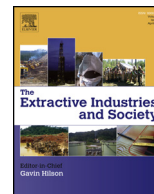




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Original article

# Forest governance and post-conflict peace in Liberia: Emerging contestation and opportunities for change?

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### ABSTRACT

International peacebuilders intervened in post-conflict Liberia to influence the direction of forest governance. Peacebuilders promoted reforms designed to ensure that timber revenues could no longer fuel violence and serve as a catalyst for post-conflict reconstruction. These reforms have been contentious, and have not progressed as expected. The anticipated revenue, employment and community benefits of timber extraction have not materialized, and companies that were awarded concessions have failed to honor their contractual obligations and regularly violated Liberian law. This is because the reforms prioritizing state-centric timber extraction are recreating past arrangements that fostered corruption and patronage and exploited forest communities. This paper argues that these difficulties, along with a concerted effort by international and Liberian advocacy groups to publicize the plight of communities, have led peacebuilders to rethink the privileged status of timber extraction towards a policy goal that affords communities more rights in determining how forests are managed and used. The findings suggest that ready-made solutions for the governance of natural resources can be counterproductive and make peacebuilding more challenging. The findings also suggest that despite the substantial influence of international actors involved in peacebuilding, it is possible to challenge existing narratives that allow new policy choices to emerge

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## 1. Introduction

In the 1990s, Liberia was the site of a brutal civil war that killed tens of thousands of people and disrupted the lives and livelihoods of millions more. The conflict destroyed the country's infrastructure and led to the collapse of social, political, economic and social systems. Liberia's GDP fell by 90% precipitating one of the most rapid economic collapses in history (IMF, 2008: p. 15). The cessation of hostilities in mid-2003 led to the installation of a transitional government and the deployment of 15,000 United Nations (UN) peacekeepers. It also sparked substantial international intervention to strengthen and solidify peace by establishing security, delivering basic services, restoring the economy and livelihoods and rebuilding governance (UNSG, 2009).

The causes of the conflict have been characterized in a variety of ways. Early explanations focused on West Africa's "barbarism" in which irrational and uncivilized warlords, motivated by ethnic hatreds committed murder for no reason (Kaplan, 1994; Richards,

1996). Other explanations suggested that tribal or religious differences, changes to the international system in the 1990s or repressive and authoritarian government rule over the masses led to the Liberian state's collapse (Reno, 1998; Ellis, 1999; Levitt, 2005). In most accounts, the conflict was linked to the extraction of natural resources. The conflict in Liberia was blamed by analysts on the exploitation of diamonds, timber and other resources that when traded on global markets provided the revenue for rebel groups and corrupt governments to buy weapons and wage war (UNSC, 2001; Global Witness, 2002). Liberia emerged as the global poster child of so called "resource conflicts", and was the prime example of how forests were thought to fuel civil war (De Jong et al., 2007).

International perceptions about what fueled the Liberian conflict shaped and influenced post-conflict peacebuilding priorities. International peacebuilders<sup>1</sup> stressed the risk of renewed conflict stemming from the exploitation of what came to be known as "blood timber", and intervened to reform the Liberian forest sector. The

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<sup>1</sup> Autesserre (2014: p. 10) defines international peacebuilders as "foreign entities—people, countries, and organizations—whose official goal is to help build peace."

fundamental objectives of international intervention were to improve governance so that timber could no longer fuel violence and, paradoxically, help ensure that in the future timber extraction served as a catalyst for post-conflict reconstruction. The UN placed sanctions on Liberian timber exports, and international actors pushed for a review of all resource concessions and enhanced state authority over forest resources. The same international actors endorsed and promoted new laws, policies and practices, which were passed by the government of Liberia, intended to improve revenue transparency and government accountability, and provide for public participation in resource-related decisions. These reforms sought to ensure that commercial timber extraction, conservation initiatives and community–forestry activities were balanced in order to optimize the economic, social and environmental benefits of Liberia's forests, which were at once important to national development goals, globally significant for conservation and vital for the livelihoods of a majority of the population. It turned out that international actors prioritized restarting large-scale timber extraction for export markets. Between 2008 and 2009 substantial efforts were made to grant concessions to foreign-backed timber companies to provide the government and communities with revenue, contribute to poverty alleviation and development objectives and create jobs. Nearly a decade later, however, these reforms are contentious, and have not progressed as expected. The promised revenue, employment and community benefits of timber extraction have not materialized, and companies that were awarded concessions have failed to honor their contractual obligations and have regularly violated Liberian law. This is largely because the reforms prioritizing state-centric timber extraction recreate past arrangements that fostered corruption and patronage and exploited forest communities. I argue that these problems, along with a concerted effort by international and Liberian advocacy groups to publicize the plight of communities, have led international peacebuilders to rethink the preferential treatment of state-led timber extraction towards a policy goal that affords communities more rights in determining how forests are managed and used. The findings suggest that ready-made solutions for the governance of natural resources in the aftermath of conflict can be counterproductive and lead to blind spots that make peacebuilding not only more challenging, but potentially destabilizing. The findings also suggest that despite the substantial influence of international actors, it is possible for existing narratives to be challenged and new policy choices to emerge. While international peacebuilders are not the only figures responsible for the forest reforms, they had unprecedented influence in Liberian affairs in the aftermath of the conflict.

The argument is developed first by analyzing the literature linking natural resources, conflict and peace. It subsequently focuses on international intervention to reform Liberia's forest sector and documents increasing contestation over those reforms. The paper then explains the roots of the contestation and how this contestation is opening up opportunities that challenge existing narratives about the links between natural resources and peace that genuinely lead to policy change. It concludes by exploring the larger implications for post-conflict peacebuilding and natural resource governance. The paper draws on participant observations and 85 interviews with government officials, members of international organizations, and Liberian advocacy groups involved in forestry reforms and communities affected by potential timber extraction between 2008 and 2011. The analysis also benefited from email communications with stakeholders and publicly available reports as well as meeting notes, policy documents and memos not in the public domain. For reasons of confidentiality, I do not quote interviewees by name and list only their status/position and interview year.

## 2. Natural resources, conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding

Over the last two decades, international peacebuilders have devoted significant attention and resources to post-conflict natural resource governance reform (Lujala and Rustad, 2012). One reason is that natural resources have been linked to “dozens of armed conflicts, millions of deaths, and the collapse of peace processes” (Lujala and Rustad, 2012: p. 6). Rustad and Binningsbø (2012) found that between 1970 and 2008, 29–56% of all civil conflicts involved natural resources. There is considerable debate about the precise links between natural resources and armed conflict, but three explanations are commonly cited (Le Billon, 2001). First, the capture of resource-rich territory and the associated resource revenues can be an opportunity and motivation for rebellion, and once a conflict begins, extraction can be a means of bankrolling belligerents and prolonging war (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Ross, 2004). Second, grievances related to resource extraction can provoke armed conflict. Government policies that limit or undermine land ownership (e.g., privatization, conservation areas, development projects), promote the enclosure or appropriation of land and resources that limits access and use, or perpetuate degradation and population displacement linked to environmental changes and frustration over unfulfilled economic benefits from resources, can all produce violence (Peluso and Watts, 2001; Le Billon, 2012). Third, resource dependent countries tend to be more conflict prone (Collier, 2007). Evidence suggests, for example, that resource-rich countries are more corrupt and less accountable, more economically feeble and impoverished, and more authoritarian; the outcome of which is “a downward spiral that may . . . lead to civil war” (Ross, 2004: p. 26).

Natural resources also appear to be important for sustaining peace (Lujala et al., 2012; UNEP, 2009). In situations when natural resources played a role in an armed conflict, post-conflict peace was about 40% shorter than when they did not (Rustad and Binningsbø, 2012). The reasons for this are complex, but analysts suggest that resource revenue falling into the hands of rebel groups and corrupt government officials is a main reason for conflict relapse (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Le Billon, 2003). As a result, UN sanctions have been imposed to regulate resource extraction and many post-conflict governments were encouraged by international actors to review resource contracts to ensure their legality. International peacebuilders also initiated commodity-tracking schemes to curtail illegal resource exploitation and bring more revenue into official government coffers. The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme, for instance, is a tracking system created to prevent rebel groups from profiting from diamond mining and trading. The Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade initiative encourages timber-producing countries to adopt a system for tracking timber and limiting the proceeds from logging available to armed groups. While sanctions and commodity-tracking schemes offer promise, evidence suggests that sanctions can impair local livelihoods in some cases (Cooper, 2008). Likewise, there remain questions about the ability of commodity schemes to end or prevent conflict or whether post-conflict governments have the capacity or will to track resource exports (Le Billon and Nicholls, 2007).

Beyond these security imperatives, peacebuilding operations have focused on exploiting natural resources (Lujala and Rustad, 2012; World Bank, 2004). In many post-conflict countries, revenues from resources were an integral, if not dominant, part of the pre-war national economy and state budget. Moreover, armed conflict severely upends economies, intensifies poverty and destroys infrastructure. The view among many international peacebuilders is that natural resources can foster economic revival, create employment, address poverty and provide a source of public revenue (Collier and Hoeffler, 2012; UNEP, 2009).

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