SSR 2.0 BRIEF

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A Decade of Police Reform in Liberia: Perceptions, Challenges and Ways Ahead

Despite a decade of police reform, the effectiveness of the Liberia National Police is still limited. Corruption, perceptions of insecurity, lack of resources and overlapping institutions are major challenges that still need to be dealt with. As this brief argues, a more problem-oriented, reflexive and flexible police reform process is also required, including better communication and transparency.

Abstract:

The lack of trust in public services and security agents became starkly obvious when Liberia was severely hit by the Ebola virus last year. Now that the country has been declared Ebola- free and the UN peacekeeping force is set to continue its drawdown, it is time to take stock of the police reform after over a decade of external support. Drawing on over 80 interviews with various stakeholders and nine focus groups conducted in 2013/14, this brief outlines some of the major challenges and perceptions related to police reform.

Corruption and a fundamental lack of resources remain endemic. Innovative attempts at decentralizing policing through a pilot Justice and Security Hub continue to face numerous challenges. Motivation for police officers stationed outside the capital Monrovia is low. Perceptions of insecurity are prevalent. Moreover, a myriad of institutions created by numerous actors has serious repercussions for the effectiveness of the reforms. As Liberia's security situation continues to remain "stable but fragile," a number of recommendations are made in order to ensure the future of a reflexive and flexible police reform process. This includes better communication and transparency for improved relationships between security institutions and the population and institutional learning, better coordination between and amongst security actors and consolidation of the current police forces rather than further expansion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Introduction

"I don't want to join the police because the system is completely rotten, and if you join and want to fix the system, you will become corrupt."[1]

"I trust the police…I love the way when I call them, they come."[2]

Over a decade into police reform, the effectiveness of the new Liberian police, their record of engagement and collaboration with international security actors, and their image are mixed. Security sector reform (SSR) has been part and parcel of many international peacekeeping interventions, though the primary focus has long been on military reform. Only in November 2014 did the UN Security Council pass a resolution agreeing to make policing an essential part of peacekeeping mandates (UN Resolution 2185). Arguably, police reform is especially important in medium-to-long-term peacebuilding efforts, as a central public good symbolizing the (re-)establishment of statehood. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in Accra in 2003, ending nearly 14 years of intermittent civil war in Liberia, proposed the complete restructuring of the Liberia National Police (LNP). As part of the United Nations Mission to Liberia (UNMIL), an entirely new LNP was to be put in place (see UN Resolution 1509), under the auspices of the UN Police (UNPOL).

Liberia was founded by the American Colonization Society as a homeland for freed slaves, gaining independence in 1847. The descendants of freed slaves, known as Americo-Liberians, exclusively ruled the country for over a century, suppressing indigenous Liberians, until a coup d'état in 1980 by Samuel Doe. In terms of security provision, a system of regime policing was entrenched in Liberia through an ever-increasing number of politicized and repressive security actors. From the start, security forces existed to protect the regime. Originally known as "home guards" and later evolving into the Liberia Frontier Force when border protection became more important, the modern-day Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) was born in the 1960s. This was followed by the creation of the civilian LNP in 1975. This was short-lived, however, as impunity and politicization of the police forces worsened throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Doe, in particular, and later Charles Taylor (who led a rebellion that started the first Liberian civil war in late 1989) created numerous elite units, raising "regime security to a pathological level."[3] By the early 1990s there was virtually no functioning civilian police outside of Monrovia and by the time the war ended in 2003 there were approximately 16 different security agencies.

As of April 2015, over a decade into the reform, 4,904 police officers have been recruited, (partially) vetted and (re-)trained.[4] This includes efforts to recruit female officers and set up a specialized unit to address sexual and gender-based violence.[5] In addition, two specialized units, the Emergency Response Unit and Police Support Unit (PSU) have been set up to support the LNP by dealing with extreme situations like riots, demonstrations and armed robberies. In February 2013, the first-ever Justice and Security Hub was inaugurated just outside Gbarnga, in central Liberia, which aims to decentralize security and justice to the counties.

The most serious stumbling block to the peacebuilding efforts in Liberia has been the outbreak of the Ebola virus in the region, which claimed thousands of lives and infected many more. As a 90-day state of emergency was announced in August 2014 and further restrictive measures were introduced to try to control the virus, distrust in public services and security agents became starkly obvious. By May 2015, Liberia was officially declared Ebola-free and UNMIL resumed its plans for drawdown by June 30, 2016, further reducing its forces, including the UNPOL contingent. What does this mean for police reform in Liberia? Drawing on over 80 interviews with various stakeholders and nine focus groups with market women, teachers and youth, this brief outlines some of the challenges and perceptions related to police reform in Liberia and provides policy recommendations to address some of the most significant issues.

This brief first addresses three series of fundamental challenges to the police reform process. First, its effectiveness has been limited by a fundamental lack of resources, corruption and difficulties in the ongoing vetting process. Second, the challenges related to multiple agencies being involved in SSR are explained, detailing security agencies with overlapping mandates and limited institutional learning amongst major international organisations including the UN. Finally, the complexity of perceptions related to security provision is discussed, showing that a prevalent perception of insecurity is often the result of ad hoc incidents related to economic crimes and not political violence.

On the basis of these findings some practical and innovative recommendations are made to allow for a more problem-oriented, reflexive and flexible reform. The most important issue is to develop better communication and transparency which are sorely needed for improved interactive communication networks between the population and the reform actors. This improves the understanding of security needs that the population has and of security sector reform being undertaken.

Better communication and transparency also provides opportunities for institutional learning. Additionally, security agencies and institutions need to better coordinate their work and the focus of police training should be on consolidation rather than expansion, targeting better train-equip programmes rather than increased recruitment.

Promises and Pitfalls

The many challenges faced by the police have been widely documented by policy makers and scholars familiar with the country.[6] For example, the vetting process of the LNP has not been as thorough as for the new members of the AFL. Only the first three classes of the LNP were vetted, out of a total of 42 classes of recruits that had been trained by early 2014. Vetting included the printing of photos in national newspapers and talking to communities where potential recruits lived – albeit in Monrovia only. Needless to say, not only did many people perhaps not feel comfortable declaring potential human rights abuses undertaken by recruits, but many simply never had access to the information, especially outside Monrovia. Thus, many Liberians feel that the new police officers have not been adequately vetted.[7]

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The fundamental lack of resources is an additional challenge. For the financial year 2014/15, the LNP received a little over 50 percent of its requested budget, as in many previous years.[8] This results in critical shortages of essential police equipment, including vehicles, radios, handcuffs, cameras to document crime scenes, recording tapes and even raincoats. Police usually only receive one or two sets of uniforms, which quickly become worn. Moreover, training was put on hold for over six months in 2013/14 due to funding problems at the training academy, creating a backlog of already-recruited personnel who were waiting to receive training. Because of the Ebola outbreak, training was further suspended and the deployment of nearly 300 graduates was delayed.[9]

The much celebrated Justice and Security Hub, planned in five locations but so far only inaugurated near Gbarnga, also faces numerous problems. The idea is that attorneys, public defenders, judges and police officers, as well as immigration officers, will live and work in one compound, pooling resources in order to bring justice and security closer to the population. A special unit responding to sexual and gender-based violence and a civilian oversight body also make up a part of the hub. The hub principle

has a real possibility of addressing the serious lack of access to justice and security outside Monrovia, but its implementation has stalled. While the UN Peacebuilding Fund provided the original funding, agreeing to finance the first hub and search for co-funding for the remaining ones, costs rose unexpectedly and building faced numerous delays. As a result, the already-planned construction of two further hubs in Zwedru and Harper has been put on hold. In addition, the Gbarnga hub remains incomplete, and those stationed there lament a lack of basic equipment.

Moreover, the existing hub is based at quite a distance from the nearest town, Gbarnga, which especially affects the possibility of the outreach and civilian oversight office stationed there. In the first six months after its launch, it only received around a dozen complaints. Moreover, the Ministry of Justice handles these complaints — against judges or police — internally. Most participants in the focus groups in Gbarnga (conducted in January 2014) had never heard of the hub, or when they had, were not sure of its purpose. There have been some improvements in terms of delivering security because of joint resources; however, the hub is still failing to live up to its potential. This is not only due to still-insufficient resources and the lack of capacity, but also ineffective information and transparency mechanisms.[10]

Another challenge is corruption, which remains endemic amongst the police, and has been widely acknowledged as such.[11] Caused, at least in part, by underfunding and insufficient pay, at the lowest level bribes have to be paid to traffic police at checkpoints. In addition, the victims of crimes have to pay for services such as registering a case, calling the police to a crime scene or having them carry out most basic policing functions. There is also a widespread perception that suspected criminals can pay their way out of police custody: "I don't trust the police, they capture the criminals but then let them go."[12] At worst, there is a belief that members of the police and other security agencies are themselves involved in criminal activities.

Financial constraints are especially difficult for police officers posted outside of Monrovia, who have to pay for their accommodation in addition to their families' back in the capital. There is also a sense — whether factual or not — that only those stationed in Monrovia can be nominated for a promotion. Distance to secondary education institutions exacerbates a feeling of isolation (with many officers completing part-time degrees). One PSU officer lamented "we feel disheartened and discouraged to be here away from our families."[13]

Not everything is bad news, however. The LNP has recently started specifically recruiting police officers in the counties outside of Monrovia so they can then be deployed there after their training. Closeness to their own families will cut down on living costs and boost morale. Better understanding of the communities to be policed is also an aim of this initiative, although increased corruption and nepotism could be a negative side effect. Whilst data collection on crime levels has been notoriously bad, improvements and new systems are currently being tested in Monrovia. Training is now concentrating on senior and mid-level managers. Considering the nature of political appointment for the most senior ranks of the police, this is an important step in professionalizing the LNP. The first group of mid-level and senior managers undertook several months of training in Ghana in late 2013, and have returned with many new ideas and enthusiasm. This includes better record keeping, addressing a lack of discipline and improved planning and budget proposal. One of the major challenges faced by the LNP, however, is the myriad of institutions that are involved in the reform.

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Lost in Institutions

The panoply of security agencies, civil society actors, donors, UNPOL and other international actors involved in the reform of the LNP has created a maze of ideas and propositions, which is at times difficult to untangle. Competing interests have held back the progress of a Police Act, which the legislature planned to discuss in 2013, but instead it was sent back to the drawing board after a new committee was constituted. It is now back with the minister of justice, who is conducting a further review, before submitting the act to the president, the first step in legislative adoption.

Moreover, a multitude of often-overlapping institutions exist that are supposed to aid the police. This includes the community policing forums, set out to create awareness and build cooperation between the community and the police. These ceased to function in 2010 due to a lack of funding, but were relaunched under a new name, community watch forums, in 2011. Nevertheless, funding is ad hoc and limited. Further, the county security councils often mentioned in policy reports (they are supposed to gather intelligence as part of a more elaborate early warning system) seem to be largely non-existent. To date, they have been set up by one individual non-governmental organization (NGO) in three counties, namely Lofa, Grand Geddeh and Nimba counties, with the funding limited to a number of years. These security councils were also suspended during the Ebola crisis.

As for the UNPOL mission, on which the LNP still heavily depends for a variety of support, criticism has focused especially on its work in training the earlier classes of recruits. The multinational composition of UNPOL, with very diverse police traditions, cultures and practices, led to very inconsistent training.[14] The mission is flawed by the unevenness of the advice and practice carried out, due to the delegation of responsibility to a rotation of staff members. Thus, while there are many extremely dedicated, motivated and effective members of the UNPOL mission who have a clear positive impact, the rotation system and limited introductory training means this is at times an exception rather than the norm. Rotations can range from six months to a year (with the exception of more senior members) and there is usually no room for a handover or training for new arrivals with their predecessors. This means that every time new UNPOL officers arrive, the wheel has to be reinvented. In combination with the frequent rotation of LNP officers, this can lead to a serious lack of institutional knowledge and effectiveness in some departments and areas, as well as mistrust and bad working relationships between Liberian policemen and their international mentors.

Perceptions of Insecurity and Policing

Public discontent at the state-of-emergency and preventative measures taken to address the Ebola crisis — and in some instances the response of security forces — led to renewed tensions and violence. Most notoriously, an entire area of Monrovia, West Point, was quarantined after residents looted and destroyed equipment in an Ebola treatment facility in August 2014. This was a protest against the lack of consultation with the community and rumours that the government — as a ploy to fill their coffers with more international funding — had in fact created the Ebola virus. During further riots, an AFL soldier shot a 15-year-old protestor, with several others injured. No criminal investigation ever took place — inquiries were limited to administrative hearings in the AFL and a report on the incident by the Independent National Commission on Human Rights. Events like these underline the level of mistrust accorded to security actors in Liberia, only heightened by the Ebola crisis.

In 2014, as well as violence related to the extraordinary measures taken by the government to battle the Ebola crisis, there were incidents of pre-election violence and intercommunal violence. A norm has become established whereby the Liberian security is regarded as "stable but fragile."[15] In 2013, UNMIL noted an increase in the number of incidents of mob violence, which were becoming more violent and volatile.[16]

In combination with threats of demonstrations, these images of burning tires and defiance of authorities has led to an unease amongst security actors, especially in light of the impeding UNMIL drawdown.

The incidents of mob violence, along with vigilantism more generally, are often linked to ineffective security agencies, thus regarded as actions replacing the formal system of state policing. Informal watch team groups are believed to be common throughout Liberia, at times overlapping with the official program for community watch forums. In a survey from 2011, forty-two percent of respondents cited community watch teams as the foremost security actors in Nimba County.[17] Informal security groups are very much a part of reality in post-war Liberia. The perception amongst many Liberians is that they cannot trust the police or security forces, nor do they feel secure. Yet these perceptions are complex and seemingly incongruous at times. Of over 70 participants in focus groups, conducted between January and February 2014, the majority said they do not feel safe in their own community (see Table 1).

Table 1: "Is your town / community secure?" Answers from Focus Group Discussion conducted between January-February 2014

	Market Women	Youth	Teachers
Gbarnga	No	No	No
Ganta	No	Yes	No
Monrovia	No	Mixed	No

However, it is not that simple. While the perspectives noted in Table 1 illustrate the overwhelming opinion in each of the focus groups, it became clear from the discussions that this is also not a continuous sense of insecurity. Rather, crime waves arise in different neighbourhoods periodically, often related to external factors like holidays or the rainy season. Often, informal neighbourhood watches are set up during these times, sometimes with the endorsement of local LNP officers. These waves of crimes will then pass, and the watches cease to function. Moreover, insecurity is largely related to economic crimes and not political violence. Notable also is that the only groups where the participants felt secure overall was among the youth (in Ganta and Monrovia, see above). This can be related to their own security mechanisms, status and power in their communities and age-related perceptions of insecurity at a different threshold.

Furthermore, although many of the focus group discussants acknowledged the fact that they would have to pay for police services, lamented incidents of corruption and expressed feelings of insecurity and inefficiency, they were also quick to note it is nonetheless still beneficial to have many (formal state) police in your area. Likewise, some even acknowledged that circumstances beyond the control of individual police offices led them to the vicious cycle of corruption and greed. In fact, many people interviewed or participating in focus groups recognized the difficult situation of the police, related to inadequate funding and salaries, which is why services have to be paid for.[18] One LNP officer explained "they [the community] respects us, even if they have no confidence in us."[19]

Overall, it can be said that the police are not perceived as particularly functional and some riots can be related directly back to the perceived injustice of security actors.[20] But this does not mean they are entirely rejected. In addition, a feeling of insecurity is also passed on through misinformation. This lack of transparency and information − whether related to the rights of bail of criminal suspects or the employment policies of foreign mining companies − also has a tendency to exacerbate mob violence. This became blatantly evident during the Ebola crisis.

Ways Ahead and Policy Recommendations

Given the current track record of post-conflict SSR programming, the Liberian case is perhaps not surprising. Scholars and policy makers alike have begun to seriously review and evaluate reform programs, seeking to understand how to make them more effective and sustainable as part of a second-generation SSR. The direction has changed toward more problem-oriented, reflexive and flexible reforms.[21] But how can this be applied in the Liberian case? Three major changes are necessary. First of all, better communication and transparency - in order to enable an improved understanding of the perceptions of insecurity and actual security needs of the population (and who provides them) and for the population to comprehend the security reform being undertaken. Moreover improved communication and transparency provides for institutional learning amongst security actors, Second, security agencies and institutions need to better coordinate their work both internally and between each other. This also enhances institutional learning, boosts morale and sharpens the specific mandate of each actor. Lastly, the focus should now be on consolidation rather than expansion. In other words, current police need to be trained and equipped rather than recruiting more. These are now discussed in turn.

1.   The first major change which is needed in order to achieve a more reflexive and flexible police reform process lies in ensuring transparency and communication at all levels, focusing on three key dimensions.

a.   Improved interaction between those carrying out the reform, on the one hand, including UNPOL, the LNP and donors, and the population, on the other hand, benefits all sides. For the reform actors, a more holistic understanding of perceptions of security would be ensured, which means they can respond in a more appropriate manner. For example, they would be able to respond to particular waves of insecurity as and when they occur or be better able to understand how to work with non-state actors. While it might be institutionally difficult for UNPOL to work with non-state security actors directly, hybrid forms of governance should at the very least be acknowledged. This improves chances of providing much-needed parallel security mechanisms in an effective manner. One repercussion would be to rethink current approaches to community policing in order to improve information distribution and communication between the population, non-state and state security actors. An initial move in this direction would be to provide a comprehensive mapping of what currently exists in practice.

b.   Better communication and transparency also means the population has a better understanding of services available and changes that have been carried out. This would enable important initiatives like the hub's civilian oversight body to be used more effectively and thus be able to improve relations between the security and justice sectors and the population. Lessons can be learned here from the positive and often successful community engagement that was carried out for Ebola prevention, which hugely improved over time. Access to information and transparency for all Liberians – on crime rates, incidents of mob justice, cases in oversight mechanisms – is indispensable, since a lack of information spreads insecurity like a wildfire.

c.   More room is needed for institutional learning within the different institutions as well as between each other. This includes upgrading the current rotation system among UNPOL staff to generate adequately transparent and informative handovers between mission members. Improving this would ensure lessons from predecessors can be learnt and applied in a problem-oriented manner. Better communication among the LNP on pay, training, promotions or legislative developments, to mention just a few, would also go a long way. Better knowledge of the functioning of the police not only improves accountability from within, but would also boost morale amongst current police officers.

2.   Better coordination amongst and between security institutions is a second major undertaking that is needed in the Liberian case. The myriad of institutions in Liberia only harms the reform without proper coordination and cooperation. Fewer programs of security provision and early warning systems – including those implemented by NGOs or other external bodies – would lead to a clearer overall vision of the police reform. As such, creating a solid overview of the programs that exist and consolidating these is another vital move in the way ahead. A holistic overview of institutions and programs also serves as a way to ensure transparency, as recommended above.

3.   Finally, while the current reform cannot be completely overthrown, structural changes are still necessary. Post-conflict countries often face a dilemma: a police force needs to be put (back) into place as quickly as possible in order to boost security, yet it takes time to build up a force that functions well and is not dependent on external actors. Although the LNP is still far off its target of a total of 8,000 officers needed to effectively police the country, the focus now should be on consolidation rather than expansion. There is no use in having additional police officers if the current ones do not have adequate equipment and, sometimes, training. Positive developments, such as the training of mid-level police officers and recruitment and deployment of police office from the counties should be encouraged and supported.

Conclusion

The brief has outlined some major challenges of Liberian police reform including the fundamental lack of resources, endemic corruption and the stumbling block faced by innovative institution like the Justice and Security Hub. Promising elements such as training schemes for mid-level personnel have also been detailed. Moreover, the downsides to the panoply of security agencies and reform institutions have clearly been shown, most notably in unclear reform mandates and a massive loss of institutional learning. Additionally, the complexity of perceptions related to securitywere analyzed, using original empirical fieldwork data. In order to learn from the decade of reform and move towards a more problem-oriented, reflexive and flexible police reform process, the most important recommendation is to improve communication and transparency. These changes would provide an opportunity to positively improve the future of policing and police reform in Liberia.

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Notes

1. Focus group discussion with teachers, Gbarnga, January 2014.

2. Interview with market superintendent, Ganta, August 2013.

3. Thomas Jaye, "Liberia," in Challenges of Security Sector Governance in West Africa, edited by Alan Bryden, Boubacar N'Diaye and 'Funmi Olonisakin (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2008), pp. 169–171.

4. Twenty-Ninth Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia, S/2015/275, 23 April 2015, Paragraph 45.

5. Laura Bacon, "Liberia's Gender-Sensitive Police Reform: Improving Representation and Responsiveness in a Post-Conflict Setting," International Peacekeeping, 22:4 (2015), pp. 372-397.

6. For example, see Bruce Baker, "Resource Constraint and Policy in Liberia's Post-conflict Policing," Police Practice and Research 11, 3 (2010), pp. 184–196.

7. See also Dorina Bekoe, "Elusive Gains: Policing and Security Sector Reform in Liberia," in Policing in Africa. edited by David J. Francis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 37–52.

8. It received just over US$20 million instead of the requested US$40 million. See Wade C. L. Williams, "Liberia: Police Budget vs. Road to UNMIL Drawdown, GOL Investment Minimum," 10 June 2014, http://allafrica.com/stories/201406101284.html.

9. Twenty-Ninth Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia, S/2015/275, 23 April 2015, Paragraph 48.

10. See also Marina Caparini, Extending State Authority in Liberia: The Gbarnga Justice and Security Hub (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2014).

11. Human Rights Watch. No Money, No Justice': Police Corruption and Abuse in Liberia. New York, 2013.

12. Interview with youth activist, Ganta, August 2013.

13. Interview with PSU Officer, Justice and Security Hub, Gbarnga, September 2013.

14. Ursula C. Schroeder, Fairlie Chappuis and Deniz Kocak, "Security Sector Reform from a Policy Transfer Perspective: A Comparative Study of International Interventions in the Palestinian Territories, Liberia and Timor-Leste." Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 7:3 (2013), pp. 381–401.

15. Twenty-Ninth Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia, S/2015/275, 23 April 2015, Paragraph 20-22.

16. Twenty-Seventh Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia, S/2014/123, 18 February 2014, Paragraph 14.18. This increase is, however, only statistically so and remains numerically low, with about 60 recorded mob violence incidents in 2013.

17. Patrick Vinck, Phuong Pham and Tino Kreutzer, Talking Peace: A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes about Security, Dispute Resolution, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Liberia (University of California, Berkeley: Human Rights Center, 2011), http://www.peacebuildingdata.org/node/627; see also Ana Kantor and Mariam Persson, Understanding Vigilantism: Informal Security Providers and Security Sector Reform in Liberia (Sandöverken: Sweden: Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2011).

18. Newspaper reports in June 2015 alleged that the police have not been paid at all for up to two months, see Samwar S. Fallah, Liberia: Hungry-Protecting Police Gone Months Without Pay, Front Page Africa (23 June 2015), http://allafrica.com/stories/201506231341.html.

19. Interview, Ganta, August 2013.

20. For similar findings, see: Karen Barnes Robinson and Craig Valters, Progress in small steps: Security agains the odds in Liberia. Case Study Report - Security (London: ODI- Development Progress, 2015).

21. For a good overview, see Antoine Vandemoortele, Learning from Failure? British and European Approaches to Security and Justice Programming. CSG Insights (Ontario: Centre for Security Governance, 2015).