr. Brown, and we moved to a dark bar nearby to talk. We had started off our conversation in one of the meeting rooms in the Ministry, but Mr. Brown was not comfortable talking about our topic when others in the Ministry could hear.

It was difficult to get the interview going. Mr. Brown seemed sceptical to our project, and we were tired of asking the same questions over and over. The problem with local ownership, as he saw it, was that while Liberians often wrote the policy to begin with, they had no capacity to take an idea and turn it into actual steps. If the Liberian Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) had been written by Liberians, he said, it would have contained technical assistance to break things down into actual steps. 'The problem is the PRS wasn't written by Liberians.' The problem with this is that the PRS is touted by all actors involved as the piece of local ownership *par excellence.* He told us he had spoken to many internationals who take a lot of pride in their contribution to the PRS: 'There's definitely a lot of *international ownership* to it.'

Why does the international community seem to multiply strategies for anything? 'It's always easier to write a new strategy than to implement an existing one.' But are the policies favoured by the international community flawed, we asked. '*I* don't think they're flawed, because they come from the same Western educational system that I

come from.' But there he was, working for the Liberian Ministry of Containers. 'The UN has a "false consciousness thing" about Liberians. The UN assumes that if they only understood how the [Western standards] work, that's what they would want.'

There was a certain bitterness to what he said, and that surprised us at first. Did that come from the fact that he had to work in the Ministry to solve the issues NGOs could just criticize? 'It's easy for INGOs to say that [certain issues are a violation of international standards]', he said. 'They don't have to deal with the [actual problems].' We started talking about his role as a non-Liberian working for the Ministry of Containers: 'I'd rather be working for the US government' he said. 'I don't mean to say "work for the US Ministry of Containers", but if I'm to advise as an outsider, I'd rather be explicit about it. Many technical issues have political repercussions, and I think it'd be easier to be explicitly out of that.'

As a way of ensuring local ownership and capacity-building, many international fellows worked with a Liberian counterpart. In the past, ministers had come to rely heavily on Scott Fellows ('who knew *everything* about the ministry') only to find that their knowledge vanished when their time was up. 'I now have a Liberian counterpart on everything', Mr. Brown told us. The Liberian counterpart, we understood, was useful in terms of identifying protocol issues. Asked about how the cooperation was going, he replied 'the ideas are mine, the work plan is mine; the Liberian person could *not* be more disinterested.' But the issue, Mr. Brown explained, was not just one of 'Liberians vs. non-Liberians.' Again, the conversation brought us over to the Liberian diaspora – the so-called 're-pats' – who have become more involved in Liberian ministries. 'They're ideal', he opined. Not only did they 'get' the politics, but they seem 'less timid about telling people that things should be different.' It was clear to us that Mr. Brown experienced a certain unease about passing judgement on how things should or should not be done, and was afraid of being more a representative of a Western governing logic rather than a staff in the Liberian ministry: '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 conversation had taken a turn, bringing us straight to the heart of the matter: 'I act like I'm part of the ministry, but I'm *nooot* part of the ministry.' For instance, he 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.' He 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 his role as both outsider and insider: 'Sometimes we make things more complicated and difficult than they are, by thinking too much about the issues. This intern who was here for three months improved things a lot, 'cos he just went in and told them how things could be more efficient.' We were nearing the close of our conversation, as the bar was starting to fill up. We asked him if he ever felt part of the ministry, or if he always felt like an outsider: 'The only time I feel like I'm part of the ministry 100% 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.' He told us how difficult it had been when the Minister had once accused him of siding with an NGO. Why, we asked, was his advice important to a Liberian minister, as opposed to the advice from other international experts? 'It might be a relief for the Minister to have an international who is not part of politics, so that the Minister can rely on the technical advice.' Our 'white guy' then returned to his ministry.

Conclusion: The Locus of the Local

In terms of understanding the meanings of local ownership, and the conditions for the possibility of a meaningful national political process, our conversations with the Fellows took us to the heart of the matter, to the site where the distinction between inside and outside was being articulated, written and rewritten. The inside/outside distinction reified in the International Relations scholarship, making what is inside *ipso facto* a part of national or local politics and the outside the sphere of global politics, cannot grasp the processes of articulations of sovereign politics and global governance that take place every day in post-conflict countries.[10] It relies on the distinction being fixed. But this distinction must be reinforced and rewritten continuously by placing insiders at one table and outsiders at another. Through our rendition of some of the conversations we had over the course of a week in Monrovia, we have tried to show the extent to which go-betweens like the Scott Fellows are crucial to upholding these practices of demarcation of boundaries. Through their function as insiders by virtue of their position, they confirm in practice the distinction. When they work in the ministry, they are no longer supposed to be 'international', and the ministries are thereby taken to have inherent qualities of local ownership.

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[10] See Andersen and Sending 2010.

Our conversations also brought out another important element: that the conditions for the possibility of a meaningful local or national political process may lie not in *where* that process takes place, but in *how*. Local ownership over a political process involving interactions between a country devastated by civil war on the one hand, and the well-oiled large-scale bureaucracies embodying the international community on the other, can be meaningful only if the distinction between these two is porous. Local ownership depends not on the distinction between local and global being fixed, but on how porous that boundary is. The central role played by the Scott Fellows in Liberian ministries is not one of intermediaries. They help translate contexts, be they bureaucratic or cultural. As we were told by Nice Guy Eddie, 'they 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 interests of our country.'

Implementation of peacekeeping processes is increasingly sought grounded in what is presented as *local ownership*. Such a focus, it is usually argued, is necessary for the legitimacy of both the policies being implemented as well as the UN peacekeeping endeavour in general. It is also seen as crucial to the sustainability of these processes. However, as we have tried to show in the present paper, while the difficulties pertaining to local ownership may not be easily solved at the policy level, they have to be dealt with – as indeed they routinely are – in implementation practices. The central point to emphasize in this negotiation is the role played by different contexts. Training programmes aimed at sensitizing to the difficulties of local ownership should therefore to a greater extent take their starting point in practices and different contextualizations.

While peacekeeping is inherently the meeting place of different stakeholders with different interests and identities, an emphasis on where people come from and who they are may not be the solution to overcoming the dilemmas of local ownership. When stakeholders representing different agendas are brought together in specific contexts and settings, the central question – as we have brought to the fore with respect to the Scott Fellows – is not necessarily who you are, but whose perspectives guide your work. In the fragile post-conflict settings in which peacekeeping operations work, deliberate reflection on this perspective may be particularly important, since the truly local perspectives cannot yet be voiced through the intricate institutionalized mechanisms of the UN peacekeeping machinery.

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