

Country Study 3:

Sierra Leone – a state on the move

After ten years of civil war in which grave human rights violations and atrocities were committed, especially against women and children, Sierra Leone was regarded as a «failed state». A massive UN peacekeeping mission managed to demobilize the combatants in 2002 and peace was restored. Public institutions have begun to resume their functions and the economy is showing signs of recovery. Nonetheless, the country's stability and structures are still fragile. So how can development cooperation contribute towards stabilizing Sierra Leone?

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Sierra Leone gained its independence within the British Commonwealth in 1961. Colonial exploitation had left the country poor with an extremely low literacy rate (around 8 percent), but its government structures and public administration were well-functioning and efficient at this time. However, the new state was weak and the local «chiefdoms» (most of which had no traditional legitimacy but were one of the central pillars of the British system of indirect rule) were eroded by mismanagement and corruption.

In 1972, President Siaka Stevens centralized power, introduced one-party government and integrated the paramount chiefs into a system of personal patronage. His strategy initially established some measure of stability, but this stability displayed all the typical features of «strong man» rule in Africa.

The collapse of the state in Sierra Leone began around 20 years later, when President Stevens transferred power to his successor, General Momoh, without holding elections. Student protests erupted which were crushed by violence. Then in 1991,



Photo: Rudner

civil war spilled over from neighbouring Liberia with support from Liberia's dictator Charles Taylor. Years of military government and failed elections followed, and in Sierra Leone's rural regions, the state ceased to function altogether. The final collapse of the state occurred after a military coup in 1997. By this time, the south of the country was controlled by pro-government militias, while the north and east were in the hands of the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

The civil war was fuelled by weapons and other forms of support from Libya and Burkina Faso. By the mid 1990s, Sierra Leone had developed into a war economy which was dominated by a conflict over the control of diamond mining, and by the looting and torching of villages – actions which were completely unrelated to the political issues that had originally triggered the civil war. The conflict in Sierra

What does the term «state» mean in Africa?

When we talk about fragile or even failed states, especially in relation to Sierra Leone or many other African countries, we must first ask the question: «What does the term state actually mean?» It usually denotes the structures of the nation-state with its bodies and institutions, but in most African countries, including Sierra Leone, this is a fictitious construct. Such structures are a legacy of colonialism, in which countries' borders were drawn and redrawn at random, and which left behind an institutional architecture which has little relevance to the realities of African societies.

After independence, states emerged without citizens, a social contract, or public servants. Instead, there are networks of family and ethnic relationships in politics and administration, and it is these networks which form the real system of rule. The states concerned are in a very difficult interim position: their traditional structures have collapsed, but democratic traditions do not (yet) exist. In this context, corruption is not just a reflection of individual rulers' dishonesty or immorality; it is an effective means by which to oil the wheels of politics and society, smoothing out the worst frictions in a hybrid, transitional society and thus having a stabilizing effect. In reality, it is the fiction of the state, not an actual state that collapses in fragile African countries. The state is fragile because it has no basis in society.

A reduction in financial support from abroad, as occurred in the early 1990s after the end of the Cold War, is often enough to destabilize the power monopolies and cause the thin veneer of statehood to peel away. Sierra Leone is a classic example of this process.

Leone is a typical example of a «new war» – a mix of regular warfare, organized crime and massive human rights violations committed against the civilian population (see Mary Kaldor, *Mary Kaldor, New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge: Polity, 1999, p. 8 ff.).

How was Sierra Leone stabilized?

In this type of «state failure» scenario, with former government actors involved in looting resources and the military now commercialized, external intervention is the only way of preventing any further destruction of the country. In Sierra Leone, this took place through the deployment of British troops: it took just 800 well-trained soldiers to bring the fighting to an end. After negotiations which led to the Lomé Peace Agreement in 1999, the largest-ever UN peace mission (United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone – UNAMSIL) began, involving some 18,000 UN blue helmets until the peace accord was signed in January 2002 and costing around US\$ 2 million a day. The demobilization of combatants was completed in January 2002. In all, 72,500 combatants were demobilized and 65,000 have undergone formal reintegration programmes. Sierra Leone is viewed as a successful model of best practice in UN peace operations.

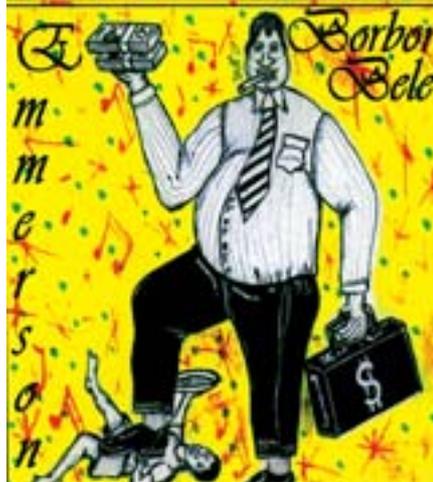
The international support for Sierra Leone was not confined to restoring peace and security, however. The UN, the World Bank, the EU and various donor countries and international NGOs contributed to emergency relief programmes for its suffering population as well as to national reconstruction measures. A Transitional Support Strategy was prepared which was incorporated into a Poverty Reduction Strategy in early 2005. This is regarded as a coordination mechanism for external support and is based on three pillars:

- ① good governance, peace and security;
- ② pro-poor sustainable growth;
- ③ human development.

How stable are peace and statehood in Sierra Leone today?

The first parliamentary elections in May 2002 passed off peacefully and were generally transparent. Sierra Leone's parliament convenes regularly; the government, comprising 22 ministers from all three warring parties, operates efficiently on the whole; and the judiciary has also resumed its functions, at least in the capital. In a pioneering move, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone,

as well as a Special Court based on the South African model, have been established to deal with war crimes and uphold truth and justice. Both organs have mixed memberships – Sierra Leone citizens and members of the international community. The adoption of a law on decentralization, and the local elections in May 2004, were other important steps towards the restoration of government authority. Today, Sierra Leone is one of the world's poorest countries, ranking bottom in the United Nations' Human Development Index. Nonetheless, in 2004, the economy



achieved growth of 6.4 percent, which signals slow but steady recovery, with diamond mining remaining the single most important factor. Agriculture is also starting to recover, albeit still at subsistence level, but this is enough to enable Sierra Leone to dispense with most food aid from abroad.

But despite these positive signs, Sierra Leone still faces major risks and unresolved problems. Firstly, there is the issue of the government's legitimacy, as its politicians belong to the same elites as

before the war. Corruption is viewed as a serious problem, not only by donors. In Freetown's cramped streets, protesting students are still erecting road blocks, and this year's hit song «Borbor Bélé» is being played over and over again with great relish in every corner of the city. The hard-hitting lyrics are a scathing attack on the fat-cat politicians who exploit ordinary people. However, it is Sierra Leone's young people who probably pose the greatest potential risk to the country at present. Many of the former child soldiers are marooned in the capital Freetown; most are unemployed and homeless and live cheek-by-jowl in the city's expanding slums. Even those who did not spend their youth in marauding gangs or as child soldiers bear the brunt of 15 years of statelessness: they have received no primary education or training, and are often orphaned and uprooted from their homes.

From an outsider's perspective, agriculture, especially subsistence farming, appears to be the key basis for economic recovery and poverty reduction, but for most young people, working the land is not a desirable goal. Many of them no longer have any connection with farming: they have no land of their own, and lack the skills and especially the desire to wear themselves out with physical work when other options have been open to them until now. This is a perfect breeding ground for «shadow globalization» – a burgeoning transnational black market in small arms, drugs and diamonds in a society in which large sections of the popula-

The government of Sierra Leone has launched an ambitious reconstruction program.



Photo: Reuters



Children and young people bear the brunt of statelessness: many are orphans, and many of the older ones spent their childhoods as soldiers.

Photo: Rudner

tion no longer have any regular source of income (Ulrich Schneekener, *Fragile Staatlichkeit als globales Sicherheitsrisiko*, APuZ 28-29/2005). Sierra Leone's neighbours Liberia and Guinea – which remain in a state of instability – also pose a potential risk; Sierra Leone is defenseless against any overspill of violence from these countries.

What Sierra Leone urgently needs now is neatly summed up in the Poverty Reduction Strategy: to establish a state which takes its own statehood seriously but also has the flexibility to integrate traditional social structures and functions openly instead of allowing them to operate in the background as a clandestine but, in reality, dominant system of rule. It is also essential to work with the people of Sierra Leone and equip them with the skills and opportunities to earn their own living. After the horrific experiences of war, they must be offered prospects for the future, so that they can position themselves in a new society and contribute to its development. Economic alternatives are also required so that young people in particular can earn a living without resorting to the «soft» option of small-scale crime or falling into the clutches of recruiters sent by the warlords in the neighbouring countries.

Support through development cooperation?

Sierra Leone is not a partner country of German development cooperation. German development cooperation was suspended in the 1990s due to Sierra Leone's poor governance. Nonetheless, the German Government has contributed to the reconstruction process and has supported

the UN-administered Trust Fund for reintegration and post-war stabilization. It has also released the development cooperation funds that were previously pledged but not disbursed, in order to help bridge the gap between emergency relief and long-term development, primarily through implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy. German development cooperation is directed mainly at the interface between economic development and the promotion of a new decentralized state system in rural regions.

GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit – German Technical Cooperation) is involved in the delivery of basic skills training and education for young people and other marginalized groups, as well as the provision of support for young entrepreneurs. KfW Entwicklungsbank (KfW development bank) supplements these activities through its financing of rural infrastructure with a focus on economically relevant infrastructure; the aim is to work closely with the newly elected decentralized bodies and build a network of microfinance institutions.

The state on the move?

The measures adopted within the framework of German development cooperation, in cooperation and coordination with other donors, are appropriate, for they are helping the fragile state of Sierra Leone to achieve greater internal stability by strengthening its institutions and establishing a basis for its economy. Nonetheless, it must not be forgotten that Sierra Leone – four years after the restoration of peace – is still a fragile state and is likely

to remain so for some time, for its state structure is largely propped by external actors rather than evolving from within. Due to the traumas of war, the civil war has shaken the foundations of society and has further undermined the country's traditional ruling structures and social system. This creates problems, notably an underclass of uprooted young people who operate outside any social control or generally accepted system of values. But it also creates opportunities: for example, it has reduced the risk of frictions with the modern «state system», which can now move into the ensuing power vacuum. But although old barriers are falling, this does not mean that the modern system has prevailed. Marauding child soldiers cannot be turned into responsible citizens overnight.

Sierra Leone's present stability is based on the massive support which it receives from abroad – around 60 percent of the public budget is externally financed – and it will continue to depend on this support for a long time to come. This situation creates goal conflicts between various development cooperation paradigms which have yet to be satisfactorily resolved: should development cooperation seek to promote good governance, or should it focus on supporting fragile states? Should it prioritize the stabilizing effects of external aid even when there is «rent-seeking» by elites? Should it promote local ownership, even if this entails supporting non-legitimate elites, or should it opt for foreign control? The assistance paths the international community opts for will depend, among other things, on the number and significance of other and new crises, and on the importance it attaches to Sierra Leone when combating regional instabilities in the context of international terrorism.