



THE FLETCHER SCHOOL
TUFTS UNIVERSITY

**The Nexus:
Corruption, Conflict & Peacebuilding Colloquium**

Thought Piece: What is corruption in conflict zones?

Fighting corruption has become an increasingly important topic for governments of the industrialized donor nations and the institutions whose membership they dominate. The World Bank and US government are at the forefront of this agenda, though most of the European nations have subsequently added it to their foreign aid policies in recent years.

Despite the increasing attention placed on this issue by the international community, very little exchange occurs between those working on conflict/peacebuilding and those engaged in fighting corruption. The de-facto pillars operate simultaneously and often in overlapping sectors yet without co-ordination or purposeful mitigation of possible consequences (positive or negative) each may have on the other.

The Institute for Human Security within the Fletcher School at Tufts University hosted a select group of thinkers and policy makers to discuss the critical questions related to the nexus of conflict, corruption and peacebuilding on April 13, 2007. The *purpose* of the event was threefold:

- 1.) Finalize a map of existing research and activity related to the nexus;
- 2.) Exchange views and ascertain thinking about gaps and emerging questions; and
- 3.) Determine the questions of significance for a research agenda and attendant activities moving forward

In preparation for the colloquium, each participant was asked to draft a short *Thought Piece* on a specific aspect of the agenda in order to fuel the discussion. These pieces were intended to be 'food for thought' and not academic, formal publications;¹ nor were they intended to be made public. However after much discussion regarding the paucity of existing literature it was felt, where authors permitted, that there was value in making them available.

For further information on the Colloquium, contact Professor Cheyanne Church at Cheyanne.church@tufts.edu or visit <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/corruptionconf/index.html> .

¹ Further information on the agenda and the parameters provided on the Thought Pieces may be found on the Colloquium website.

**The Nexus: Corruption, Conflict & Peacebuilding
THOUGHT PIECE**

**‘Savin’ Lives’
Corrupt Governments and International Humanitarianism²**

MARC SOMMERS

Draft

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The ‘good’ people [in the government] are earmarked as points of entry. Then everybody goes to [them] with everything, and soon they can’t do anything properly. It’s a potential vicious cycle, and [soon] their [government] peers will call them a ‘donor baby’ – beholden to donor interests and not a true patriot.

– International NGO official, Sierra Leone (Sommers 2000: 28).

Background: The Case of Sierra Leone

Before Sierra Leone’s civil war began in 1991, a veteran international agency official recalled working directly with the Sierra Leonean government. The recollection inspired memories of extreme frustration. After two years of working in Freetown, Sierra Leone’s capital city, the official concluded that there was “no way” to enhance the capacity of Sierra Leonean government officials – corruption had made reliable public service, in the official’s view, an absolute impossibility.

The issue of corruption plaguing Sierra Leone’s civil service is longstanding and infamous. It has been widely cited as a cause of Sierra Leone’s extreme impoverishment and civil war, and the issue regularly surfaces during interviews with Sierra Leoneans and international agency officials about the state of post-war Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone’s public service deficit harkens back to the early post-independence years. William Reno has made a compelling case that public service was hardly the point of Sierra Leone’s government under its famous dictator, Siaka Stevens, and his hand-picked successor, the hapless Joseph Momoh, who sequentially ruled the nation from 1968 until Momoh’s overthrow in 1992. Stevens and Momoh ran the country like a private enterprise, developing extensive patronage networks that sucked practically all of the country’s massive diamond resources directly into the pockets of the Presidents and

² The phrase ‘Savin’ Lives’ is drawn from a sign posted on the windshield of a U.S. Army Jeep in Kosovo in August, 1999.

their respective cronies. Before Stevens came to power, diamonds created about USD \$200 million in formal economy profits. By 1987, that amount had descended to a mere \$100,000 (Reno 1998: 116).

Presidents Stevens and Momoh balanced their profiteering with a general neglect of the country's expanding poverty. Their practiced talent for rapacious governance nonetheless attracted "resources from many patrons" by virtue of the nation's impoverishment (Reno 1998: 114). War only increased international development aid, which rose from 123.3 percent of internal revenue in pre-war 1988 to 178.2 percent by wartime 1993 (Ibid.: 115). That said, a very significant portion of this aid was not funneled through the government. Still, in 1996, as the civil war continued, Richards declared that those international donor agencies seeking to support government reform were "leaning not on a real set of institutions, but on a façade" (1996: 60). Robert Kaplan, of course, went further still, drawing from Sierra Leone's notorious governance record to help support his estimation that the country is beset by a "pre-modern formlessness" (1994: 2) and constituted a prime example both that Africa is a "dying region" (Ibid.: 16) and that the future map of much of the developing world will be "an ever-mutating representation of chaos" (Ibid.: 14).

War and Corruption: Some Negative Impacts of International Action

How should foreign institutions deal with corrupt war and post-war governments? The Sierra Leone case illustrates the vexing challenge confronting international agencies and their powerful donors. The Sierra Leone government's longstanding reputation for corruption and thoroughly (and quite intentionally) inept governance opened the door for many international agencies to virtually sidestep government institutions during the civil war period. Meanwhile, other agencies took the opposite tack, choosing to directly empower and financially support Sierra Leone's government, a government so weak and ineffective in the late civil war years that it could scarcely claim to have a national army or a presence of any kind in most of the nation. The result was a divided humanitarian community and an embittered, if colossally ineffective, government.

This very brief paper will consider some of the implications arising from the presence of international institutions that, while they seem to be divided, may nevertheless collectively, if unintentionally, support corrupt government practices. The paper argues that while some institutions fund weak wartime governments, other international institutions directly and indirectly undermine their capacities. The absence of coordinated strategies makes the challenge of building reliable post-war governments with little or no corruption even more difficult.

As this is a ‘thought piece,’ the main points will be listed as brief statements:

- Weak governments with reputations for corruption effectively create opportunities for humanitarian agencies to make end runs around governments to address pressing human needs swiftly and with limited constraints. Such governments have tremendous difficulty limiting humanitarian activities, and corrupt ones may merely attract, at best, grudging recognition. Open hostility and counterproductive measures may also arise.
- At the same time, other humanitarian actors may champion building the capacities of war and post-war governments, even those notorious for corruption. A divided international community can make the issue of government corruption a question of debate instead of an issue that is collectively addressed. Indeed, the fractious atmosphere may inspire some government officials to join the fray, openly favoring some international agencies while demonizing others. This is hardly an atmosphere that cultivates impartial, uncorrupt government practice.
- In the short term, the virtual absence of government controls opens the field for humanitarian outfits to serve populations in need largely on their terms. Some donor agencies may support this behavior by funneling money through humanitarian agencies while refusing to, or being restricted from, giving assistance to government institutions. Operating in governance vacuums that they unintentionally helped to support, this can lead to impressive humanitarian early achievements under extremely difficult circumstances.

But even these achievements may be somewhat undermined by the highly competitive environments permeating so many humanitarian and post-war situations. Coordination activities may amount to little more than agencies sharing

only the information they choose to share, while government bodies lack the power to regulate or control humanitarian action, and know it.

- Peering into longer term impacts tends to reveal shortsighted gains and questionable enduring positive effects from international entities. Power imbalances between national government and international agency officials, for example, appear to regularly inspire deep resentment and even anger among national government personnel. According to officials of weak, post-war governments with reputations for corruption, international agency officials may be abrupt, patronizing, and generally disrespectful with them, or may overlook them and their government responsibilities altogether. Another divisive measure is for international agencies to identify what they consider to be ‘non-corrupt’ government officials which they choose to interact with. Such officials can be overrun with requests from agencies, even requests that should properly go through other government channels.

Distrust, resentment, and hostility among national government personnel ultimately creates formidable, and somewhat avoidable, barriers to achieving positive and lasting humanitarian and reconstruction results.

- A second long-term impact arises from international agencies, including media agencies, contending for the same well-qualified local personnel. The resulting bidding market rockets up local salary levels and drains the pool of qualified personnel who might enter public service. Already plagued by a limited tax base and donor support, most war-affected governments cannot possibly compete. In such situations, the existence of governments with severely limited capacity is almost inevitable. This, in turn, can invite opportunities for government practices that may be variously viewed as corrupt or expedient.

Looking Ahead: Two Research Questions of Importance

- A vital research question would be to understand how international actors, however unintentionally, effectively enable corrupt practices in weak, war-affected governments. Some of the results are unfortunate products of expedience,

such as pressures to achieve positive short-term results or hiring local personnel. Others may arise from the fact that corrupt governments do not tend to inspire one's respect. Regardless, it is important to understand how uncoordinated international agency actions can fuel government corruption during and after wars, so that counterproductive policies and behaviors can be addressed.

- Not mentioned above is the fact that corrupt, war-affected governments create exceptional opportunities to make profits. In addition to those activities that involve corrupt peacetime governments, such as illegal access to natural resources (forests, diamonds, etc.) and human exploitation (human trafficking, etc.), war-time governments can open the door to lucrative war-time ventures such as gun running, and dramatically expand of established illicit trades, such as drug dealing.

The corruption-and-war cocktail can also make the illegal exploitation of resources such as of timber, minerals or rare animals far easier and far more extensive: unregulated timber concessions in Liberia under Charles Taylor's reign is an instructive example. In such situations, international standards cannot be applied or evaluated, corruption cannot be easily measured, and those who can guarantee access in insecure territories can name their price.

War and corruption, in other words, changes the terms of trade, dramatically expanding markets for illicit exchange and opening up opportunities for huge profits among those who can either provide security or make business. Exactly how this works is a subject in great need of investigation.

References

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