



# Decoupling local ownership? The lost opportunities for grassroots women's involvement in Liberian peacebuilding

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## Abstract

Civil society organizations and grassroots groups are often unable to play an active role in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding. A possible explanation for the observed challenges in peacebuilding is the gap or decoupling between international expectations and norms from practical action, local norms and capacities. External actors are often overly instrumental and operate according to a general template that fails to start from what the local capacities might actually be. This often leads to the decoupling of general values from practical action, which helps account for the observed barriers of engaging local civil and community organizations in reconstruction. We examine the different types of decoupling and the challenges these present. We evaluate our general theoretical argument using evidence based on the experiences of Liberian women's civil society organizations. Given the compliance of the Liberian government with international norms, we should expect external actors to have an easier task in incorporating civil society and women's organizations in the post-conflict reconstruction process; yet, the record appears to be the opposite. While we present the 'tragic' aspect of this relationship between international norms and local practice, we also suggest opportunities for 'hybrid' alternatives.

## Keywords

Gender, Liberia, peacebuilding, post-conflict society

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and grassroots groups are often unable to play an active role in reconstruction and development in post-conflict countries. Decoupling – defined as the gap between international norms and local norms and the capacity to

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implement policies – provides a possible explanation for the observed challenges in peacebuilding and reconstruction. Decoupling occurs through different pathways, either because locals are unwilling to accept the new rules and norms or because they lack capacity to implement policies.

The literature on peacebuilding normally attributes failures in post-conflict reconstruction to the top-down imposition of policies and values on local populations (see Paris and Sisk, 2009; Richmond and Mac Ginty, 2014). Another impediment to post-conflict reconstruction is the difficulty of formulating bottom-up policies when local actors have low capacity (Donais, 2012; Pouligny, 2006). This overlooks how local community organizations and civil society – despite the many challenges – are often eager participants in the reconstruction process and willing to adopt institutional reforms conforming to international norms and practices (Donais, 2012; Interviews in Liberia, 2011).

Our claim here is not that arguments about weak civil society and top-down intervention are inherently wrong, but rather that they fail to distinguish situations where locals are unwilling to accept international norms and values with cases where locals are willing but unable to implement policies due to low capacity. Both lack of willingness and capacity appear to lead to similar outcomes (e.g. failure to implement policies) and decoupling, but these are different obstacles to peacebuilding with distinct causes and challenges. Decoupling provides a more nuanced approach to understanding interactions between external and domestic actors and encompasses both scenarios as obstacles that hinder the process of peacebuilding.

External influences on post-conflict states are not limited to direct external coercion or imposition through international intervention, but also take mimetic (i.e. imitating) and normative forms. In fact, newly emerged states and societies may come to display similar institutions or outcomes through a process of isomorphism, or adaptation to softer international norms and expectations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Convergence of institutions often leads to the decoupling of general values from practical action, which creates barriers to properly engage local civil and community organizations in reconstruction. As we will explore in detail, decoupling comes in different types, and each category of decoupling leads to different challenges for external and local actors. Recognizing decoupling can help in contextualizing the implementation of peacebuilding policies and also in identifying the mechanisms behind this.

We evaluate our general theoretical argument by exploring the experiences of Liberian women's CSOs since the end of the civil war in 2003. Liberia is an appropriate case study, because of the important role of local female leaders in the peacemaking process leading up to the women's organizations' mediating presence in the Peace Agreement signed in 2003, and the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as President in 2005 and 2011. Moreover, following United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325, Liberia became the first country in Africa, together with the Ivory Coast, to adopt a National Action Plan (NAP) for implementing UNSCR 1325 in 2009. Liberia appears to perform quite well on certain indicators of gender empowerment considering the level of development in the country and the recent conflict history (Gizelis, 2009; Kevane, 2004; Svensson, 2008). In the Liberian context policies illuminate the tension between the pursuit of global values resulting from international interactions and the reality present at the local level.

We set out our argument first by looking at debates about local and external actors in the peacebuilding process, then by discussing the idea of decoupling and differentiating three aspects of this, then by applying this to Liberia. Our conclusions highlight the gaps that have been revealed, and also point to some possible opportunities to overcome these.

## **Interactions between external and local actors**

In a post-conflict environment external actors can interact with locals in two ways. One the one hand, bottom-up approaches emphasize the importance of local non-governmental and grassroots organizations in reconstruction (Lederach, 2008). Top-down peacebuilding approaches, on the other hand, tend to focus on elites and establishing functioning institutions in a country after violent conflict (Donais, 2012; Paris, 1997).

Influential sources, such as the Annan (2005) report, develop the idea that the UN system requires a greater focus on governance through promoting partnerships and local ownership. This approach to peacebuilding seeks to strengthen individual, local and national capacities, building institutions, instigating good governance and enhancing economic opportunities. The report follows a 'people-centred' approach, placing local populations at the centre of the strategy and empowering them to take the initiative (Annan, 2005: 2). 'People-centred' or bottom-up approaches emphasize the importance of local dialogue and capacity building, and appeal to local actors. However, they do so through an international template that is overly technical, depoliticizing and often exclusionary (Paris, 2002). The focus is often on a handful of professional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are often artificial creations, with weak roots in the community, and dependent on external support (Ottaway, 2000: 85). More deep-rooted and active local groups tend to stay out of such activities and their neglect is a consequence of internationally set priorities. International bodies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and development agencies, believe the main focus for peacebuilding should be to get institutions to comply with a set of political and economic standards and expectations (Boutros-Ghali, 1992; World Bank, 1997, 2002). Duffield (2002) has labelled this a process of 'metropolitan monitoring'.

Critics argue that liberal peace is externally driven and imposes a particular understanding of peacebuilding favoured by dominant states and international organizations. Most international organizations internalize the political and economic values of the wealthy liberal democracies, while countries hosting peacebuilding missions tend to be poor and politically weak (Paris, 2002). Although Paris (2002: 638) is supportive of liberalization, he recognizes that this cannot be imposed, and goes so far as to suggest that the attempts to apply standards for domestic governance makes contemporary peacekeeping resemble the colonial era's 'mission civilisatrice'.

Recently, a number of approaches have emerged that highlight the limits of the liberal peace approach (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013). Chief among these is the hybridity approach, which suggests a tense, conflictual and ultimately accommodating process of peace configurations worked out across a range of different actors, contexts and normative frameworks (Richmond, 2015: 62). There is an emphasis on intersubjective mediation between local and international scales and norms with conflict mitigated through everyday life (51). Richmond emphasizes the central dilemmas of hybridity in

the configuration of relationships and compromises between different actors and their socio-historical, normative and interest frameworks (Richmond, 2015: 62). The strength of this approach lies with its highlighting of different scales, agents and the tensions between them. Björkdahl and Höglund (2013), although sympathetic to the hybridity approach as well as related ideas like localization, argue that the literature has not sufficiently emphasized empowerment and disempowerment and that it undertheorizes local agency. Other arguments emphasize friction and the unexpected outcomes of interaction (Millar et al., 2013: 142).

While not disagreeing with these arguments, we wish to highlight something slightly different, namely processes and mechanisms by which such tensions or frictions, compromises and accommodations are produced and managed. With the hybridity approach it is easy to lose track of specific mechanisms, given the emphasis on constantly changing complexes or amalgamations (Mac Ginty, 2010: 404). The friction approach does talk about generative processes, but again emphasizes the unexpected (Millar et al., 2013: 142). We do not disagree with this, but believe that focusing on decoupling can help illuminate some of the key mechanisms behind these processes and how the outcomes are perhaps more unintended rather than unexpected.

Distinguishing different processes is helped by Millar's (2014) attempt to disaggregate hybridity theory by outlining hybridity at four levels – institutional, practical, ritual and conceptual. Our analysis starts at the institutional level, because we agree that institutional hybridity is most open to international agency and most amenable to planning and administration. As Millar (2014: 505) suggests, institutions are the main sites where we find the effects of political influence, technical knowledge and access to economic and human capital. In contrast to bottom-up arguments, we use decoupling to get at this wider institutional setting within which actors are embedded, specifically at the global level where mimicry can be more influential than persuasion and habituation (Mushkat, 2009: 438). Understood globally, acculturation and norm diffusion can be considered as distinct social mechanisms that influence state behaviour, generating similarity of behaviour across many issue areas (Goodman and Jinks, 2008: 726). Decoupling allows for the identification of mechanisms and structural processes that may generate both conflict and similarity, and indeed provide mechanisms to facilitate compliance.

Post-conflict states often seek to establish reconstruction practices consistent with specific values, organizational structures and approaches deemed appropriate by external actors. Specific forms of institutions and efforts to build local state capacity and minimize the relapse of conflict may be adopted as a result of direct coercion and persuasion by external actors (Doyle and Sambanis, 2000). However, this may also come about because post-conflict states seek to adapt 'liberal' or 'modern' practices due to acculturation and imitation of 'relevant' state structures (Goodman and Jinks, 2008: 728). Civil society is not necessarily co-opted or made up of passive consumers of externally imposed values and ideas, but may actively participate and willingly conform and adapt to global norms and values (Finnemore, 1996: 343; Goodman and Jinks, 2004; Meyer et al., 1997: 165).

We set out in the next section how the global diffusion of values also leads to decoupling, which is the process of creating and maintaining gaps between formal policies and actual practices on the ground. This gets at many of the issues raised in the hybridity

literature, but maintains a connection with the structural dynamics and norm diffusion that help contextualize the behaviour of agents and entities. The structural pressure to adapt to global values, ideas and principles creates a range of inconsistencies that often lead to incoherent policy outcomes. Post-conflict countries and societies adopt values from a world that offers many examples of variant models and options. Thus, convergence to global values and principles is not uniform or consistent (Meyer et al., 1997; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Strang and Meyer, 1993).

## **Decoupling in peacebuilding**

The idea of decoupling has been extensively applied to the study of human rights, where adherence to international laws and treaties does not translate into transformative changes in local practices (Cole, 2005; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2005; Hafner-Burton et al., 2008; Koenig, 2008). Goodman and Jinks (2008) highlight three different archetypes of decoupling that usually emerge in human rights implementation. The first category of decoupling (technical decoupling) transpires when the global norms are not properly configured to the local technical needs. Even though this is a fairly common form of decoupling, it does not constitute a lack of compliance with international norms, unlike the other two forms of decoupling that we explore more extensively in this article. On the contrary, changes in bureaucratic structures and adoption of new legal frameworks progressively lead to decoupling and the transformation of state institutions (Goodman and Jinks, 2008: 730). The second category of decoupling (normative decoupling) represents the lack of willingness to comply with externally imposed values and norms. In this case, decoupling includes cases where there is public compliance to global values and practices, but it is disconnected by local practices, values and behavioural expectations (e.g. human rights violation, lack of implementation of gender mainstreaming policies, implementation of institutional reforms or effective taxation). Finally, the third category of decoupling (resource decoupling) is a gap between embracing new policies and the local capacity to implement and monitor the adopted policies. In this scenario, locals are willing to implement policies and adjust to international norms, but they do not have the capacity to do so effectively.

While not initially applied to the reconstruction of states, decoupling is present in post-conflict contexts when states and societies are going through a transformation in order to minimize the chances of recurring conflict. Not all the forms of decoupling are evidence of major failures in the process of adopting new values and reform state structures. Some forms of decoupling might even be necessary. Often, 'benign' forms of technical decoupling – such as the outcome of restructuring bureaucracies – can be intertwined with more complicated gaps in practice (Goodman and Jinks, 2004).

The normative decoupling constitutes a more severe challenge to deep institutional reform (Goodman and Jinks, 2008). In this case there is a gap between the global script of behavioural patterns, expectations and institutional design and local practices. In the case of peacebuilding, it covers a wide range of policy areas and topics. Human rights violations caused by adherence to local practices are a common example of such a gap. The mismatch between the restructuring of formal state institutions and the prevailing forms and structures of local social networks and CSOs leads to

perverse outcomes, such as lack of cooperation between external actors and local CSOs, mistrust and divergent goals.

The third form of decoupling – resource decoupling – commonly reflects the difficulty of peacebuilding policies to configure the new institutions to the local populations' needs. As noted by the liberal peace critics, the templates applied usually fail to start from the existing local capacities and expertise, as we are going to illustrate. This form of decoupling leads to failure in engaging with local grassroots activists because of their own low capacity or misperception on how local social networks can be incorporated in the peacebuilding process. Identifying the type of decoupling that persists during the peacebuilding process can contribute to the differentiation of policies and to addressing specific challenges, some more problematic than others.

### **Implementing peacebuilding and governance in Liberia**

Liberia's 2006 National Human Development Report (NHDR) and NAP are clear examples of attempts to convergence towards international norms and expectations that can lead to decoupling. Pitched in very general terms that reflect the global norms that each country should adhere to, the NHDR (UNDP Liberia & Liberia Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs, 2006: 17) focuses on good governance and social capacity building linked to a vibrant and responsible civil society.

The development of NAPs to implement the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, as has been outlined in Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), is an example of efforts to engage with local actors and CSOs as stakeholders in the process. The main goals of the LNAP are to strengthen and develop prevention, response and protection policies, procedures and mechanisms that promote human rights and guarantee the security of women and girls, to promote their empowerment through a range of economic, social and security policies, and to raise awareness of Resolution 1325 as a means of strengthening and coordinating gender mainstreaming activities (Ministry of Gender of Development, 2009: 12).

The process of drafting the plan – developed by the Ministry of Gender with the help of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) – began in August 2008 and the plan was officially launched on 8 March 2009. The participants in the consultative process included representatives of various governmental institutions, UN agencies, representatives of donors, CSOs, community-based NGOs and leading women's CSOs, such as the Women NGO's Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL). It was validated by participants at strategic regional county dialogues, discussed with a number of key stakeholders and developed through the 1325 National Steering Committee and at an Indicators Workshop organized by the Ministry of Gender and Development and supported by the UN Fund for Women (Ministry of Gender of Development, 2009: 8).

There is scope within this framework for bottom-up policies and initiatives that target local actors. The UN is very clear that grassroots organizations should be the main targets with support for enhancing their capacity to advocate for gender equality (Government of Liberia and the United Nations, 2009: 22). Yet, norm diffusion reflects the power distribution within the system of global governance and the unequal relationship between the advocates of certain norms, values and expectations and those deemed

to be the ‘recipients’. There are two aspects to this process – a more structural process of acculturation and a more intersubjective diffusion of norms, understood by Autesserre (2014: 38) as the trained mindset of the intervenor and the privileging of ‘expert’ knowledge over local understandings.

The role of CSOs is to act as watchdogs and civil society, notably women’s groups, is called upon to monitor the implementation of LNAP and the UNSCR 1325. Neither these interventions nor methods of monitoring their implementation are driven by local capacities and needs. The process of norm diffusion takes little account of context or of potential for hybrid solutions. Although post-conflict countries and societies may seek to actively engage in the process, they lack the technical capacity to implement and monitor the prescribed policies themselves or the willingness to do it. As a result, the lack of competence or compliance leads to either resource or normative decoupling – or both – which undermines the implementation of programmes such as NAP and gender mainstreaming.

### **Liberia’s experience: Decoupling and gaps in implementation**

We further illustrate both normative and resource decoupling by examining the interactions of Liberian women’s CSOs with external actors, such as the UNMIL and foreign NGOs, and the challenges that local CSOs face while adopting and implementing global values and practices.

The empirical evidence is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in Liberia in April and June 2011. The research focused on the interactions between women’s CSOs and the UN mission. The questions explored the history of the organizations, their experiences of interacting with external actors, their level of engagement with peacebuilding and reconstruction, and their overall assessment of the challenges they were facing. Twenty-eight out of a total of 42 interviews included local CSOs, mostly led by women. The CSOs were located in Monrovia and the counties of Lofa, Nimba and River Cess. The counties were selected based on the level of UN presence – measured by the number of UN contingencies – and indicators of female empowerment, such as relative education ratio, that reflect the social and economic characteristics of each county (for which we generally do not have more direct data).

The selection criteria ensured variation in terms of women’s capacity to mobilize and the presence of external actors. The sample of the selected women’s organizations was not random, but there was enough variation to represent different circumstances and experiences. The three counties outside Monrovia – where most of the interviews took place – also exhibited significant variation in social and economic development. Outside Monrovia, Nimba county is the most populated county, with a strong UN and international NGO presence. Women have a relatively high education ratio compared to men and a culture of traditional social organization (Gizelis, 2011). River Cess is the polar opposite, a very isolated area with a dispersed population and low capacity to organize. At the time of the interviews (2011) there was one UNMIL camp to serve the whole county and no other international actors present.

Out of the 28 organizations, 25 were organized and led by women. In 24 out of the 25 organizations, all the spokespersons were women, whereas in one of them a man and a woman represented the organization. The number of spokespersons varied depending on

the location –whether the meeting took place at their centre or offices or in other locations – and the overall strength of the organization. In general, older and high in capacity organizations had their own centres for meetings and more representatives were present during the interviews. Their numbers varied from five to one. The purpose of these organizations also varied from engaging with peacebuilding as a process, instigating policies on specific issue areas, such as sexual violence and agricultural projects, and monitoring the implementation of the principles and goals of the LNAP. The organizations included in the sample were both influential and historical organizations located in Monrovia, such as WONGOSOL, and rural organizations in the three counties outside Monrovia.

In addition to the women's organizations, the interviews included government officials from the Ministry of Gender and Development, UN officials from Monrovia, Bong, River Cess, Lofa and Nimba counties, and three of the major international NGOs present in Liberia at the time. Background information and commentaries were also provided by other local NGOs located in Monrovia, but with an extensive network of activities in rural parts of the country, as well as other grassroots organizations involved in peacebuilding.

The second area where decoupling, especially normative decoupling, is observed includes differences in policy priorities. These differences reflect deeper values about local practices and traditions engrained in the role those social networks and CSOs play in local societies. Both these areas impact the ability of most grassroots organizations to engage with the global norms and values.

### *Resource decoupling: Public compliance versus local capacity*

During the interviews with women's organizations and external actors, two themes emerged that suggest decoupling. The structure and characteristics of what constitutes a CSO and social network in a post-conflict environment do not converge with international expectations. The interviews indicate that the weak or loose structures of local CSOs lead to low capacity; thus, in these cases decoupling occurs because of grassroots organizations' inability to implement policies. In some cases external actors often do not recognize existing CSOs as legitimate partners in attracting donor funding, coordinating available resources to implement projects and policy formulation. In these instances normative decoupling occurs because of a lack of willingness by the locals to follow structures imposed by external actors, as well as of lack of capacity. Although the analytical distinction is important, it is not always easy to separate the two different types of decoupling – resources and normative. The following comment by a UN official regarding the overall impact and state of Liberian CSOs reflects the perceptions of many international NGOs and UN officials of what constitutes a CSO in Liberia:

That I've noticed in my work, sort of out in the field is that like it's hard to connect to civil society in general of any kind, like it's, it's pretty diffused and there aren't sort of like very sort of like. It hasn't appeared to me in a year and a half that there are very many sort of cohesive grass roots organizations. (UNMIL official)

Most CSOs do not have formal membership or registers, and volunteers rather than two to three salaried staff perform most administrative tasks. While there are cases where



representatives report membership numbers up to 2000, it is not clear how realistic and accurate such numbers are because there are no registers, just loose associations. Moreover, most of the CSOs do not have an explicit organizational structure. Most community organizations have a leader – often self-appointed – who represents the members, but it is unclear if the leader has a mandate or to what extent the appointed leader accurately and faithfully represents the opinions, wishes and needs of the other members of the group. As another UNMIL official points out:

...but there's the sort of elite of Liberian local civil society and then below that just pretty loose associations. So when you... what I found when we get down to the village level there is often not really an obvious youth group or an obvious women's group to sort of engage with, but there will be sort of a leaders that sort of bring women or youth together. (UNMIL official 2011)

The informal nature of social networks and loose associations among different communities makes it difficult to measure their effectiveness using concrete indicators and criteria. In the absence of any clear measurements on the extent and resilience of such loose associations and networks, it is difficult for external actors to appreciate their existence, actively engage with them in implementing post-conflict programmes and projects, and evaluate their performance. As a UNMIL official clearly indicates, the loose structure of Liberian CSOs presents a challenge to efforts to build bridges with the CSOs and use them as partners in the implementation of policies:

You cannot do business with that kind of NGOs so we have to know where they are located how they are located, what are the facilities they have, what kind of resources they have, although it is true that they would need capacity building if resources are not adequate you don't have to take the risk you have to go to somebody who has at least 75% to 80% of the resources you are looking for. And then work with them and the process build their capacity to be able to get to the next level. So we do capacity assessment based on *our own* checklist (our emphasis). (UNMIL official 2011)

Ever worse, external actors cannot even identify existing organizations as such; thus, making the implementation of policy documents such as the LNAP quite difficult in practice. The following two quotes, the first one from a UNMIL officer and the second one by a member of a foreign NGO, highlight the challenges of identifying grassroots organizations as partners:

I don't know for me I'm still skeptical about that rural women structure. To be honest on I have my doubts about their sincerity there. It's the Ministry's baby, it's the ministry' brain child. This from my own you know perspective these are women who are very active in politics so they made them County coordinators, now they have County structures they have even acting district structures they have. (Representative of NGO 2011)

But I think that in Nimba and Lofa we haven't seen organizations as such, I mean there is always somebody who is representing women in the community and there is the county gender coordinator that sort of pull together a group of women or help identify candidates for trainings or for who in the course of their work referring women back to our teams. (Representative of NGO 2011)

Ironically, by most accounts parts of Nimba and Lofa counties have some of the most vibrant CSOs outside Monrovia, as another interviewee points out: 'You go to some counties you have a lot of NGOs based there, maybe because of the activities in those counties like Nimba for example there are many NGOs based in either Ganta or Sanniquellie' (UNMIL official 2011).

In particular, in Nimba county there are currently organizations that predate the second civil war and have had a track record of collaborating with UN agencies. Thus, the responses of external actors towards CSOs and women's organizations suggest that decoupling transpires during peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, at least with regards to the structures and resources available to the CSOs, rendering them unsuitable partners in implementing policies.

The LNAP emphasizes the role of CSOs in monitoring and assisting the implementation of the recommendations of the LNAP and UNSCR 1325. While the LNAP is a clear signal of compliance with international norms and goals by the government of Liberia, it is questionable whether the majority of women's organizations have the capacity to perform some or all of the prescribed tasks. The incongruity between public compliance in the forms of instruments such as the LNAP and the lack of capacity in CSOs constitutes an illustrative example of decoupling.

International NGOs and UN agencies do not seem to have a very clear understanding of the actual capacity levels of these organizations within the social context where they function. As a UN official admitted, until 2011 there was no effort to assess the capacity of most of the women's organizations, a situation that she was hoping would change with the arrival of the Swedish NGO *Kvinna till Kvinna* in Liberia.

One of the oldest and most revered women's organizations in Nimba county still struggles to build enough capacity to sustain developmental projects. The organization also maintains a centre that provides child care and literacy programmes for women. Acquiring a new mill was necessary to increase their agricultural output so they can support and implement more activities in their community. Their experience with their new mill is indicative of the lack of resources and know-how that hinders capacity building. However, in their narrative there is also evidence of their willingness to work with external actors:

We were given a project that is the cassava project and this project came about to add value on our cassava because we were only doing planting cassava you know harvested, carried on the market and sometimes to even make the carry it was so difficult. It was a brilliant idea to help the women to leave from another stage to a higher stage or in fact transforming that women's organization into a business entity but unfortunately our anticipation of that project it did not work out the way we wanted it to be... At the same time he said it can produce 30 bags of cassava everyday so the very first time the women brought so many cassava about 65 to 70 bags and grinding, did everything but there was no press to drain the water and there were so many things so we felt that it was kind of a disappointment to us until now we have gone nowhere so we still need external support again maybe help us to graduate from that stage. (CSO in Nimba 2011)

Low organizational capacity hinders the efforts of most organizations to preserve viable agricultural projects that will be self-financed in the long term and obstructs women's organizations from engaging with the Liberian political process and fulfilling their

expected roles. While at face value enhancing the capacity of CSOs is a common goal for the external actors and the government, the methods of supporting CSOs do not match the existing capacity and needs, thus leading to resource decoupling. The following quote summarizes the crucible of why most attempts to support CSOs fall short:

For now they don't have the capacity, because all of their projects are small small projects, like they farm together the cassava farm, and sell their product and then they will use that thing to get some other seeds and replant. So they don't have bigger projects actually to take care. (Local CSO in Lofa 2011)

### *Normative decoupling: Divergent goals and willingness to comply*

The difficulties external actors have in directly engaging with CSOs are partly attributed to lack of trust in terms of the motivations that drive many of the rural organizations, as well as their links to the political elites. Traditional authorities and political elites often control the agendas of CSOs. Their objectives diverge from the policy goals of external actors or the policies espoused by the government, especially on issues such as human rights, leading to unwillingness to comply with norms or decoupling. In addition to normative gaps regarding the forms of social networks and CSOs in post-conflict countries, such as Liberia, inconsistencies in values and expectations in social behaviour between external actors and local populations also lead to decoupling and unwillingness to fully cooperate with external actors.

Normative decoupling is particularly evident in the area of women's or human rights, as the following quote highlights:

If you start talking to people about women's rights they begin to listen. Women's rights human rights are so intertwined that people begin to listen and we tried to say yes these things are possible they are true. But then it is still an area where there are not familiar with so it's difficult for them to internalize it. And it becomes a little bit, these people are coming with these terms which in the end will create problems for us in our communities. (Local CSO Lofa 2011)

The resistance to implementing women's rights, especially in sexual violence and female genital mutilation (FGM), reflects an inherently negative response towards global values on gender mainstreaming and women's rights, which are often perceived as threatening to local culture. Local communities perceive such rights as a foreign imposition that destroys traditional practices and customs and even undermines the role of more traditional associations, thus leading to resistance to global values, as a UNMIL official emphatically states:

For me traditional when you say traditional women's groups it's Sande society. Female genital mutilation is their human rights violation and although of course we understand that this is part of the culture in Liberia it has a long history. There is a very strong opposition among rural women especially to stop the practice. (UNMIL official 2011)

Representatives of local CSOs, however, suggest that sometimes unwillingness to comply with international norms comes from the government and the political elites or

even other local organizations and groups. The quote below also suggests that there are divisions among women's organizations. While some organizations attempt to address issues of FGM and sexual violence, other organizations, like the traditional societies such as Sande, resist cooperation since many practices are part of their own traditions:

So sometimes maybe the government might not be so willing to work with us, for example issues concerning FGM, you know or you know bring into the Sande or poorer societies, so we do have our own like ladies, yeah they could be in women's organizations you know however fluid those organizations are, whether they're you know as in are they recognized by the government or not, but just some women's organizations that are you know women coming together on specific issues. So we do we contact the women on our own, depending on what the issue is, depending on what we are trying to find out. You know, like I said issues of FGM and whether Sande school and bush schools are on it and what is happening. If there is anybody who is in trouble, maybe we need to assist etc. We might not be getting as much support from the government. (Local CSO Nimba 2011)

The diverging perceptions between grassroots organizations and external actors on human rights and values in general, and women's rights in particular, often lead external actors to mistrust and ignore CSOs even in policy areas where it might have been possible to build consensus and develop synergies, such as adult education programmes.

If women's organizations are not always engaged with topics such as human rights or sexual violence, what are the issues and policies that they are mostly interested in? Women's organizations in the counties prioritize three main areas where they need support in order for their organizations to remain sustainable and able to flourish in the long term. None of these issues are a priority for donors or external actors, leading to normative decoupling when it comes to peacebuilding projects. The cost of transportation remains a serious obstacle for rural women's organizations to reach members in remote areas. In most cases they have to walk long distances from village to village or set meetings on market days, when most of the women gather to sell goods:

Being you know the spearhead of the women groups in Voinjama but again you know for example women it's like the Voinjama district women for peace and democracy, this is Voinjama district (Interviewee shows on a map) they don't even have a vehicle to be able to go to Kolahun or to like other places in Voinjama to contact with their women or to develop their network the only chance they have is if like someone would drive them or but these are like very basic things that prevent you to become an effective women's group just on your district I think most of these women groups are very much localized. (Local CSO Lofa 2011)

The second priority of the women's organizations is to build up their organizations' capacity in order to remain sustainable even in the absence of external actors. Representatives of several organizations have consistently argued that externally funded projects, such as swamp cultivation of rice and cassava, are short term. Per the narrative of most of the organizations, they usually receive support such as agricultural tools or seeds, which eventually stops, before the groups have had the opportunity to become financially self-sufficient. Instead, they emphasize adult literacy training as essential for the ability of women's organizations to write proposals and seek independent funding.

Moreover, as one of the women's CSO representatives argues, literacy is necessary for women to be empowered to participate in peacebuilding and reconstruction. In other words, women suggest that for them adult education is imperative to address problems of decoupling due to low capacity:

Like I said challenges are various but for us our own setting will be to establish schools adult schools for women since we want to, we feel that women can also make it like for me I have a woman and what if she's not educated. So UN need to do more so that by the time they leave you know women can be empowered completely to help themselves. (Local CSO 2011)

The lack of skills in writing proposals disenfranchises most women's organizations from accessing resources and ultimately performing their role as 'watchdogs' of the implementation of global norms. While women's organizations have indicated that there are a few attempts to provide them with basic skills and literacy, they also pointed out that often such projects are done in a haphazard way and with a lack sufficient funding so they are not sustainable. This lack of technical skills undermines the capacity building process of CSOs, as the following quote clearly articulates:

One of the reasons is we don't know how to write proposals they are helping us because they are catering to women and children men and all of us welfare. We have not gotten any support from international or national donors because we don't know how to write a proposal they come and interviewer us. We fill in we fill in the forms... we have not gotten any projects that will empower us as women. (Local CSO Nimba 2011)

However, empowerment is more than just writing proposals. Many women do not have the leadership skills or willingness to articulate their own interests, especially in front of men. The unwillingness of women to be present at the same time as men in gatherings reflects deeply rooted customs and beliefs that inevitable hinder the inclusive implementation of peacebuilding:

They don't usually want to be there at the same time as the men, sort of, so even if they're there they don't really necessarily say anything, so maybe there is a need to sort of separate them, yeah. When you deal with this one then you later on deal with this group and it is also the same thing with girls, yeah. And school if you do any, we have like human rights clubs or any kind of awareness raising are involving the youth and students, the girl children don't, they don't say anything, you know they would be in the backgrounds. (Local CSO 2011)

## **Can decoupling be resolved?**

The empirical evidence drawn from the interviews with CSOs in Liberia suggests that decoupling, because of lack of resources and willingness, is prevalent and often the different types are intertwined. In an empirical context the different types of decoupling require diversified forms of intervention and indicate the need to theorize about different mechanisms through which peacebuilding falters. Not all mechanisms have similar effects. Low capacity among CSOs (resource decoupling) can be addressed with targeted financial and technical support. The distribution of funds also depends on external actors

developing effective methods of meaningfully evaluating the impact of different projects on peacebuilding. The challenge of satisfying two competing audiences often thwarts attempts to address resource decoupling. External actors must satisfy donors, who expect results for the resources that they spend, and local communities who expect tangible improvements in their quality of life and environment. Often external actors follow rituals that are aimed at displaying the benefits of their actions more to donors than to locals (Autesserre, 2014: 215). Decoupling makes it difficult to find common ground between the two competing audiences. This leads to frequent failures, even when intervenors make efforts to understand and engage with local conditions. This is more than just a clash or conflict of interests among actors: it is structurally driven. This reality raises multiple questions on how best to resolve such a conundrum.

A small first step is trying to provide a more accurate assessment of the capabilities of local organizations based on a set of context-specific criteria, including the age of the organization, whether they have built or maintained a centre, their ability to reach remote areas and access to other women's groups. This accompanies more subjective evaluations of the ability of the CSOs' leaders to comment on the broader social and economic context and how broad the CSO's goals are, for example whether limited to agriculture or a genuine interest in peacebuilding activities, broader development and women's rights, can also help to construct a clearer profile of the overall capacity of CSOs.

It is instructive that some UN officials, while they do not use the concept of decoupling, recognize the gap between international norms and the implementation of these norms in post-conflict reconstruction. In their efforts to address decoupling, they often use policies that can be examples of good practice, as the following quote illustrates:

So yes so far I've worked with only women groups who established, will have at least a structure who have a leadership and I know, have a history of working with other organizations and they are honest and they are not eating the money which in Liberian terms means that you like misused the funds. (Local CSO Monrovia 2011)

Once capacity has been assessed then meaningful collaborative projects that correspond to local needs in the area can begin. Projects typically require some form of incremental input from external organizations in order to gradually expand their capacity. Sometimes established organizations from the 'local centre' – for instance, Monrovia – that have a history of collaborating with external actors can travel or expand to areas with lower capacity and help mobilize local populations. Thus, they can act as intermediaries between external actors and smaller, weaker CSOs.

There is perhaps more opportunity for this today, since grand-scale liberal ambitions have been scaled back for more pragmatic approaches. Richmond, for instance, talks of the emergence of a post-liberal peace based on greater adaptation to the local context and the realization that the local agency may well be hostile to and disruptive of external intervention (Richmond, 2011: 25). Taking this argument a step further, we suggest that international actors actually encourage a change in approach, not only because they are starting to recognize the real limits to their actions, but because the ideas underpinning international intervention are evolving to concentrate on 'best fit' solutions that work with existing resources. The most obvious example of this is resilience-building, which

can be said to represent a more pragmatic and pre-emptive approach focused more on communities and human capacities rather than formal institutions. While some of the literature sees this shift as evidence of an intensification of neoliberal solutions, it can also be regarded as offering new opportunities for local agency to find space for hybrid solutions that reject the classical liberal form (for a discussion of hybridity and resilience, see Chandler and Richmond, 2015).

Normative decoupling requires different strategies of engaging with local actors who maintain antithetical values and belief systems to the international norms (Goodman and Jinks, 2008). Richmond (2009, 2011) and Mac Ginty (2010) have suggested solutions that combine liberal and local into a hybrid form that does not try to replace the liberal international approach, but tries to open it up to non-liberal 'others'. In an active way it would try to engineer a negotiation or interface between the everyday local and the international, to modify how the peacebuilding framework operates (Richmond, 2009: 332). Such an approach would be based on negotiation and engagement rather than imposing an already decided agenda. This proactive stance could be applied to the different dynamics of decoupling as they emerge in post-conflict countries and potentially lead to policies that support recoupling or convergence of practices and policies.

However, this does open up a debate over the nature of the hybridity approach. Millar (2014) distinguishes between a descriptive approach that tries to understand the main processes and a prescriptive approach that seeks to find solutions. Indeed, some critics suggest that prescriptive hybridity seeks to patch up the liberal peace, dealing with alterity and context, in a problem solving way (Nadarajah and Rampton, 2014: 58). In the case of our decoupling argument, the 'prescriptive' implications of the previous section may or may not be developed. Identifying decoupling naturally leads to suggestions for how to remedy deficiencies and address gaps in implementation. However, like Millar, we are more concerned in this article to provide an account of the mechanisms of interaction between international and local actors and to identify the context within which this takes place, rather than give in any detail either a prescriptive account of what needs to be done, or a more critical account of the rights and wrongs of intervention. Ours is an account of decoupling processes, even if prescriptive or critical arguments may follow.

## Conclusions

Gender politics in Liberia is one of the issues that should stand a chance of success given the history of women's organizations and movements in the country. Yet, we observe a gap between international resolutions and programmes when engaging with local people. We use the notion of decoupling to explain the general issue of the gap between formal policies and actual practices and outline variants of decoupling to account for such things as the limits of institutional designs, gaps between policy and local capacity, and reasons for local failure to comply with or to enact global norms.

While the enactment of a global governance agenda can in part be attributed to the institutional convergence that often occurs independently of actual external impositions, the problems generated by the ensuing processes of normative and resource decoupling are compounded by the attitude of external interventions, which tend to use the bottom-up approach in an instrumental way. A mix of top-down and bottom-up often fails,

because it is too much driven by an inflexible element of ‘external engineering’ rather than local adaptation. Some, like Krause and Tersonke (2005: 451), argue that the new ‘hybrid’ approach represents a bolder attempt at externally driven social engineering that tries to substitute for a more organic process driven by local actors. It assumes that international actors can apply the right ‘recipe’ with appropriate adaptation to local conditions. However, we add to this analysis our view that decoupling can also occur because of less coercive or instrumental facts relating to institutional imitation. ‘Hybrid’ approaches will benefit from understanding the different typologies of decoupling (e.g. normative versus resourced decoupling) in order to identify possible areas where synergies can be built and recoupling can develop. Thus, while we have largely outlined the negative consequences of decoupling, we do believe that decoupling might take a more positive form and create space for a hybrid or post-liberal approach that can better address genuine local needs.

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