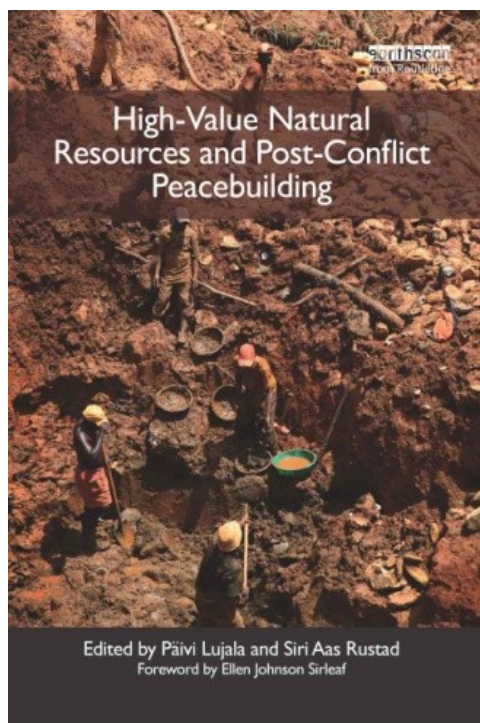


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### **Forest resources and peacebuilding: Preliminary lessons from Liberia and Sierra Leone**

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# Forest resources and peacebuilding: Preliminary lessons from Liberia and Sierra Leone

*Michael D. Beevers*

The 1990s were characterized by extended violent conflicts that were primarily internal in origin, but that tended to spill over into neighboring countries. These conflicts, most of which erupted in the developing world, came to be known as “new wars” because they seemed to be a novel species of civil war (Kaldor 1999; Duffield 2001). The new wars created a cottage industry of scholars who attempted to understand their causes and consequences; they also led to the evolving concept of peacebuilding: defined broadly, peacebuilding consists of efforts, on the part of international actors, to avoid conflict relapse by consolidating peace. Peacebuilding operations include maintaining security, providing humanitarian relief, fostering social and political reconciliation, and supporting economic development. Because peacebuilding is based on an underlying logic that stresses “building states to build peace,” it also includes initiatives that are designed to strengthen state institutions and the relationship between citizens and the state (Call 2008, 5).<sup>1</sup>

A substantial number of new wars appeared to be related to natural resources or the environment, which led to research that explored the links between conflict and resources. Much of the resulting literature has focused on the role of resource scarcity, resource abundance, and specific “conflict resources” in the onset or duration of civil war.<sup>2</sup> There has also been an emerging awareness that natural resources and the environment are potentially critical to avoiding conflict relapse. Although peace depends on a number of factors, competition over natural resources, persistent environmental problems, and the inability to meet livelihood needs may reignite

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Roland Paris (2004) suggests that peacebuilding rests on a normative logic based on the “elixir of liberalization,” which assumes that market-oriented economic systems and democratization can enhance peace. For further exploration of this issue, see Indra de Soysa, “The Capitalist Civil Peace: Some Theory and Empirical Evidence,” in this volume.

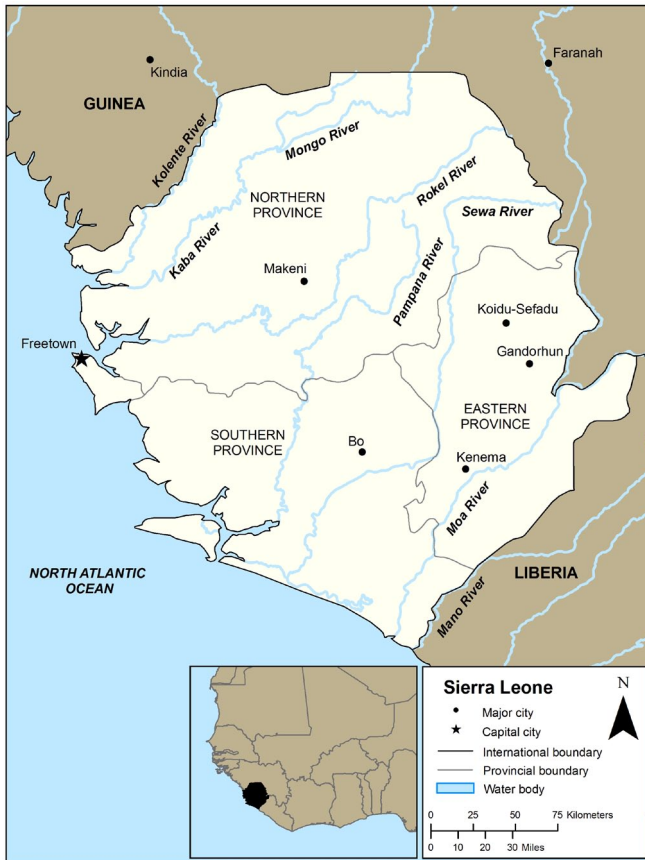
<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, Homer-Dixon (1991, 1999); Collier and Hoeffler (1998, 1999); Deudney and Matthew (1999); Diehl and Gleditsch (2001); Peluso and Watts (2001); Bannon and Collier (2003); and Ross (2004).



conflict. Indeed, preliminary research confirms that during the first five years after a peace agreement, internal armed conflicts that involve natural resources are twice as likely to recur as those that do not involve natural resources (Binningsbø and Rustad 2008). The proper management of natural resources and the environment may thus help initiate peace and energize post-conflict development (Bijlsma 2005; UNEP 2009).

This chapter compares the management of forest resources in two very different post-conflict contexts: Liberia and Sierra Leone (see figure 1).<sup>3</sup> In Liberia, forests were recognized as an important factor in fueling the conflict; as a result, com-

<sup>3</sup> This chapter is based on fieldwork and documentary evidence collected in Liberia and Sierra Leone between October 2008 and May 2009. As part of a doctoral research grant funded by the U.S. Institute for Peace, interviews were conducted with government officials, representatives of international organizations, members of local civil-society organizations, activists, and residents of local communities. The chapter also incorporates information collected in the course of a United Nations Environment Programme mission to Sierra Leone, May 3–15, 2009.



prehensive forest reforms were a central component of the peacebuilding agenda.<sup>4</sup> In Sierra Leone, where forests were of only marginal importance in what was essentially a “diamond war,” post-conflict forest reforms were not undertaken. The role of forest reform in these two countries reveals preliminary lessons about three mechanisms that can contribute to peacebuilding: fostering dialogue, promoting economic recovery, and supporting sustainable livelihoods.

The chapter is divided into five major sections: (1) a discussion of scholarly perspectives on the relationship between forests, conflict, and peacebuilding; (2) a review of post-conflict management reforms in Liberia; (3) a review of forest management in post-conflict Sierra Leone; (4) a summary of lessons learned; and (5) a brief conclusion.

<sup>4</sup> This chapter defines *forest reform* as formal efforts that (1) are undertaken by national and international actors to alter how individuals and groups behave in relation to forests and forest resources and (2) are embodied in new laws, institutions, policies, and practices.



**Figure 1. Forest cover in Sierra Leone and Liberia**

Source: FAO (2009).

**PERSPECTIVES ON FORESTS, CONFLICT, AND PEACEBUILDING**

In the course of exploring the links between natural resources and conflict, one question scholars asked was whether some of the new wars were being fought over forests.<sup>5</sup> Wil de Jong, Deanna Donovan, and Ken-Ichi Abe, for example, have suggested that forests and conflict are strongly correlated, noting that at least half the conflicts of the twentieth century occurred in forested areas, and that “countries affected by violent conflict are home to more than 40 percent of the world’s tropical forests” (2007, 1–2). Nevertheless, there is considerable ambiguity about the precise linkages between forests and violent conflict (Rustad et al. 2008).

According to one perspective, forest degradation or scarcity, combined with population pressure and poor or inequitable management, can foster violent competition over dwindling livelihood assets (Homer-Dixon 1991; Kaplan 1994). Although this forest-scarcity hypothesis has come under criticism (Hauge and Ellingsen 1998; Peluso and Watts 2001), it continues to have a widespread effect on policy (UNEP 2009). Another perspective suggests that rough terrain can provide insurgents with safe havens from which to launch wars and destabilize governments (Kaimowitz 2003). The notion that forests are a terrain that offers opportunities for initiating or prolonging conflict finds little support in the empirical record, however (Rustad et al. 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Examples of this work include Austin and Bruch (2000); Price (2003); USAID (2005); and de Jong, Donovan, and Abe (2007).

Other research argues that countries whose economies depend on valuable natural resources are more susceptible to conflict because resource abundance can lead to slow growth; increased poverty; and weak, corrupt, and less accountable governments (Ross 2003). Such explanations also emphasize the economic motives of combatants and the entrepreneurial, “self-financing” character of new wars that leverage natural resource revenues to fuel conflict (Ballentine and Sherman 2003, 1). In cases where a country relies excessively on timber revenues, dependence can make the government weak, corrupt, and less accountable. For example, timber revenues can bypass government procedures, and concessions can be arranged outside the structures of public accountability. Timber wealth can further weaken governments and foster violence if shadow states emerge that compete with the state for revenues and authority (Reno 1998, 2000).<sup>6</sup> Finally, looting, the sale of concessions by combatants, and competing ownership claims—all of which are associated with conflict timber—can trigger, perpetuate, and fuel conflict (Collier and Hoeffler 1999; Reno 2000). While few studies support the notion that abundant forest resources cause conflict, a combination of factors—including stalled economic growth, endemic poverty, weak government, and the availability of substantial timber revenues—can, under certain conditions, prolong and exacerbate violence (Thomson and Kanaan 2003; Global Witness 2004; Ross 2004).

The perception that new wars appeared to be linked to natural resources led to international efforts to manage those resources, with the goal of ending conflict and promoting peace.<sup>7</sup> Despite a historical reluctance among consuming countries and international organizations to attempt global control of the trade in valuable commodities (Crossin, Hayman, and Taylor 2003), the United Nations, international financial institutions, various Western governments, and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) established a number of mechanisms—including legal instruments, voluntary initiatives, and normative standards—designed to curtail the trade in conflict resources, starve combatants of the revenues that were fueling and prolonging conflict, and thereby force combatants to the negotiating table (Le Billon 2003).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William Reno (1995, 1) defines a shadow state as a “parallel political authority” that exercises control over informal markets and natural resources in order to build political and economic power outside the realm of state institutions.

<sup>7</sup> See Ballentine and Nitzschke (2005) and Rustad, Binningsbø, and Le Billon (2009).

<sup>8</sup> With respect to Liberia, for example, the UN imposed an arms embargo and prohibited trade in round logs and other timber products; for Sierra Leone, the UN imposed sanctions on the import of rough diamonds. And in both countries, the UN used expert panels to gather information and report back to the Security Council. Meanwhile, a group of Western governments, international NGOs, and businesses established the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme to prevent the international sale or shipment of conflict diamonds. Of course, restricting revenues is no guarantee that a conflict will be shorter or less violent. For example, combatants may respond to a drop in revenue by attacking a neighboring country, by inflicting revenge on the civilian population, or by breaking up into different factions, which can make negotiations more difficult. Efforts to curtail revenues may also make it harder for one side to attain victory—thereby prolonging rather than shortening the conflict (Le Billon 2003).

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Once a peace agreement is in place, peacebuilding generally focuses on immediate needs, and natural resource management is rarely a priority.<sup>9</sup> But as the national government begins to reestablish authority and rebuild institutions, natural resource management receives increasing attention, predominantly at the insistence of international actors; such initiatives often involve consultation with local civil-society organizations. Specifically, natural resources form the core of export strategies that can contribute to economic growth, provide employment, and create the national revenues that are vital to peacebuilding. Natural resource management can also address environmental problems and ensure the accessibility of the natural resources on which sustainable livelihoods depend (UNEP 2009).<sup>10</sup> Finally, natural resource management can help transcend political and societal cleavages and establish the trust that is necessary for long-term peace (Conca and Dabelko 2002; UNEP 2009).

In sum, proper management of natural resources can help consolidate peace. In practical terms, the management interventions occur through reforms—laws, institutions, policies, and practices—that are designed to strengthen state institutional control over natural resources. Although it is still unclear how much reforms matter for peace, there are ongoing efforts to understand how and to what extent these management interventions shape peacebuilding trajectories.

### LIBERIA

Liberia has an estimated population of 4 million and suffers from the endemic poverty common in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>11</sup> While estimates vary, approximately 80 percent of the country is forested, of which 35 percent is characterized as “undisturbed forest” (UNEP 2004, 44–45). The rest of the country is made up of regenerating wooded areas or land used for shifting cultivation.<sup>12</sup> Most Liberians live in rural areas and depend on agricultural and forest products for their livelihoods. Approximately 55 percent of the population lives in forest areas, and nearly all the population uses either charcoal or firewood for energy (UNEP 2004); the forests are also central to cultural practices.

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<sup>9</sup> Peacebuilding efforts are typically focused on establishing security; meeting humanitarian needs; demobilizing, disarming, and reintegrating combatants; supporting elections; repairing infrastructure; reestablishing the rule of law; and opening up the economy to foreign investors.

<sup>10</sup> Sustainable livelihoods depend on the availability of resources (natural, economic, social, and human) and are shaped by formal and informal institutions.

<sup>11</sup> In 2008, Liberia was ranked 176 out of 179 countries on the UN Human Development Index (UNDP 2008).

<sup>12</sup> *Shifting cultivation* is a farming system in which land is cultivated on a rotational basis to maintain productivity. In Liberia, patches of forest are cleared for rice, cassava, or other crops every few years, after which the land is left fallow, to be reclaimed by natural vegetation.

## **Perspectives on the roots of the conflict in Liberia**

Throughout the Liberian conflict (1989–2003), scholars and the media tried to comprehend the causes of a brutal civil war while the international community tried to engineer an end to it. The origins and character of the conflict remain subject to debate,<sup>13</sup> but considerable attention has centered on the economic imperatives of Charles Taylor—first as a rebel leader and warlord, and later as president (1997–2003)—who used his control over conflict resources (such as diamonds, iron ore, rubber, and especially timber) to amass power and personal wealth (Reno 1998; Smillie, Gberie, and Hazleton 2000; UNSC 2001). William Reno (1998), for example, has argued that Taylor wanted to win the war not because of political ambitions but in order to consolidate authority over natural resource markets. The conflict has also been blamed on Liberia's natural resource wealth—most notably, its vast supplies of timber and other forest resources—of which both the government and rebel elements attempted to gain control in order to finance military operations (Reno 1998; Global Witness 2002, 2004; Baker et al. 2003; UNSC 2001, 2004).

Substantial evidence links Taylor and other combatants to natural resources. Liberia's timber exports drastically increased in the 1990s (Baker et al. 2003; World Bank 2005) and became Taylor's most lucrative conflict commodity.<sup>14</sup> While he was president of Liberia, Taylor financed weapons purchases by selling the largest timber concession in the country to the Oriental Timber Company (UNSC 2001; Global Witness 2004). Reports also alleged that Taylor gained control of Sierra Leone's extensive diamond-mining areas in order to finance violence (Smillie, Gberie, and Hazleton 2000). Even Taylor's enemies reportedly used timber and diamonds to finance their operations (Global Witness 2004; World Bank 2005).

Reports of the connections between natural resources and the Liberian conflict mobilized the UN, which had tried—but thus far failed—to alter the trajectory of the conflict.<sup>15</sup> The result was a variety of mechanisms designed to stop the flow of resource revenues that was fueling and perpetuating the conflict. In July 2000, for example, UN Security Council Resolution 1306 banned the import of all diamonds from Sierra Leone (UNSC 2000); and in May 2003, Resolution 1478 banned the import of “all round logs and timber products” originating in Liberia (UNSC 2003, 4). It is uncertain whether these interventions directly brought about an end to the war, but one thing is clear: by throwing a spotlight on conflict resources and Charles Taylor's economic agenda, international media

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<sup>13</sup> See Sawyer (1992); Richards (1996); Reno (1998); Ellis (1999); and Levitt (2005).

<sup>14</sup> When Taylor became president, timber production surged. From 2000 to 2002, forestry was the country's most important economic activity, representing 50 to 60 percent of exports and 26 percent of gross domestic product (UNEP 2004).

<sup>15</sup> The UN and the Economic Community of West African States were involved in at least thirteen peace agreements (including the Abuja Accords, which led to the election of Taylor), all of which collapsed.



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reports helped to frame the way in which the UN and other peacebuilders understood the Liberian war.

Framing the conflict in terms of purely economic motives, or as an example of competition over valuable natural resources, overlooks its more complex and overlapping sociopolitical and economic roots and their connection to natural resources. Jeremy Levitt (2005) suggests that the conflict originated in resentment against a long line of oligarchic, dysfunctional, and oppressive governments, of which Taylor's was just the latest. While Liberia's abundant natural resources may have been a source of tension, Levitt argues that the tension did not result from the resources themselves, but from unfair land ownership and tenure rights that had been devised in the 1800s. Under these rules, certain groups (mostly Americo-Liberians) had the right to individual land ownership, but indigenous populations were forced to remain under systems of collective land ownership that were dominated by customary authorities (Richards et al. 2005).<sup>16</sup> These patterns were still in place in the 1950s and 1960s, as Liberia was opening its forests and minerals to international markets. During that period, the government moved to take control of the most valuable lands, assigning benefits to a small group of landowners, political leaders, and foreign-owned businesses. These arrangements left most of the country underdeveloped and a large segment of the population disenfranchised, with few opportunities for sustainable livelihoods and little access to land.

In keeping with Levitt's focus on the history of oppression and exclusion in Liberia, the conflict can also be viewed in the context of patronage, a system in which political leaders divert state revenues to shore up their own power. Ultimately, patronage systems can lead to the formation of shadow states, which undermine the state by (1) diverting to political supporters revenues that would otherwise be used to provide basic services, (2) marginalizing rural populations and urban elites,<sup>17</sup> and (3) empowering local strongmen who can eventually become warlords (Reno 2000). Patronage networks are essential for political power: leaders must purchase support and are thus financially dependent on natural resource revenues. Patronage tends to thrive in places like Liberia, where most revenues come from natural resources and where concessions have historically been arranged with little transparency or accountability (Reno 2000; Richards 1996).

In sum, a fuller account of the conflict and its links to natural resources would emphasize, in addition to economic motives, both historical grievances and the patronage system. Economic and political motives are deeply intertwined

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<sup>16</sup> *Americo-Liberians* is the term used to refer to the descendants of free African Americans and freed American slaves who, in 1822, under the auspices of the American Colonization Society, settled in what would eventually become Liberia—where, for much of the nation's history, they politically dominated the region's indigenous populations.

<sup>17</sup> Urban elites can become marginalized when political leaders' access to formal or informal revenues diminishes, making it increasingly difficult to dispense patronage in exchange for support.

in Liberia, and Taylor's wholesale looting of the country's natural resources can be viewed as an effort to buy loyalty and to dispense the patronage that was needed to acquire political power.

### **Forests and peacebuilding in Liberia**

Despite the importance of Liberia's forests to livelihoods, the main purpose of forest reforms was to persuade the UN to lift timber sanctions, which would allow the national government to harness the financial potential of its forest resources for peacebuilding. The sanctions demanded that Liberia gain "full authority and control of timber producing areas" and take "all necessary steps to ensure that government revenues . . . are not used to fuel conflict." The sanctions also mandated systems of transparency and accountability to ensure that timber revenues would "benefit the Liberian people, including development." Finally, the sanctions mandated environmentally sustainable business practices, legal reforms, and a review of concessionary agreements (UNSC 2003, 4).

In early 2006, in a first step toward reform, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf issued Executive Order No. 1, which canceled all forest concessions, placed a moratorium on commercial timber harvests, and established the Forest Reform Monitoring Committee to oversee forest reforms.<sup>18</sup> In June 2006, the UN acknowledged Liberia's progress and conditionally lifted the sanctions (UNSC 2006): however, a permanent withdrawal of sanctions would occur only if comprehensive forest reforms were passed within ninety days and were approved by the Security Council. After three months of consultations by the Forest Reform Monitoring Committee—with input from the Liberia Forest Initiative, Liberian NGOs, and government agencies—the government of Liberia enacted the National Forestry Reform Law (NFRL), which emphasized the government's authority over forests and was oriented around the "three Cs" of forest management: commercial, community, and conservation (GOL 2006a).<sup>19</sup> By acknowledging that Liberia's forests have multiple uses and values, and by highlighting the importance of sustainability and community benefits, the three Cs provided

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<sup>18</sup> The UN panel of experts recommended canceling all forest concessions as a first step toward forest reform (UNSC 2004).

<sup>19</sup> The Liberia Forest Initiative (LFI), which was founded in 2004, was pivotal in undertaking forest reforms. Led by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development, the LFI was a partnership created to provide support for the Liberian forestry sector. Its members include, among other organizations, the Center for International Forestry Research, Conservation International, the European Commission, Flora and Fauna International, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the International Union for Conservation and Nature, the National Transitional Government of Liberia, and the World Bank. For additional information on the LFI, see Stephanie L. Altman, Sandra S. Nichols, and John T. Woods, "Leveraging High-Value Natural Resources to Restore the Rule of Law: The Role of the Liberia Forest Initiative in Liberia's Transition to Stability," in this volume.

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something for all stakeholders (GOL 2006a). The NFRL also recognized that “past instances by both Liberian and non-Liberians of political patronage, corruption, tax evasion, violations of the rights of local communities, and lack of transparency have resulted in the unsustainable management of forests, and even fueling conflict” (GOL 2006a, 6).

Given the significance of rebuilding the economy and the central role of raw materials in jump-starting economic growth, it is not surprising that commercial forestry received the lion’s share of attention in the reform process (IMF 2008).<sup>20</sup> Liberia’s conflict-to-development strategy is based on fast-tracking productive economic sectors in order to revive the economy, create employment opportunities, rebuild infrastructure, and supply basic services (GOL 2006b).<sup>21</sup> By “reviving the traditional engines of growth” and restructuring the economy, with the assistance of foreign investment and exports, the government hopes to alleviate poverty and support a peaceful post-conflict trajectory (IMF 2008, 21).

Indeed, Liberia’s forests represented an enormous opportunity for a cash-strapped country ravaged by years of conflict and institutional decay. But because of Liberia’s history of corruption and patronage, the grievances associated with forests, and the role of timber in fuelling the conflict, the recommercialization of forests would require oversight to ensure transparency, accountability, and the rule of law; safeguards incorporated into the NFRL included monitoring of new concession agreements, chain-of-custody contracts, and tracking of timber revenues. To ensure transparency and accountability and improve fiscal administration, partial oversight for the forest sector was handed over to a foreign comptroller, who works under the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program (GEMAP). The comptroller interacts with the government of Liberia; the Forestry Development Authority (FDA), the government agency that is responsible for managing Liberia’s forests; the UN; the World Bank; and donor countries.

Acknowledging communities’ historical lack of rights and benefits, the NFRL set out to effect “empowerment” by ensuring that communities were “fully engaged in the sustainable management of forests” and could “equitably participate in and . . . benefit from . . . forests” (GOL 2006a, 34–35). The NFRL also (1) mandated that concessionaires pay fees to affected communities and surrounding counties and (2) required, through regulations, that firms conduct environmental assessments and negotiate social agreements with communities; these agreements detail community benefits and access rights and must be approved by the FDA before commercial activities can begin. Recognizing that forests are essential to

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<sup>20</sup> Interviews with Forestry Development Authority staff, national government officials, activists, and members of local civil-society organizations, Liberia 2008.

<sup>21</sup> A commercial focus is also the result of Liberia’s long history with forestry—including narratives, rooted in the once-booming timber export industry, that remain deeply embedded among residents in particular parts of the country and in the government, specifically the FDA. In interviews in 2008, FDA staff and government officials described a longing for the “better days” of timber exports—before Taylor’s era and the stigma of conflict timber (Beevers 2008).

livelihoods, the NFRL assigned broad rights allowing community use of forests. The NFRL also acknowledged the importance of Liberia's forests to national, regional, and international conservation; as a consequence, the reforms address wildlife management and establish new regulations for forest networks and other protected areas.<sup>22</sup>

On paper, the NFRL is comprehensive and perhaps even "cutting edge."<sup>23</sup> But implementation has been slow and fraught with contention. For example, the FDA, which is in charge of implementing the NFRL, has been criticized by Liberian government officials and international financial institutions for the lack of progress in realizing financial returns from commercial timber production. Optimistic scenarios developed by the International Monetary Fund, for example, estimated that the sector would generate US\$25 million and create employment opportunities in 2008 (IMF 2008). Although several commercial contracts were awarded, no timber was legally harvested, and no revenue was collected. Part of the problem stems from the FDA's failure to award concessions to reputable companies. Although the FDA was required by law to advertise globally, it did not do so; as a result, when large forest concessions were put out to bid, there were few responses—and none of the companies that did respond had significant experience in forestry or discernable capital with which to carry out timber operations.<sup>24</sup> This suggests not only that companies granted concessions may fail to meet their contractual obligations, but also that they may be shell companies—which, if they are allowed to do business, will increase the risk of corruption.<sup>25</sup> Risks may be associated even with known companies. For example, Global Witness (2009), an international NGO, reported in mid-2009 that the FDA had granted a contract to a timber company that is known for illegal logging in other parts of the world—and thereby failed to follow the law. A mounting number of alleged improprieties in the awarding of concessions have also raised questions about the FDA's commitment to transparency and accountability. According to the UN Panel of Experts on Liberia, in 2008, the FDA altered three forest management contracts on over 235,000 hectares of forest, which would have led to over US\$50 million in lost revenue over twenty-five years, while benefiting the companies (UNSC 2008). There have also been persistent reports of forest contracts being altered by the FDA and of a bidding process that is fixed in favor of certain companies.<sup>26</sup> Some government officials and FDA administrators blame international consultants and "agitators" for the fact that commercial forestry has yet

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<sup>22</sup> Liberia's forests, which include a large swath of the Upper Guinean Forest, are significant for biodiversity and have been identified by international conservation groups as important for the mitigation of climate change.

<sup>23</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Shell companies have no active business transactions or assets; they can be used for legitimate business purposes, but they are also used as fronts for illegal business operations.

<sup>26</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008.

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to produce revenues, claiming that they are getting in the way of post-conflict development by questioning Liberia's commitment to accountability and transparency, and thereby subverting the national interest.<sup>27</sup>

Problems in the commercial timber sector have been compounded by a backlash against what is perceived by some as a "commerce-centric" development agenda, in which community objectives are subordinate to timber production and historical grievances concerning land ownership and tenure remain unaddressed.<sup>28</sup> According to a member of Liberian civil society, "fast-tracking timber has eroded the trust between the government and communities. . . . A more deliberate set of rules of how communities would be integrated into commercial activities needs to be discussed."<sup>29</sup> Some observers feel that in order to mitigate potential conflicts before commercial forestry begins, legitimate conflict resolution structures should be established and certain issues (including land ownership and tenure rules, and the definition of "community") should be resolved.<sup>30</sup>

Contention has also emerged over the Community Rights Law, which was mandated by the NFRL. The controversy began in 2008, when a nine-page community rights bill submitted to the legislature was mysteriously replaced by a thirty-two-page version (Beevers 2008). This sleight of hand was significant because the two versions were very different: the nine-page bill, for example, described the government's obligation to community forestry and recognized tenure rights, but still reserved to the government the authority to manage forest resources. The thirty-two-page version, in contrast, had communal forests as its central organizing principle, and placed forest management directly into the hands of community residents. Whereas the nine-page version would have endowed the state with the power to oversee the commercial timber sector and conservation areas, the thirty-two-page version granted such rights to communities—ostensibly to guarantee that the benefits would go directly to the people, rather than being siphoned off by businesses and the central government.

In the wake of the switching of the documents, which has never been explained, further negotiations were undertaken that resulted in a seventeen-page law that was passed in October 2009: the Community Rights with Respect to Forest Lands Act. Confusion remains, however, about how commercial forestry will be carried out on communal lands; there is also considerable anger in some communities about the fact that the earlier law was watered down, preventing communities from developing "in accordance with their own needs and interests" (Binda 2010). The FDA, for its part, maintains that giving communities full control of the

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<sup>27</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008. Disputes over land are commonplace, and violent conflict related to land claims is on the rise. A report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has also stated that land disputes threaten Liberia's national stability (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia 2009).

forests would exacerbate tensions over competing claims to forests, put more power into the hands of companies, undermine the government's ability to manage the forests for a variety of uses, and deprive the country of the revenues needed for post-conflict recovery.

## **SIERRA LEONE**

Sierra Leone has an estimated population of 6 million and remains one of the poorest countries in the world.<sup>31</sup> While estimates vary, approximately 18 percent of the country is forested, and two-thirds of the remaining land area is "wooded," consisting of secondary and regenerating forests. About 5 percent of Sierra Leone's forests consist of either rainforest, which is located in forest reserves, or mangrove swamps, which are located in coastal areas (Baker et al. 2003). Historically, about 60 percent of Sierra Leone's total land area was rainforest (Baker et al. 2003), but by the early twentieth century, timber extraction by colonial authorities and shifting cultivation had reduced the forest cover to its current level (Richards 1996; Squire 2001). As Paul Richards (1996) has noted, if Liberia was the last country in West Africa to have its forests exported, Sierra Leone was the first.

In Sierra Leone, forests did not contribute significantly to conflict or to the outbreak of violence, and timber was not implicated in funding or sustaining the hostilities (Baker et al. 2003)<sup>32</sup>—probably because Sierra Leone has only a limited amount of commercial timber and neither the rebels nor the government could readily access forest areas.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Sierra Leone's forests were not without a role in the conflict: they served as enclaves for rebel combatants, allowing them to launch attacks and to hide from government forces; they also provided a setting in which the rebels were able to build a sense of community (Richards 1996).

## **Perspectives on the roots of the conflict in Sierra Leone**

The causes of the brutal and protracted conflict in Sierra Leone (1991–2002) have been subject to much debate, but the struggle is often characterized as a spillover from the Liberian war.<sup>34</sup> As is the case with Liberia, explanations have focused on the economic motives of Charles Taylor—who, in order to gain control of Sierra Leonean diamond-mining areas to sustain the Liberian war, helped give rise to and supported the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in its uprising against the

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<sup>31</sup> In 2008, Sierra Leone ranked 179 out of 179 countries on the UN Human Development Index (UNDP 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Interviews conducted by the author suggest that considerable illicit timber harvesting was carried out during the conflict, although there is little evidence to back up this claim.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Kaplan (1994), in a largely discredited but stubbornly persistent account, assigned the causes of the Sierra Leonean war to environmental collapse triggered by a history of deforestation and poor agricultural practices.

<sup>34</sup> For discussions of the origins of the Liberian conflict, see Kaplan (1994); Richards (1995, 1996, 2001); Reno (1998); Bangura (2004); Gberie (2005); and Keen (2005).

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government of Sierra Leone (Global Witness 2000; UNSC 2001).<sup>35</sup> The war in Sierra Leone is also portrayed as having been fuelled and prolonged by diamonds, if not directly triggered by these valuable global commodities.<sup>36</sup> David Keen, for example (2005), has observed that collusion over the spoils of war—between rebels and soldiers as well as between diamond companies, brokers, and government officials—provided substantial incentive to continue the conflict and undermine any overtures toward peace.

A consistent flow of reports from international NGOs (such as Global Witness and Partnership Africa Canada) documenting Taylor's greed and the trade in conflict diamonds helped to mobilize the UN and various Western governments and led to a set of interventions aimed at managing diamond exports and the resulting revenues. In July 2000, the UNSC passed Resolution 1306, which prohibited the direct or indirect import of rough diamonds from Sierra Leone and required the Sierra Leonean government to establish a certificate-of-origin system before the diamond trade could resume (UNSC 2000).<sup>37</sup> After a succession of coups, elections, and failed peace agreements, hostilities finally ceased. Although many factors contributed to ending the war, it was ultimately the international attention to conflict resources and to Taylor's economic agenda that provided sufficient leverage for the international actors that were trying to end the conflict (Keen 2005).

The focus on Taylor's greed and on conflict diamonds, however, tends to overlook the roots of the conflict that were particular to Sierra Leone and that made the rebellion possible. Specifically, a long history of patronage and undemocratic government, widespread underdevelopment, and grievances associated with natural resources generated resentment (Richards 1996; Bangura 2004; Keen 2005). This resentment was deepened by a number of factors. First, Sierra Leone's population was aware of the country's abundance—and also aware that it had not benefited from it. Second, land was a source of conflict, largely because agriculture had to compete with other uses, such as diamond mining. Finally, the chiefs—the customary custodians of land outside Freetown (the capital)—had the power to distribute land and to arbitrate land-based disputes, and these customary arrangements for land ownership and tenure often conflicted with people's aspirations

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<sup>35</sup> For discussions of Charles Taylor's role in the Sierra Leonean conflict, see Zack-Williams and Riley (1993) and Le Billon (2006).

<sup>36</sup> For discussions of the role of diamonds in the Sierra Leonean conflict, see Smillie, Gberie, and Hazleton (2000); Farah (2001); and Keen (2005).

<sup>37</sup> The system eventually put into place, the KPCS, was designed to ensure that diamonds can be traced from the point of extraction to the place of export, to ensure that they do not originate in conflict areas. For additional perspectives on the KPCS, see J. Andrew Grant, "The Kimberley Process at Ten: Reflections on a Decade of Efforts to End the Trade in Conflict Diamonds"; Clive Wright, "The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme: A Model Negotiation?"; and Harrison Mitchell, "A More Formal Engagement: A Constructive Critique of Certification as a Means of Preventing Conflict and Building Peace," all in this volume.

and livelihood needs (Keen 2005). In particular, young rural men had little access to productive land and few employment opportunities outside of diamond mining.

Sierra Leone's historically unjust and corrupt political system, which began with British colonialism and continues today, is based on patronage networks that have exploited the country's resource base (first forests, and now minerals) to gain personal enrichment and consolidate political power. In addition to looting the country's natural resources, these networks marginalized segments of the population and undermined government authority by creating shadow states (Reno 1995).

Siaka Stevens, who was president of Sierra Leone from 1968 to 1985, helped set the stage for conflict and for the failure of the state. In the 1970s, in order to strengthen his political power, Stevens centralized state control of diamond mining, exacerbating already inequitable land relationships and rendering small-scale diamond mining, on which many Sierra Leoneans relied for their livelihoods, illegal. Under Stevens' autocratic rule, diamond revenue was also diverted from state institutions to patronage networks, which led to declines in state spending on education and health. In the early 1980s, the global economic decline led to a national fiscal crisis in Sierra Leone—and caused Stevens to further consolidate power in urban areas and to withdraw support for rural communities altogether (Keen 2005). These actions produced a disaffected urban elite that was outside of Stevens' patrimonial system and that had political (rather than simply economic) motives for war, as well as a disenfranchised group of young men who could easily be absorbed into the RUF (Richards 1996; Abdullah 2004). While the role of Taylor and diamonds in explaining the war should not be underestimated, a more nuanced account would also highlight two other factors: the importance of diamond revenues in maintaining patronage systems, and the ways in which underdevelopment and grievances about access to land laid the foundations for violence.

### **Forests and peacebuilding in Sierra Leone**

An estimated 70 percent of Sierra Leone's population lives in rural areas, relying on agricultural production and forest resources for their livelihoods; the forests are also a cultural asset. In addition to their importance to the shifting cultivation of rice and other sustenance crops, forests provide most construction materials and are used by 95 percent of the population to obtain firewood and charcoal (Baker et al. 2003). Despite the significance of the forests to Sierra Leone's rural population, forest management is not a peacebuilding priority, either for the national government or for the international actors—the UN, the World Bank, donor governments, and international NGOs—that are assisting with peacebuilding efforts.

Sierra Leone's peacebuilding strategy emphasizes economic growth, youth employment, and revenues from mining and agriculture. The World Bank and the government of Sierra Leone regard these sectors as the primary drivers of



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long-term economic recovery and poverty reduction—and, ultimately, of peace (World Bank 2005). According to the peacebuilding priorities articulated in *The Agenda for Change*, the government’s planning document for post-conflict development, only a “transformation of the economy” can set the country on a path to peace (GOSL 2008a, 1). Peacebuilding objectives, as expressed in the *Agenda*, therefore focus on foreign investment in agribusiness and mineral extraction (of diamonds, rutile, and bauxite, for example), in order to provide the necessary revenues and employment needed to spur economic recovery and provide basic services (World Bank 2005; GOSL 2008a).

Because patronage, corruption, and grievances have been associated with the use of natural resources, the *Agenda* stresses transparency and accountability. As described in the *Agenda*, natural resource management will be largely focused on harnessing Sierra Leone’s comparative advantages (large mineral deposits, abundant fertile land, and a deep harbor) for the betterment of the country, although “ensuring clear land ownership” is mentioned in the document (GOSL 2008a, 5). Forests are mentioned in World Bank documents not as a critical component of sustainable livelihoods but only in relation to deforestation, poor land use, and loss of biodiversity, all of which are presumed to deepen poverty (World Bank 2005).

Current wildlife and forestry regulations—the Wildlife Act and the Forestry Act—were passed in 1972 and in 1988, respectively, although the Forestry Act was revised in 1990, before the war began. New wildlife regulations and forest policies were drafted in 1997 and 2003 but were not passed, and no comprehensive attempt to address forests has occurred since. Since 2008 however, growing concerns about Sierra Leone’s forests have mobilized a small group of UN agencies, donor governments, national civil-society organizations, and Sierra Leonean government officials to discuss comprehensive forest and trade reforms (GOSL 2008b; Howard 2009).<sup>38</sup> The concerns stem, in part, from a perception among stakeholders that the government lacks control over its remaining forest areas, and from reports of illicit timber harvesting in parks and reserves (Ford 2008). There is also a desire among stakeholders to conserve Sierra Leone’s remaining forests, which are under pressure from agriculture, mining, hunting, urban development, and timber harvesting (Howard 2009). In 2008, to regain control of the forests, the government placed a temporary ban on all timber exports until forest reforms can be introduced (Ford 2008).

There are conflicting views on where the threats to Sierra Leone’s forests come from and on whether such threats can undermine peace. For example, Sierra Leonean activists and civil-society groups claim that illicit timber harvesting is sanctioned by local chiefs and government officials, both of whom profit from the revenue. The worry is that even small-scale trade in forest products may sustain shadow states, which may deprive local communities of needed resources,

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<sup>38</sup> In early 2009, the Ministry of Agriculture restructured forest management to mirror the approach used in Liberia; it is now organized according to conservation, commercial, and community goals.

exacerbate forest- and land-based grievances, and foster conflict. Other observers, however, mostly from government and international organizations, claim that hunting and “slash and burn” agricultural practices—which are expected to rise in tandem with future population growth and diminished opportunities to “get rich” in diamond mines—will lead to deforestation and the loss of biodiversity.<sup>39</sup> This view suggests that forest scarcity may threaten peace by fostering competition over remaining stands of forest, and by limiting the opportunities for youth who are looking for livelihoods that are tied to forest resources rather than to diamonds. Still other observers have suggested that conservation organizations have “overplayed” deforestation in Sierra Leone, and that both the sustainable use of forest products and the conversion of forests to agricultural land are necessary to meet the livelihood needs of forest communities.<sup>40</sup> Adherents of this view are concerned that government attempts to control forests may diminish livelihood opportunities for local communities and thereby increase tension between communities and customary chiefs and between communities and the government.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Contrasting the experiences of Liberia and Sierra Leone makes it possible to draw preliminary lessons about how forest reforms—or a lack thereof—can affect peacebuilding. The focus in this section is on three mechanisms that can help strengthen peacebuilding: fostering dialogue, promoting economic recovery, and supporting sustainable livelihoods.

### **Fostering dialogue**

As noted at the outset of the chapter, efforts to manage natural resources may help transcend political and societal cleavages and establish the trust that is necessary for long-term peace. In Liberia, forest reform has created opportunities for substantive dialogue between a broad array of stakeholders, including the government, international actors, community activists, and Liberian civil-society groups. Communication, however, is only part of the process, and whether it will succeed in building trust, confidence, and cooperation is uncertain.

By providing a public forum to discuss historical grievances and expose the corruption and patronage that have historically been associated with Liberia’s forests, reform has sparked contentious debates about the ownership and control of forests—topics that have historically been off-limits in public discourse. The debates illustrate the central role that forests play in community livelihoods. The contention does not originate with the reforms, which are comprehensive, but from suspicions about the government’s ability to manage forests and timber revenue for the good of the country—in particular, for the good of local communities.

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<sup>39</sup> Interview notes, Sierra Leone 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Interview notes, Sierra Leone 2009.

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Indeed, the reform process is increasingly characterized by distrust between key actors.<sup>41</sup> The FDA, for example, has accused international actors, including NGOs and consultants that have an interest in the success of the reform process, as well as Liberian civil society, of openly thwarting development by publicly questioning the FDA's motives. The FDA asserts that holding the forest sector to such strict standards and holding up genuine errors on the part of FDA staff as examples of corruption has slowed down the process of awarding contracts: each time a new allegation arises, the activities of the commercial sector are put on hold because of public pressure.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, Liberian civil-society groups blame the government for circumventing the law and undermining the country's fragile peace by fast-tracking commercial forestry and resorting to the "old ways" of doing business.<sup>43</sup> The rhetoric has heated up to the point where stakeholders are accusing each other of pitting the "state against society," "communities against the government," and "communities against communities."<sup>44</sup> In short, while fostering dialogue that would have seemed impossible only a few years ago, the reform process may also be fostering cycles of suspicion that can only slow economic development and create deep divisions between stakeholders.

In Sierra Leone, the absence of forest reforms may be a missed opportunity. Although most of the international attention has focused on conflict diamonds, which are viewed as the primary natural resource and therefore a principal means of supporting peacebuilding, forests can help consolidate peace in rural areas. Forests may have played only a marginal role in the conflict, but grievances over land ownership and tenure rights, and the availability of livelihoods, are connected to forest management. Without a forest reform process in Sierra Leone, there is no opportunity to discuss the uses and value of forests, the opportunities they provide for alternative livelihoods (particularly for youth), or potential changes in customary land arrangements. Without reforms, the patronage systems and the resulting grievances long associated with forests will persist, leaving the root causes of tension and conflict to fester. Given the several decades of government neglect of rural areas that began under Stevens, forest reforms would allow communities to participate in decision making and feel that they are a part of the country's future. Although recent discussions of forest reform are a step in the right direction, they need to be expanded to incorporate a larger group of stakeholders.

### Promoting economic recovery

Because they foster growth, provide employment, and generate revenue, valuable natural resources are often key to peacebuilding. In Liberia, commercial forestry is a crucial component of economic recovery—but, contrary to expectations, only

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<sup>41</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008.

a small fraction of the projected US\$24 million in revenue for 2008–2009 was collected (UNSC 2008). Moreover, the shortage of reputable timber companies, coupled with reports of alleged improprieties in handling bidding and contracts, has raised questions about transparency and accountability. While the improprieties may have resulted from poor judgment or lack of capacity, they may also represent parallel systems of doing business. Reform can change the law, but it is more difficult to change the underlying culture, in which patronage and corruption have historically functioned alongside state institutions. If, because of lack of oversight, forest reforms simply recreate patronage systems, the reforms may ultimately legitimize and strengthen those systems, weaken the government, and siphon revenues away from peacebuilding priorities (Chabal and Daloz 1999).

To genuinely promote economic recovery, forest reforms must alter prewar social, economic, and political dynamics; given the tremendous stakes involved in the control and use of forests, however, this will not be easy. The increasingly public forum in which Liberia's forest issues are discussed suggests that an emphasis on accountability and transparency is challenging the old ways of doing things, but robust state institutions cannot survive unless international actors make a long-term commitment to support Liberian civil society, actively seek the participation of forest communities in decision making, and ensure continued oversight from GEMAP and other international entities.

The example of Liberia also demonstrates that when forests are central to economic recovery, they may spur contention. The contention is not about whether forest reforms were needed, but about whether the particular reforms that were instituted will effectively address prewar grievances associated with forests and land. Given the connections between politics and the exploitation of Liberia's forests and forest peoples, and between timber and the war, it should not be surprising that international actors, activists, Liberian civil-society organizations, and local communities have little trust in the FDA's ability to manage the forest sector, direct timber revenues to development, or focus on priorities that are in line with those of communities.

Tension and mistrust will continue to sow discontent and slow down the reform process. The government and the FDA must continue to work with communities and local civil-society groups—and these groups must, in turn, acknowledge the efforts of the government and the FDA. Building trust and confidence will take years, if not decades—and it may take an equally long time to determine how, and to what extent, forest resources contribute to economic recovery and peace.

### **Supporting sustainable livelihoods**

There is little question that ensuring access to the natural resources on which livelihoods depend is important for consolidating peace. Nevertheless, peacebuilding tends to focus on the high-stakes resources that are thought to fuel conflict—the result, in part, of a built-in bias that assigns priority to the formal economy as the center of economic growth. In both Liberia and Sierra Leone, forests are vital

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to livelihoods and remain at the center of rural life. While economic recovery is a prerequisite for peace, so, too, is access to sustainable livelihoods.

But sustainable livelihoods—in this case, agricultural production and the use of forest products—are generally considered low-stakes elements of the informal economy; hence, livelihoods receive little attention in peacebuilding efforts. Indeed, interviews conducted in both Liberia and Sierra Leone revealed a widely held perception that communities, and their livelihoods, are being left behind in the peacebuilding process.<sup>45</sup>

Liberia's focus on commercial forestry needs to be matched with comparable efforts to rebuild communities and ensure food security, with input from the communities themselves. As dialogue (and contention) about community rights and benefits increases, slow progress is being made. In Sierra Leone, a first step would be to push forward with forest reforms that place priority on livelihoods in rural areas, especially those that offer opportunities for youth. While reforms in the diamond sector have sought to address community and livelihood concerns, attention remains focused on jump-starting commercial mining, rather than on creating new livelihood opportunities. A second step for both countries would be to increase efforts to resolve land ownership and tenure rights, since these issues affect access to forests, and therefore to sustainable livelihoods.<sup>46</sup> When patronage systems or perverse rules associated with land ownership and tenure rights prevent communities from meeting their livelihood needs, grievances develop. Dialogue about land ownership and tenure rights would not only bring these long-held grievances to the surface, but would also set an example demonstrating that sustainable livelihoods and rural communities matter to both national governments and international actors.

## CONCLUSION

The observations offered in this chapter are preliminary but can provide insights into the connection between natural resource management and peacebuilding. First, since reforms alter people's relationship to natural resources, they inherently bring people together or divide them over time. Reform is thus not an end in itself but a slow and contentious process that can establish trust, although this is by no means easy or assured. Second, natural resource management tends to focus on specific resources that fit particular economic narratives (for example, they are related to the conflict, or they have the power to spur post-conflict recovery). As a result, forests are a peacebuilding priority in Liberia, but not in Sierra Leone.

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<sup>45</sup> Interview notes, Liberia 2008 and Sierra Leone 2009.

<sup>46</sup> In both Liberia and Sierra Leone, efforts to address land ownership and tenure rights have begun, albeit slowly. In Liberia, the Governance Reform Commission has been tasked with addressing land and property rights issues. In Sierra Leone, land reforms are addressed in the Land Policy and in the Land Commission Act, which established the Land Commission to review policy and interpret law.

But assigning priority to economic dimensions has two disadvantages: it underemphasizes the role of historical grievances, patronage networks, and the quest for political power in explaining conflict, and it overemphasizes the impact of economic recovery as a peacebuilding tool.

Peacebuilders tend to frame natural resource management in economic terms because they are ill equipped to see political grievances or to understand how political and economic motives are linked. For reform to be effective, natural resource management needs to consider the livelihood needs of the population *and* the combined political and economic agendas of those who are in power. More specifically, for natural resource management to contribute to peace, it must engage with local communities, address their everyday needs, and work to bring to the surface the systems of power and patronage that fuel grievances and sow discontent in the first place.

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