The Regional Implications of Identity-Based Conflict in Liberia

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Following several decades of violent and devastating conflict, the context of the Mano River Union (MRU) sub-region can today be described as relatively stable as a consequence of international goodwill and support of bi- and multi-lateral organizations, strategic interventions by the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) and the National Traditional Council of Liberia (NTCL), among other local collaborating partners and the critical role played by peacekeepers representing the United Nations (UN) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The international community co-facilitated creation of space and support for dialogue and other initiatives with the aim of ending conflicts and achieving positive societal transformation.

While the peacekeepers have positively transformed conflicts in all the MRU countries (Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone), it has become evident that Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea are still volatile, with reports of intermittent violent conflict disrupting the process of reconstruction. These situations invariably undermine the peace of the other MRU Countries. Warring factions with either direct or indirect involvement of ethnic groups and religious adherents have prolonged the crises and adversely affected stability in the sub-region.

One of the key issues making an impact on the positive contextual transformation underway is identity-based conflict. As a way of addressing this issue, I shall present some causes of identity-based conflict in Liberia, examine sub-regional implications, and put forward some recommendations on the way forward that would differentiate the context.

Of necessity, the process of research related to identity-based conflict in Liberia has to consider the repatriation of former slaves from the United States back to Liberia as well as historic migrations of various ethnic groups into the MRU basin and specifically into Liberia. These migrations occurred both prior to and following the immigration of settlers from the United States and Europe. In addition to ethnic migrations, there have also been migrations of adherents of African Traditional Religions and followers of Islam that preceded Christianity as transposed by European missionaries and the immigrant settlers.

When colonialists laid political boundaries between the countries of the MRU basin, ethnic groups were divided, cleaving extended families and socio-cultural linkages across borders. From the 1970s to the 1990s, conflict in all four MRU countries respectively caused displacement of close to one million people who were hosted internally or across borders in neighboring countries. In some instances, host ethnic groups blamed one or the other group for direct or indirect involvement in the conflict and prolonged the suffering of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). This also affected identity-based conflict in Liberia with regional implications.

Sources and Methodology

Despite the conditions that led to social upheaval and conflict in the region, several interfaith organizations fostered important dialogue and cooperation between faith communities to transform conflict, including the African Council of Religious Leaders—Religions for Peace (ACRL--RfP, which I served as the West Africa Coordinator from 2002 to 2011), the national Inter-Religious Councils (IRCs), and the West Africa Inter-religious Councils Coordinating Committee (WAIRCCC). The experience gained through dialogue during this period positively transformed several conflicts in the MRU and greatly improved the context for sustained conflict transformation. Their commitment and collaboration continues to have positive impact on societal transformation in spite of numerous challenges

and uncertainties.

With the support of our international partners, the WAIRCCC provided opportunities for interaction among religious leaders, women of faith and youth representing Liberia, Guinea, Ghana, Benin, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Senegal, and Cote d'Ivoire. The organization also made possible the sharing of information and lessons learned from national initiatives, sponsored capacity-building activities to enhance mitigation of conflicts during solidarity visits to countries during conflict periods, and organized visits to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Liberia and Sierra Leone as well as the National Reconciliation Council (NRC) in Ghana. It also paid visits to the national and independent elections commissions in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ghana respectively. The WAIRCCC fostered interactions with other CSOs, government officials, and bi- and multi-lateral representatives of MRU countries, offered travel to camps hosting refugees and IDPs during solidarity visits, and provided advocacy on behalf of the war-affected and vulnerable populations to end gender-based violence (GBV) and improve the quality of life. To this long list, add resource mobilization for program development and implementation at national and regional levels as a result of formulation of the WAIRCCC action plan, opportunities for mainstreaming of women of faith and the empowerment of youth, and sensitization to the stigma and discrimination against and support for care of populations either infected with or adversely affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the sub-region.

As a consequence of the ACRL-RfP initiatives with Inter-Faith Councils in more than twenty countries, and Religions for Peace International's global links in all jurisdictions, the participants of the WAIRCCC have engaged in consultations and capacity-building with other religious leaders, women of faith, and youth representing faith communities at continental and global levels. Their significant accomplishments have resulted in replicating the national and regional models for positive societal transformation in other jurisdictions. The claims of this brief paper are based on several sources of information including reviews of reports and other historical documentation compiled by the IRCL and the ACRL-RfP. Additionally, information was generated through consultations with academicians and review of their presentations. Consultations were also held with representatives of bi- and multi-lateral organizations and international partners to ascertain their roles generally and

that of ECOWAS particularly, in Liberia and the MRU sub-region. The third source includes interactions with both faith communities as direct beneficiaries and other indirect beneficiaries of the programs funded through resource mobilizations of international partners in the MRU sub-region. Finally, evaluations of the positive societal transformation of context as a result of the strategic interventions of IRCL in collaboration with the NTCL and other CSOs inform these findings.

Historical Analysis

In the book *The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in Liberia: From "Paternaltarianism" to State Collapse*, Jeremy I. Levitt states that when the settlers landed in Cape Mesurado in 1822, the socio-political environment was chaotic. Interindigenous warring created deep-seated ethnic divisions that explain why many native Liberian groups were hostile towards the settlers. The American Colonization Society's highly ethnocentric and aggressive conduct toward native Liberians seem to have exacerbated pre-existing ethnic and political tensions and as a result triggered violent conflict among the native Liberians and the settlers. [1]

The settlers generally were unprepared for the arduous nation-building task. They received inadequate orientation, inadequate and inconsistent support from the American Colonization Society (ACS) and successive U.S. governments; they were unprepared for hostile tribes; and they were unaccustomed to harsh environmental conditions in Liberia. This led to several wars being fought with indigenous Liberians. In spite of efforts of mediators to bring about improvements in the internal political, socio-cultural, and economic situation, relations between the two groups remained strained. The settlers declared independence from the United States in 1847, and, though integration has gradually been a historical phenomenon, it has been described as unbalanced with marginalization of the indigenous population segment and disenfranchisement from power and spheres of influence or affluence.

Jeremy I. Levitts also alludes to the fact that from 1822 to 1930, intermittent conflicts between the settlers and various ethnic groups (Mandingo, Vai, Dei-Gola, Bassa, Kru, and Grebo) ensued. From 1930 to 1979 there were no major violent conflicts; however, tensions

simmered that were not appropriately addressed. This period has been characterized by stability and economic growth. While there were perceptions that all was well, analysts present that the economic growth was unbalanced, without broad-based impact on the entire population of Liberia. This led to the rice riots of April 1979 and a year later, in April 1980, the overthrow of the Tolbert Government by military coup d'état, and subsequent factionalization of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL).

In 1983 and 1985, there were conflicts originating in Nimba County (one of the fifteen political sub-divisions of Liberia) with direct or indirect involvement of ethnic groups of that county—Mano, Geo, or Mandingoes. Additionally, in 1989 former President Charles G. Taylor invaded Nimba County from neighboring Cote d'Ivoire in his attempt to oust former President Samuel K. Doe. During the ensuing crises, President Doe was assassinated by warring faction leader Prince Y. Johnson. As a result of traditional and ethnic ties and political, economic, socio-cultural and religious linkages, the following decades of devastating conflict affected the entire sub-region.

The Root Causes of the Conflict in Liberia

Analysts and historians have indicated that cultural and economic factors and religious influences were significant among the root causes of the conflict. In Liberia, these ultimately led to the creation of separate "identities" by which adversaries were recognized during the conflict. Within these two broad categories we can place the following: geo-political influence and interests, foreign exploitation, bad governance, the issues of "identity" and land ownership, historic autocratic rule by the settlers, and abject poverty and marginalization of the majority of the population of Liberia. It is worth noting that no population segment, faith community or ethnic group was spared. Descendants of settlers as well as indigenous persons—Christians, Muslims, and adherents of African Traditional Religions—were all adversely affected. Analysts and historians also allude to the fact that the conditions in Liberia throughout history resulted in separate *settler* and *indigenous* identities instead of a national identity as manifested in the expression of thought, attitudes and behaviors of the population. This further undermined patriotism and peaceful co-existence of ethnic groups, as well as contributed to tensions among faith communities.

It should be noted that for several decades, fuelling of conflicts became the largest employment opportunity within the MRU sub-region, next to public sector civil service, as a result of combatant mobilization. Moreover, government officials routinely exploited natural resources, diverting revenue from development and accumulating large foreign debt to finance conflict. When budgets were being developed by the Liberian Government in collaboration with stakeholders for demobilization, it was estimated that close to 50,000 individuals would benefit. At the end of the process, more than 100,000 combatants were beneficiaries. Ultimately, programs and services for combatants and civilians had to be modified due to diminished funding.

Trauma from this period has never been adequately addressed through psychotherapy, and genuine reconciliation is still to be realized despite national initiatives and the investment of resources of international partners. In addition, though demobilization has been facilitated by international partners, there are still reports of cross border conscriptions for conflicts throughout the sub-region, and caches of weapons are being discovered by law enforcement personnel in vehicles at border crossings or buried at various locations in Liberia. In the aftermath of conflict, some beneficiaries who received counselling, skills training, and tools for transition back into communities have had to sell work implements for survival. High unemployment among former combatants is critical, as they remain vulnerable and could be easily manipulated by unscrupulous "spoilers" to engage in negative activities that could undermine peace and stability at community, national or sub-regional levels.

Cultural and Economic Factors

In the presentation "Traditional Cultural Values Versus Western Cultural Values: The Impact on the Nation and Its Youths," delivered at the University of Liberia, August 2009, Dr. Joshua Dumalo Banang Giddings alludes to the following factors, which have historically undermined successful integration and peaceful coexistence between settlers and indigenous Liberians. These are: languages, music, secret societies, national dress, the extended family system, and the concept of land ownership. [2] Dr. Giddens also comments that the concept of land ownership contributed to the conflict in that settlers purchased land from traditional leaders; however, purchasers and sellers had different views on land

ownership. The settlers were buying personal property to be transferred from one generation to another in perpetuity, and the traditional inhabitants held the view that land was communal property, free to occupy and for collective use, not to be acquired for personal use in perpetuity.

Historically, individual or corporate levels of education, affluence, ethnicity and religion have influenced development of the various indigenous "identities." Appreciation for socio-cultural values, foods, and attire were some indicators of whether people ascribed to being part of one or the other population segment. Often indigenous Liberians found themselves alienated from families and tribes after they attained education and affluence, or failed to meet traditional expectations of benevolence. Alienation from an original ethnic group as well as non-acceptance in the settler group, discrimination, and lack of opportunities for economic empowerment and participation in the political process left many people disenfranchised and marginalized. This also contributed to "brain drain" in which numerous Liberians chose to live in the Diaspora with its opportunities for empowerment and constructive political participation and where there are perceptions of minimal or no discrimination. Liberians in the Diaspora (on both sides of the divide) with differing motives also contributed to conflicts involving warring factions, different faith communities, and ethnic groups. These factors affected the nature, intensity, and the period of time it took to constructively engage all stakeholders in positive transformation.

A national curriculum put in place by the Ministry of Education for use in public and private schools placed value on appreciation of western or foreign ideology and enhanced perceptions of the inferiority of Liberians' national identity. Ultimately, it became difficult for teachers to teach and students or citizens of all generations to comprehend fully what it meant to be truly "Liberian" and what was implied by being "patriotic." These factors, without timely and strategic interventions prior to the prolonged conflict, made war inevitable, with devastating national as well as regional consequences.

When former President William R. Tolbert, Jr., was inaugurated in January 1972, he declared war on illiteracy, poverty, and disease. Historically, illiteracy has contributed to both poverty and disease, limiting opportunities to improve the quality of life for a majority of the population. During the crises, the disenfranchised and vulnerable Liberian population was easily influenced by various warring factions and charismatic personalities claiming to

bring liberation, unity, reconciliation, and democracy. In 2011—in the aftermath of the conflict—illiteracy, poverty, and diseases of the mind, body and spirit still remain issues of concern that require strategic interventions. These are apparent not only at the national level, as highlighted in the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) developed by the Liberian Government, but also at regional and international levels with formulation and adoption of protocols by the fifteen countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as well as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by the comity of nations at the United Nations (UN).

Religious Influences

The majority of the indigenous Liberians were hostile to the ACS initiative, as it disrupted the slave trade, caused displacement inland from coastal areas to accommodate the immigrant population, diminished incomes from human trafficking, and changed their religious and socio-cultural identities as well as the ways of life to which they were accustomed. The indigenous populations were either Muslim or Animists and traditional practitioners. Conversely, the settlers believed their initiative to be one of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to indigenous Liberians "who needed to hear the Good News." Historically on both sides of the divide there have been links between political, socio-economic, cultural environments, and religion (Christianity, Islam, or Animism, and traditional religion). The prevailing situation affected peace, safety and security of both population segments.

There is documentation that influential indigenous leaders of the Islamic faith, inhabiting the coastal region of modern day Liberia, entered into agreements with settlers inhabiting land under their control or in proximity thereto. As such, they helped to provide safety and security for the settler population when there were situations of threat posed by adjacent hostile tribes or belligerent slave traders still operative during that period.

Religious groups in Liberia are made up principally of Muslims, Christians, and practitioners of African traditional religions. However, these categories often blend with some observers noting that Muslims and Christians maintain dual adherence and ascribe to traditional religions as well. It has been said that the problem is not religion but rather

people and how their process of socialization has influenced development of their expression of religious faith and understanding of identity. In addition some alliances of religion and ethnicity have been seen to undermine peace and cause conflict, especially where there are attempts by various ethnic groups to use religion to influence the general population or a segment thereof, impacting the outcomes in political processes and democratization in Liberia and other countries of the sub-region.

In the case of Liberia, the conflict was not of a religious nature until some prominent Muslim factional and political personalities advocated with Arab nations to support a holy war in Liberia. Arab influence during the crises in Liberia increased as a result of President Doe's recognition of Israel. The United States' financial support for the military regime headed by President Doe was in excess of 500 million dollars from 1980 to 1990. It has been reported that this amount exceeded development aid given to Liberia for the 135 years between 1847 and 1980, some of which was used for internal conflict, as there were no external threats to national peace and sovereignty at that time. Consequently, former President Col. Muamar Gadhafi of Libya supported the training of invasion forces headed by former President Charles G. Taylor. The role of Libya in the Liberian situation has been revealed in statements taken during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) public hearings as well as in testimonies of persons during the trial of former President Charles Taylor at the Criminal Court in The Hague.

In this section, it is worth noting that among the civil society organizations and institutions collaborating to enhance the positive roles of religion and ethnicity in conflict transformation and reconciliation are the Liberian Council of Churches (LCC), the National Muslim Council of Liberia (NMCL), the National Traditional Council of Liberia (NTCL), and various other national women's and youth organizations. The LCC and the NMCL together form the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL). The NTCL operates under the aegis of the Liberian Government Ministry of Interior.

The Transformative Influence of ECOWAS during the Conflict

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was organized in 1975

within the framework of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union (AU). It consists of these fifteen countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bisseau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Togo. As a consequence of several consultations, ECOWAS formed the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) as an oversight and observer group. When a majority of western governments were reluctant to intervene in the Liberian situation, ECOMOG stepped in as the West African multi-lateral armed force on August 25, 1990. However, some factors that hindered the effectiveness and undermined the neutrality of the peacekeeping force in this initiative include differing political agendas of ECOWAS countries; reservations about and limitations related to making significant financial contributions; the favor of one or more leaders of particular warring factions; a shift from "peacekeeping" to "enforcement" in an effort to transform the situation; and the demand that commanders in Liberia consult with governments of origin pertinent to national peace and regional stability matters. Hence, the burdens in terms of financial costs and personnel were borne primarily by countries such as Nigeria and Ghana.

The political (and diplomatic) costs were excessive with intervention of peacekeeping forces initially deployed as ECOMOG. Several hundred peacekeepers lost their lives. The influx of regional African actors and troops, as well as consultations involving leaders, affected the stability of the region and the dynamics of the conflict in Liberia. Tensions ensued within the ECOWAS framework between the Anglophone and Francophone countries as modalities were being finalized leading up to the strategic financial support and military interventions.

There is also evidence of external geo-political influence during and after the conflicts and in the process of democratization. Related to this is the fact that interventions of ECOMOG and later UNMIL were made possible through the mobilization of resources from foreign governments as well as international agencies and organizations. Observers and analysts point out that the role of ECOWAS (originally established as an economic integration body) shifted to a security posture in Liberia and other MRU Countries during the decades of conflict. Because the United States at the time was preoccupied with the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait, the Government of former President Bush supported the strong presence of Nigeria and Ghana among the active peacekeepers representing other ECOWAS countries.

The shift in the role of ECOWAS to a security posture in Liberia and other MRU countries resulted in a significant number of fatalities of peacekeepers and hundreds of thousands of Liberians and other residents. Liberians in particular reflect on this historic shift and the perception of the compromise in neutrality of some peacekeepers, especially in situations where enforcement was required to end violent conflicts between warring factions.

In the paper delivered during a Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation (KAICT) Research Presentation Workshop in 2009, at the University of Liberia, Professor Weade Kobbah-Wureh stated:

> ECOMOG was successful in separating the warring factions, assisting the repatriation of foreign nationals and Liberians to safety in neighbouring countries, installing the Interim Government and maintaining peace in the enclave of Monrovia, disarmament and providing security for the conduct of presidential elections. It encountered several setbacks such as coming under direct attack, getting directly involved in the war and not being able to restructure the new Liberian army in keeping with the Abuja Accords. [3]

The arrest and gruesome murder of former President Samuel K. Doe by Prince Y. Johnson took place at ECOMOG headquarters in the Freeport of Monrovia. This incident undermined the role of ECOMOG peacekeepers and prolonged the crises in Liberia with adverse effects in the sub-region. This ultimately resulted in the distribution of close to 8 million small arms and light weapons in the hands of non-state actors who threatened human life and undermined democracies in MRU countries. The arms and light weapons in the hands of non-state actors, maintenance of state control during crises as a consequence of weak economies, and diminished capacities are challenges facing the MRU governments during post-conflict reconstruction. Consequently, Liberia has experienced greater reliance on foreign support, the participation of expatriates in nation building, and the exclusion of nationals and some returnees from the Diaspora from opportunities in private and public service.

Finally, in the aftermath of the violent conflicts throughout the sub-region, former ECOWAS peacekeepers have ended their commissions, and remained in Liberia and other countries of service. In addition, during the conflicts, peacekeepers fathered children and established families in host countries. Observers have noted that in the short term, these de-commissioned personnel are making significant public and private sector contributions in

strengthening weak economies during reconstruction. At this juncture, it is still early to project what long term implications these unique developments will have on contextual transformation and integration, as well as sustaining national peace and stability in the sub-region.

Conclusions

Politico-economic disparities and identity-defining characteristics (e.g., religion and culture) have helped to fuel conflict in Liberia, with implications for the sub-region.

Though Liberia was established through philanthropic efforts of the ACS during the decade of the 1820s, without adequate and consistent support of the United States government, identity-based conflicts continued historically between the immigrants and indigenous Liberians. While interactions resulted in assimilation and integration of both groups of inhabitants, hindrances were due in part to environmental conditions, religious, political and socio-cultural challenges that exacerbated tensions between groups.

It is worth noting that scholars often fail to adequately research and document several issues that impact this discussion. The first point is that ethnic migrations into and within the sub-region generally and Liberia particularly have affected identity-based conflict in Liberia. Some migrations by Muslims and African traditional religious adherents pre-date the arrival of the settlers and Christianity as presented by them to indigenous Liberians. Second is the existence of ongoing conflicts between various ethnic groups, some of which also pre-date the arrival of settlers. These unresolved crises exacerbated the Liberian situation leading up to the 1980 coup d'état and subsequently prolonged both national and regional conflicts.

The tensions and intermittent clashes between the descendants of settlers and indigenous Liberians, the communal violence between the Kpelles and Mandingoes in Bong County, and the constant frictions between the Mandingoes, Lormas, and Gios in Lofa and Nimba Counties respectively are also challenges to be addressed by the government. In the aftermath of the conflict, issues of land ownership amongst returnees, IDPs, and original land inhabitants, especially in Nimba and Lofa Counties, were soon transformed into religious situations as a result of pre-existing Lorma, Mandingo (Muslim), and Mano or Geo

tensions.

Dr. William F. Vendley, Secretary General of Religions for Peace International (RfP), comments on the unique method formulated by RfP for building effective mechanisms to support cooperation among religious communities to transform conflict. He asserts that there are several stages of conflict to which we can match corresponding roles of faith communities. In the latent conflict stage, there is the role of education. In the confrontation stage, there is the role of advocacy. In the negotiation stage, there is the role of mediation, and finally, in the post-conflict stage, there is the role of reconciliation. In all of these stages, the IRCL has been able to co-facilitate positive transformation, in collaboration with other stakeholders, with the endorsement by the Liberian government and supported by international partners.[4]

The international partners need to maintain consistent support for capacity-building to strengthen institutions and structures. Premature disengagement and diminished support of the process of peacebuilding also will undermine the significant and historic attainments in Liberia and the MRU sub-region. With positive transformation of the context and reconstruction underway, there have been reductions in peacekeepers or changes in their roles. Additionally, decisions are being made by international donors to shift resources from peacebuilding to sustainable development. This is cause for concern to observers, especially where the context is still being described as "fragile," economically vulnerable, and in need of research and evaluation of present initiatives and monitoring to formulate appropriate strategies or plans for intervention.

In the MRU sub-region, when there is peace in country, all others are at peace. Conversely, when there is conflict, all others have conflict. This is now more evident with observers monitoring situations in both Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea, which if not contained would invariably affect Sierra Leone and Liberia. Our peace has been described as fragile, and UNMIL peacekeeping forces are expected to remain in Liberia until after 2012 with reductions in the number of personnel from approximately 15,000 to about 8,000. While Liberia's demobilization was initially planned for about 50,000, benefits were ultimately awarded to more than 130,000. In the aftermath of our prolonged and devastating conflict, accessibility of small arms and light weapons to child soldiers and the mobilization of former combatants to destabilize Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea are issues that undermine national peace and regional security.

While the government of Liberia has endorsed the TRC Report recommendations and established the Independent Human Rights Commission (INHRC), there needs to be resource mobilization and stakeholder involvement in plan and strategy formulation for national implementation by the Commissioners. Related thereto, ongoing consultations, capacity building, and sensitizations are necessary to educate beneficiaries, disseminate information, and promote active participation, especially among beneficiaries in rural areas. The Liberian population and other residents, as direct or indirect beneficiaries of this process, need to be informed about the TRC Report recommendations and INHRC initiatives related to policies of government that would sustain durable peace and regional stability.

Finally, advocacy needs to be undertaken for resource mobilization that would ensure all of these challenges are appropriately addressed by IRCL, NTCL, and other CSOs in collaboration with other stakeholders. Historically, there have been networks established between public and private sector beneficiaries with institutional links throughout the MRU sub-region. By maintaining collaborations, strengthening networks, advocating and mobilizing resources for institutional sustainability, and building national human resource capacity with the aim of promoting good governance and accountability, Liberia diminishes the probability of recurring identity-based conflict and maintains peace in the nation with positive implications for the MRU.

Recommendations

In the post conflict context, leaders need to make some recommendations on the way forward to avoid recurrence of identity-based conflict in the sub-region. While religion has been a source of conflict, we underscore the critical role of traditional and religious leaders, women of faith, and youth representing various faith communities of the IRCL and NTCL in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Each can make important contributions to strategic long term economic planning and implementation, active participation of all actors in the process of societal transformation, and promotion and support of transitional justice mechanisms in addition to community-based reconciliation for durable peace in Liberia and stability in the MRU region.

As a result of various initiatives, both the IRCL and the NTCL respectively have significantly contributed to strengthening structures and systems in both urban and rural contexts of Liberia. Local participation and international support enhanced the capacity of both institutions. Consequently, they remained involved in the negotiations during peace talks, eventually ending the prolonged and devastating Liberian conflict. At this juncture, both the IRCL and the NTCL, among other CSOs, need consistent support and empowerment for capacity building to remain involved in positive societal transformation. Both institutions should maintain collaboration with other local and international partners to sensitize beneficiaries and facilitate the merger of western and traditional cultures as Liberians strive toward a shift in their common identity as Liberians. It should be noted that recommendations made to ECOWAS by the IRCL were used to formulate the peace plan that positively transformed the Liberian context.

The IRCL, as part of the WAIRCCC, along with seven other Inter-Religious Councils (IRCs) in the sub-region, shall continue to make significant contributions to national peace and regional stability. At both continental and international levels, IRCL maintains representation in the ACRL-RfP and Religions for Peace International. All of these IRCs function at national, regional, continental, and international levels and cooperate to use collective resources to meet the challenges of our time. In each community—villages and urban areas--there are social assets in mosques, churches, temples and other societal structures. In these structures, significant channels of communication and action enable us to positively transform communities. The challenge is to mobilize these assets for networking, capacity-building and educating local populations.

We Liberians have moral assets that build on and unleash the strength of our spiritualities. We are uniquely positioned to use our moral stature and influence to encourage mutual understanding within our communities. Our spiritual assets can be manipulated if we let down our guard and become vulnerable to others who might use us for political, sectarian, or secular processes. This is especially true during periods of national elections and other positive initiatives where there are efforts by "spoilers" to mobilize vulnerable, demobilized combatants and other war-affected population segments in undermining the process of reconstruction. Individually and collectively, spirituality can provide us with courage and strength during adversity and tragedy. Similarly, spirituality can also provide unique potential resources and capacity to facilitate genuine reconciliation as well as inter-religious

dialogue and cooperation among and between persons, communities, and nation states.

It is critical that governments in the MRU coordinate efforts with ECOWAS, the AU and international partners to address conflict in the MRU; it was they who principally led historic, strategic interventions by diverting resources from development to conflict transformation and peacekeeping. National and regional consultations have resulted in formulation of strategies and mechanisms that identify early warning signs and root causes as well as recommendations and possible solutions. Now sensitization is necessary to ensure these recommendations, strategies, and mechanisms are appropriately utilized by public and private sector stakeholders in development of a new paradigm to sustain national peace and regional stability. Premature disengagement of international partners will result in diminution of human and financial resources, undermine historic accomplishments, and lead to recurring conflicts.

Some recommendations to national governments include addressing:

- impunity of belligerents who committed the worst crimes against humanity
- collaboration with international partners toward ending proliferation of small arms and light arms in the hands of new child soldiers and former combatants
- implementation of the TRC Report recommendations
- strengthening of institutions and structures in the reconstruction that is underway
- capacity building of the citizens so they may actively participate in reconstruction without reliance on expatriates, thereby reducing unemployment
- drafting of legislation and formulation of procedures or policies to address corruption and ensure good management of revenues from natural resources that will bring an end to socio-economic disparities

The process of community based reconciliation with active participation of all stakeholders must be supported by government and international partners. It requires commitment and courage of all stakeholders to become vulnerable and possibly open old wounds with the aim of finally healing and bringing closure after decades and layers of trauma. It is necessary to sustain the process through mobilization of resources and assets internally and externally for monitoring the environment; contextual analysis to ascertain which private and public sector needs are to be addressed through concerted actions; identification and development of strategies to identify and appropriately address root causes of conflict; and

the mainstreaming of women of faith and the empowerment of youth for active participation in this process. By mobilizing our social, moral, spiritual, and multi-religious and traditional or socio-cultural assets, we can build peace.

We must strive to end the recurring cycles of violent conflict and maintain the peacebuilding process through consultations, sensitizations, capacity building, and other strategies of mutual benefit to all stakeholders.

International partners have co-facilitated the creation of neutral space for the maintenance of constructive dialogue as well as constructive criticism. Both of these must be ongoing with consistent support of government and active participation of civil society beneficiaries. With implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), it is anticipated that efforts by government will transform the context into an enabling environment in which Liberians will see the creation of opportunities and the empowerment of all stakeholders to actively participate in balanced economic development that will impact all sectors. Promotion of good governance and accountability will strengthen political systems, societal structures and institutions, and will make a difference in our evolving democracy.

1. 1. Jeremy I. Levitt, *The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in Liberia --From Paternaltarisnism to State Collapse* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 28.
2. 2. Dr. Joshua Dumalo Banang Giddings, "Traditional Liberian Cultural Values Versus Western Cultural Values: The Impact on the Nation and Its Youths," delivered during workshop under the auspices of the Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation (KAICT) and UNDP, at the University of Liberia, 19-20 August 2009.
3. 3. Weade Kobbah-Wureh, "ECOMOG'S Intervention in Liberia, Strategies, Successes, Setbacks and Prospects for Maintaining Regional Peace," delivered during the workshop under the auspices of Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation (KAICT) and UNDP, at the University of Liberia, 19-20 August 2009.
4. 4. Dr. William F. Vendley, "The Power of Inter-Religious Cooperation to Transform Conflict," submitted to *Cross Currents*, 2005.