



Mapping opportunities for the consolidation of peace in Liberia

“Voices from the countryside”



Liberia Peace Building Office
Ministry of Internal Affairs
April 2017

Mapping opportunities for the consolidation of peace in Liberia

“Voices from the countryside”

by Edward Mulbah and John R Dennis

Liberia Peace Building Office
Ministry of Internal Affairs
April 2017



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Government of Liberia has placed a premium on peacebuilding and reconciliation, and it continues to support efforts to pursue this agenda. Peacebuilding and reconciliation have been supported by many partners, working collaboratively with the government.

The Liberian Peacebuilding Office (PBO) was established under this collaborative arrangement, with a mandate to coordinate national peacebuilding strategies, using relevant policies and programmes. In undertaking the National Conflict Mapping-Exercise (NCME), the Liberia Peacebuilding Office acknowledges the role played by government and its partners, such as the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (UNPBSO) and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolutions of Disputes (ACCORD) from South Africa have supported the Liberia PBO to design this National Conflict Mapping Exercise. The LPBO collaboration with ACCORD was under the auspices of the African Peacebuilding Coordination Programme (APCP), which it implements with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland. The Liberia Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services provided technical backstopping in the implementation of the study.

We therefore express our deep gratitude and appreciation to the government and its partners for the unique opportunity to undertake this laudable initiative. We recognise the tireless and professional contributions of the six field teams, comprising enumerators, focus groups moderators, note-takers and transcribers. Most importantly, we appreciate local community members, who left their busy schedules to respond to the survey and to participate in various focus groups and key informant interviews.

Printed by: Universal Venture INC.

Introduction

There is documented evidence which shows that most post-conflict countries are likely to relapse into violence within five years after reaching peace agreements,¹ and when United Nations (UN) peacekeepers exit the country. As Liberia continues on the path to peace and stability, 14 years after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2003, peacebuilding and reconciliation activities remain essential components to development goals and policies. Many studies have been carried out to support evidence-based decision-making in peacebuilding policy formulation and programme design.

The PBO conducted the NCME to systematically identify and analyse Liberian conflict issues and potential conflict drivers. The NCME focused on five thematic areas:

- prevailing conflict issues in Liberia;
- assessment of the level of effectiveness of peacebuilding processes and frameworks;
- proposals for peace and reconciliation;
- external conflict factors; and
- local and national unity.

To be able to analyse and document conflict issues adequately, and identify drivers, the NCME sought to meet seven interlocking objectives:

- to identify existing and looming conflicts with the potential to undermine national peace and stability;
- to assess the nature, type and dynamics of county-specific conflict drivers, and outline any possible ways to address them;
- to explore the underlying root causes of civil war that are not yet addressed;
- to identify key and emerging conflict issues or factors, and discuss the extent to which some previous factors are being addressed or not – including the extent to which previous interventions worked in addressing these factors;
- to recognise various peace structures and actors, as well as the interventions they have undertaken to promote peacebuilding;
- to provide guidance to inform the alignment of government strategies for peacebuilding and reconciliation programmes; and
- to recommend strategies to strengthen peacebuilding policy development, encourage national dialogue and broaden the discourse on peacebuilding and reconciliation.

1 Westendorf, J. (2015). *Why peace processes fail: negotiating insecurity after civil war*. [Internet]. New York, Lynne Rienner Publishers. Available from: <<https://www.rienner.com/uploads/55bfbb90085b6.pdf>> [Accessed 20 February 2017].



Background

In 2009, the Liberian government established the PBO, which coordinates key peacebuilding initiatives in the country.² The PBO interacts with numerous stakeholders with common interests relating to peacebuilding in Liberia. As a critical government functionary, the PBO has adopted an evidence-based approach to policy formulation and programming, to invigorate the peacebuilding landscape in Liberia. Accordingly, it has utilised research to inform its work and policy processes for building sustainable peace in Liberia.

Most of the conflict literature and peacebuilding strategies on Liberia share a common critique – various conflict issues are generally discussed, but the efforts designed to help address and mitigate them are rarely informed by rigorous analyses to ensure the corresponding tailoring of interventions. Consequently, some priorities and interventions have not yielded the desired outcomes, as conflicts abound. Since 2006, there has not been any empirical study or a national public opinion poll undertaken to track progress in reconciliation across a range of multidimensional indicators – including political culture and relations, human security, dialogue, historical confrontation and social relations. In addition, there is no empirical data that explains to what extent peacebuilding and reconciliation interventions have impacted Liberia.

2 Since early 2016, the PBO no longer serves as the secretariat of the Peacebuilding Fund.

Furthermore, there has not been a thorough conflict-mapping exercise in Liberia since the European Union (EU)-funded Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Conflict Mapping Exercise, done in 2007–2008. In 2010, the Human Rights Center at the University of California also undertook a conflict-mapping exercise in Liberia, but it was limited in scope. In 2008, the PBO and the Peacebuilding Resource Center (PBRC) undertook another conflict-mapping exercise in five counties, around issues of land and concessions, border security, access to justice, and gender. Despite the relevance of these mappings, they are not comprehensive, neither have they led to a deeper analysis of various conflicts to inform programming and interventions adequately. Therefore, the NCME sought to draw from previous studies to provide a comprehensive resource for informing ongoing national policy and programming on peacebuilding, reconciliation and, indeed, conflict resolution efforts in Liberia.

Methodology

The NCME’s research methodology combined a quantitative survey, participatory focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), along with secondary data review. A random stratified cluster sampling method was used for the research to ensure the findings were representative of the population at the country level. A sample size of 3500 was considered sufficient to provide statistically representative results and allow for meaningful comparisons. Using the population proportion to size (PPS) technique in relation to the 2008 Population and Housing Census, a total of 141 enumeration areas (EAs) were randomly selected, reflecting the population size of each county. The survey was complemented with 30 FGDs and 30 KIIs – two of each in each county. A desk review was also carried out on available peacebuilding literature. Furthermore, the study was designed to explore the subject matter from the perspective of the grassroots population as national-level perspective is sparse. Nonetheless, the methodology ensured data triangulation, objectivity and validity were assured.

Key Findings and Reflections

Findings from previous conflict-mapping exercises were instrumental in identifying a spectrum of conflict-prone factors during this NCME. The contentious factors, most of which still loom large, include land disputes, youth agitation (mainly about unemployment), mismanagement of natural resources, stifling state-citizen relationships, weak justice and security systems, lack of a shared national vision, and poverty and food insecurity.³

3 United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (UN PBSO). 2013. *Liberia’s revised peacebuilding priority plan*. United Nations.

Below is a summary of the findings from this NCME.

Perception about existing and looming conflict factors

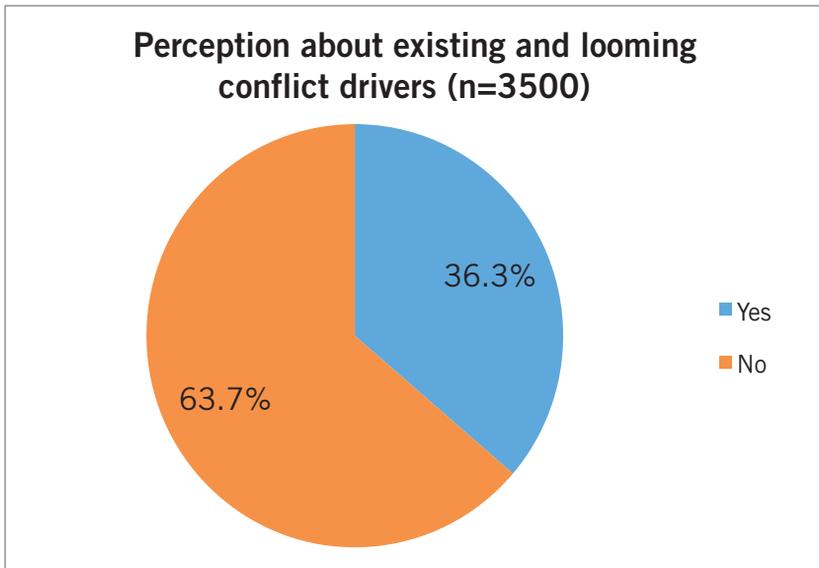


Figure 1: Perception about existing and looming conflict drivers

To assess prevailing perceptions about existing conflict drivers, respondents were asked: “*Is there anything/palava⁴ that could spoil the peace and stability in the district or county or between this district/county and others?*” More than one third (36.3%) of respondents acknowledged the existence of conflict drivers or factors that have the propensity to undermine the peace and stability in their county/district.

There are eight counties that are considered to have high “conflict potential” in the country. In each of these counties, the share of respondents who reported knowledge of existing and looming conflict drivers is above the 36.3% national threshold.

Nature, root causes and dynamics of conflict

At the national level, all respondents who acknowledged the existence of conflict were asked further: “*What is the conflict about?*” For this question, respondents had the option to list as many conflict drivers as applicable. As revealed in Figure 2, there are three high-risk conflict factors in Liberia. These include:

- land/property disputes;
- corruption;⁵ and
- border/boundary disputes.

4 Local vocabulary for “conflict”.

5 Corruption perception encompasses a spectrum of grievances citizens harbour about political governance and leadership, as reflected by a lack of accountability and transparency, misuse of public and corporate resources, etc.

Ethnic tensions and social relations and religious disputes present moderate risks to the peace and stability of the country. Further analysis of conflict factors grouped under “others” reveals that issues of drugs, crime and unemployment, especially among the youth, present additional conflict dynamics that cannot be ignored.

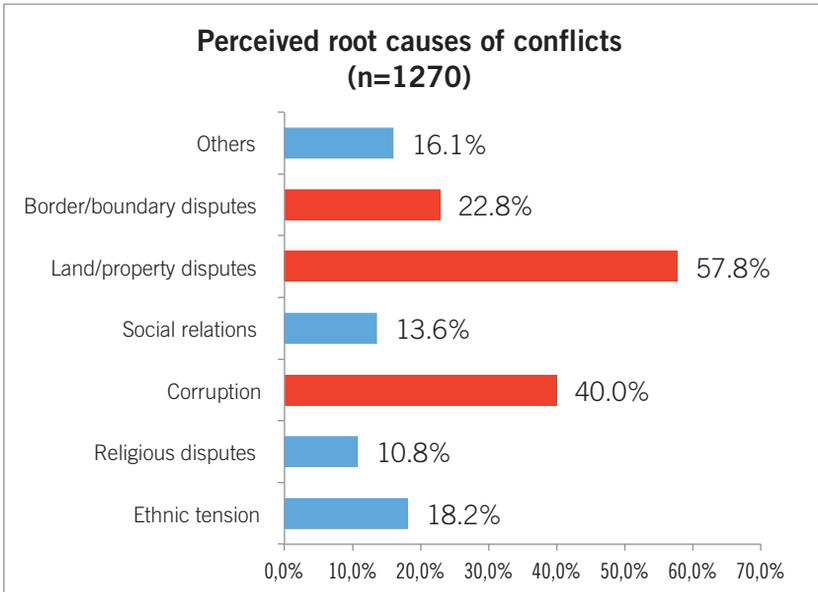


Figure 2: Perceived root causes of conflicts

Table 1: Main conflict drivers identified in each county

County	Order of specific conflict drivers
Bomi	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Boundary/border disputes 2. Land/property disputes 3. Crime (ritualistic killing)
Bong	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Land/property 5. Corruption 6. Boundary/border disputes
Grand Bassa	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Land/property disputes 8. Drug abuse and crime
Grand Cape Mount	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Border/boundary disputes 10. Land/property disputes 11. Lack of development
Grand Gedeh	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Land/property disputes 13. Ethnic tension

County	Order of specific conflict drivers
Grand Kru	14. Land/property disputes 15. Corruption 16. Border/boundary disputes
Lofa	17. Land/property disputes 18. Ethnic tension 19. Border/boundary disputes
Margibi	20. Land/property disputes 21. Corruption 22. Drug abuse and crime
Maryland	23. Land/property disputes 24. Corruption 25. Border/boundary disputes 26. Social relations
Montserrado	27. Corruption 28. Land/property disputes 29. Unemployment and economic hardship 30. Drug abuse and crime
Nimba	31. Corruption 32. Land/property disputes
Rivercess	33. Land/property disputes
Sinoe	34. Land/property disputes 35. Ethnic tension 36. Boundary/border disputes
River Gee	37. Land/property disputes 38. Boundary/border disputes 39. Ethnic tension
Gbarpolu	40. Boundary/border disputes 41. Land/property disputes

Despite a complex history of crises, Table 1 attests to the fact that conflict drivers in Liberia reflect a pattern of apparent homogeneity whereby three major drivers are central to most counties, with alternating degrees of individual risk intensity. The single most commonly cited conflict driver in all countries is land/property disputes. Disputes over land use, tenure and inheritance are pervasive across Liberia.

Many of these disputes are consequences of wartime displacement and resettlement patterns, coupled with persistent ambiguities between customary and formal property rights. The long civil war brought a complete breakdown in the structures that are responsible for dealing with problems in Liberian society, and land disputes today are the result of what accumulated during the war when there was no institution to deal decisively with the situation of land ownership.

Key conflict actors

The nature and characteristics of conflict drivers seem to have a clear parallel with the identified conflict actors. Since the main conflict drivers centre on issues of land/property and boundaries/borders, it is not surprising that tribes⁶ (51.8%) and villages⁷ (32.1%) are the key conflict actors. Similarly, the identification of political groups (23.4%) seems to explain the reported perceptions people have about corruption.

In Liberia, the intertribal dimension of conflict is present in all counties, because tribes and subtribes are recognised to be key actors. This scenario describes the conflict interactions between two or more different ethnic groups or tribes. Furthermore, it is common for politicians and influential leaders to mobilise rival groups for the purposes of promoting personal political agendas, mainly towards the acquisition of state power. As a result, it is much easier to divide citizens along political lines by exploiting grievances about social injustices and economic hardship.

6 Relations among different tribal groups.

7 Relations among different villages from the same tribal groups (e.g. two rival clans within the same ethnic group).

Conflict motives

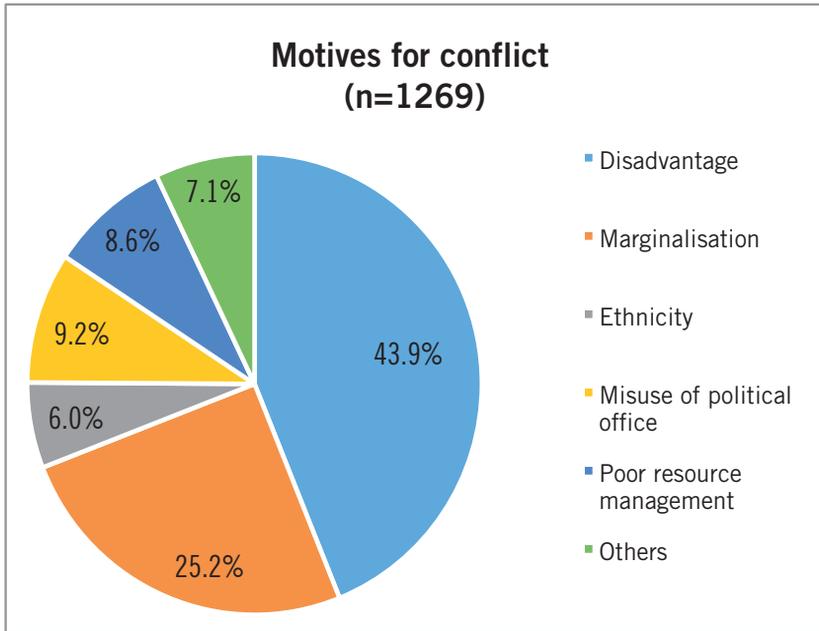


Figure 3: Motives for conflict

The motives for conflict tend to be driven more by citizens' grievances about patterns of social injustices which may be perpetuated mostly by being disadvantaged and marginalisation. Accusation of disadvantage is the leading complaint reported in all counties. In Grand Gedeh and Sinoe, concerns about ethnicity are highlighted. In Montserrado, misuse of political office is the notable concern for citizens. Dissatisfaction about poor management of resources is another reported issue/concern by the citizens.

Conflict eras in Liberia

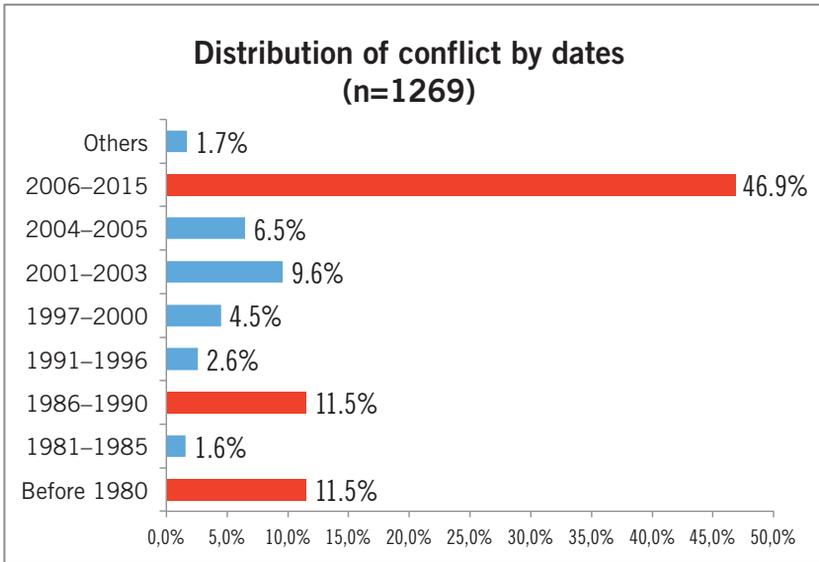


Figure 4: Distribution of conflict by dates

Generally, respondents believe that conflicts in Liberia peaked in three major eras. As shown in Figure 4, 46.9% reported that the conflicts in their counties began in the past decade (2006–15); whereas 11.5% of the respondents respectively reported that the conflict began 1986-1990; and before 1980.

It is likely that recall bias may explain why the majority of respondents reported that most of the conflicts started in the past decade. This stems from the fact that roughly 45.1% of the respondents are youth between the ages of 15 and 35 years. As such, it is plausible that their memory of the historicity of conflicts in their counties/districts is founded on relatively recent incidents of the past decade.

Main effects of conflicts

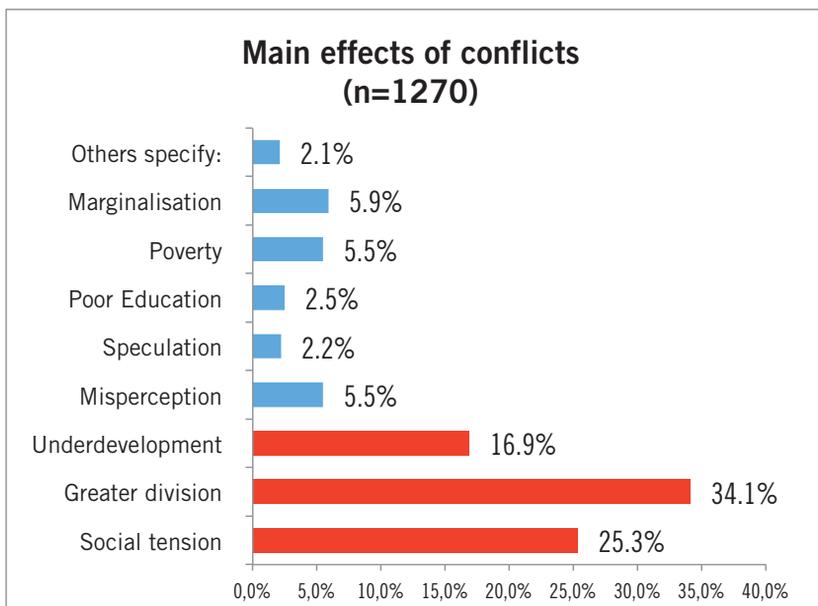


Figure 5: Main effects of conflicts

According to the findings, social relations among community members were generally cordial before the onset of reported conflict situations. More than eight in every 10 respondents (84.0%) asserted that there was a good relationship among the residents in their county before the onset of the identified conflicts. This intracommunal harmony and social cohesion has since been disrupted by different conflicts, leaving behind fractious communities burdened with problems of greater division (34.1%) and social tension (25.3%) among various groups, such as tribes, and particularly among youth and elders. Furthermore, because of these conflicts, the communities have suffered underdevelopment (16.9%), proven by poor infrastructure and little or no access to basic social services.

Available peacebuilding structures

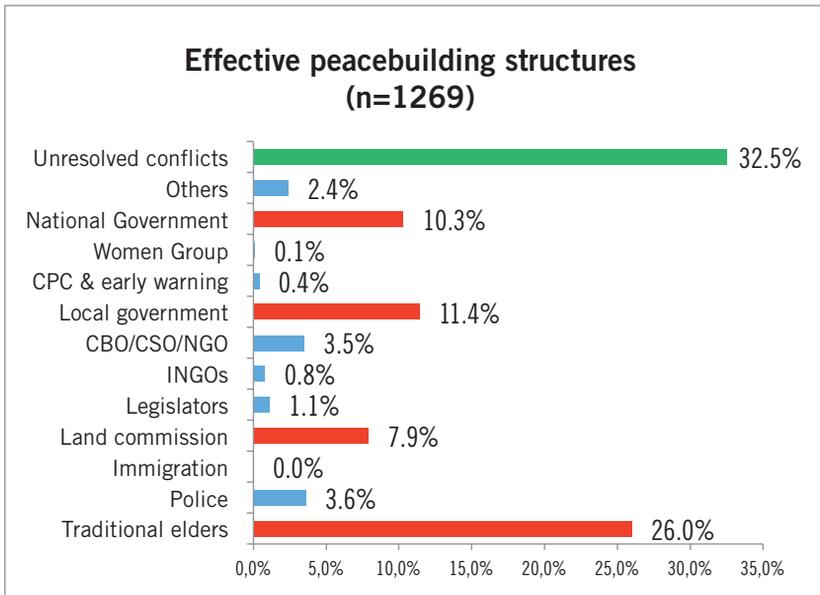


Figure 6: Effective peacebuilding structures

The mapping exercise also looked at existing peacebuilding structures and actors working in the field. Figure 6 shows that four major structures have been quite instrumental in the resolution of conflicts in Liberia. The most influential peacebuilding actors are:

- traditional elders;
- national government
- local government actors; and the
- land commission.

The role of national government in resolving conflicts is duly recognised by the citizens. Notwithstanding the gains made by these peacebuilding structures, the findings reveal that there are substantial unresolved conflicts (32.5%) in the country. This result epitomises the level of unmet demands that exist for peacebuilding initiatives in the country. Hence, the need for more effective interventions cannot be overemphasised.

Awareness about peacebuilding frameworks

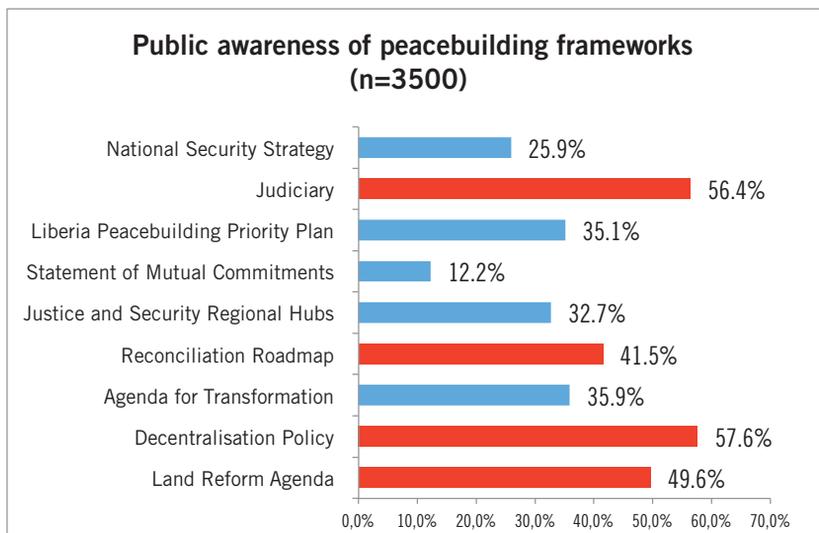


Figure 7: Public awareness of peacebuilding frameworks

In efforts towards addressing the plethora of conflicts that have engulfed Liberia over the past decades, the government and its partners have devised many policies and strategies. Stakeholders have undertaken different public awareness and sensitisation activities, utilising different information, education and communication (IEC) activities to popularise these intervention frameworks.

As shown in Figure 7, the general public is largely informed about the various peacebuilding interventions frameworks, with varying degrees of awareness. The Decentralisation Policy is the only framework that the majority of citizens have heard about in all counties, followed by the judiciary. Of all the frameworks, the Statement of Mutual Commitments is the least known by the public. In fact, it is the only framework that has below-average recognition in all counties. There is also public awareness about the justice and security hubs, the forest management framework, etc.

Level of success of peacebuilding frameworks

On the whole, respondents believe that these frameworks have been successful. Nearly nine in 10 respondents (85.5%) reported that these frameworks have been instrumental in helping to resolve and prevent conflicts in their counties. In Cape Mount (86.2%), Bomi (85.5%), Bong (82.4%) and Nimba (79.7%), respondents are most enthusiastic about the achievement of the various peacebuilding frameworks. Logistical challenges and poor road infrastructure may explain why the majority of the hard-to-reach counties – such as those in the south-east – report low awareness about these peacebuilding interventions. This finding may also provide hints as to why that region records the highest level of conflicts.

Peacebuilding mechanisms

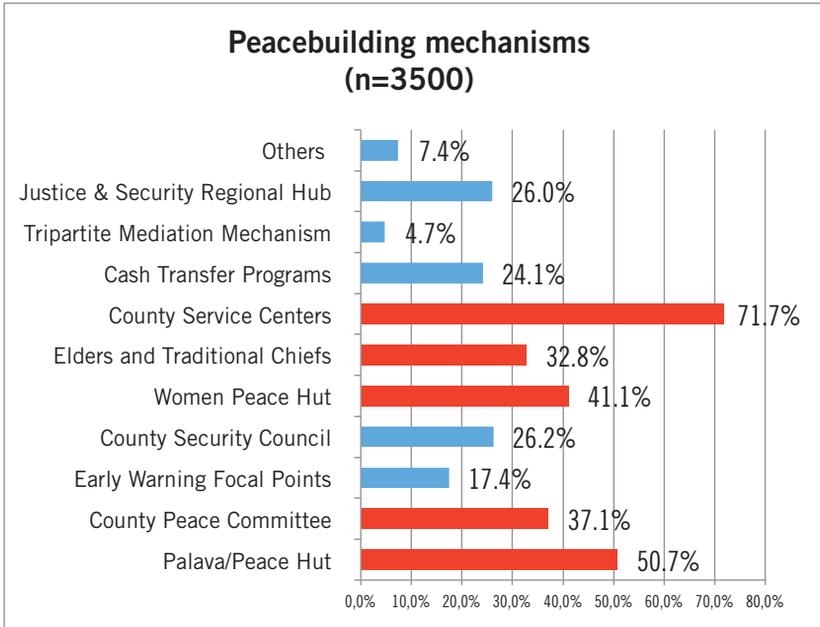


Figure 8: Peacebuilding mechanisms

In Liberia, peacebuilding actors have employed different approaches to operationalise the adopted frameworks. Figure 8 demonstrates that citizens have identified County Service Centers (CSCs) and the palava/peace hut as the most productive initiatives for peacebuilding.

The CSCs – the key strategy for bringing services closer to the people – have gained due recognition. Currently, four CSCs are operating – in Bassa, Margibi, Bong and Nimba – making it possible for citizens to process birth certificates, marriage certificates, business registrations, etc. in these counties.

Peace and reconciliation

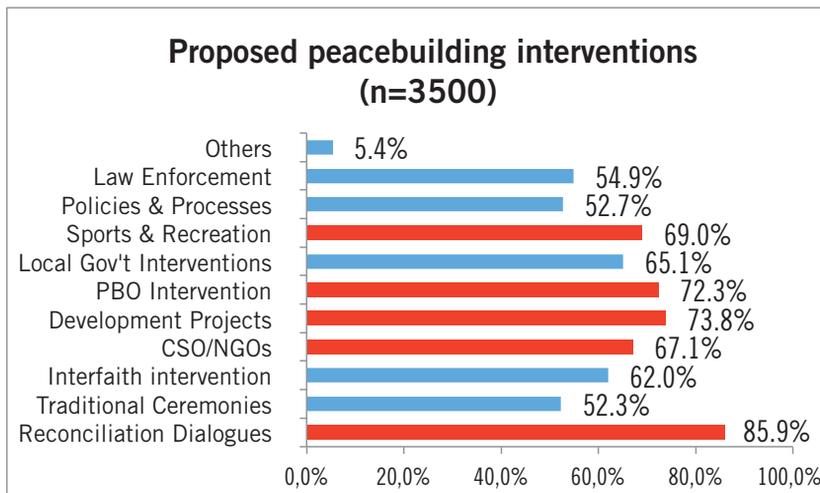


Figure 9: Proposed peacebuilding interventions

Respondents were asked: “*What sort of intervention would be helpful in promoting peace and reconciliation?*” There are five priority interventions that citizens felt would contribute immensely to peace and reconciliation. The number one intervention is reconciliation dialogue, followed by development projects, and then other interventions facilitated by the PBO.

Respondents also thought that sports and recreation and civil society organisation (CSO)/non-governmental organisation (NGO) interventions would play a pivotal role in promoting peace and reconciliation.

In Cape Mount and Nimba, respondents believed virtually every well-intentioned endeavour would contribute to peace and reconciliation, because they regard all the proposed interventions as necessary. On the contrary, residents in Lofa, Rivercess and Sinoe offered limited suggestions about the types of intervention that would promote peace and reconciliation in their counties.

Peacebuilding actors

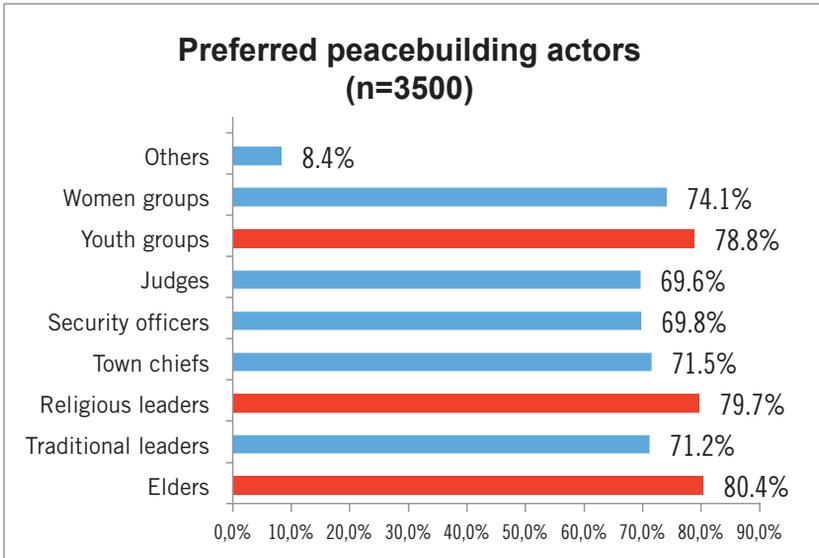


Figure 10: Preferred peacebuilding actors

As shown in Figure 10, findings suggest that the actors who are most likely to succeed in peacebuilding and reconciliation are elders (80.4%), religious leaders (79.9%) and youth groups (78.8%). With the presence of elders and religious leaders, it is more likely that contending parties will adhere to their counsel.

It is no surprise that 78% of the youth groups are likely to succeed, as they constitute a strong demographic constituent and their voice and participation in peacebuilding and reconciliation is essential to the attainment of lasting peace and stability in the country. The same can be said about women's groups (74.1%), as they have a proven track record of effective peacebuilding. The involvement of women and youth will leverage huge demographic dividends for strategic reasons.

External conflict factors

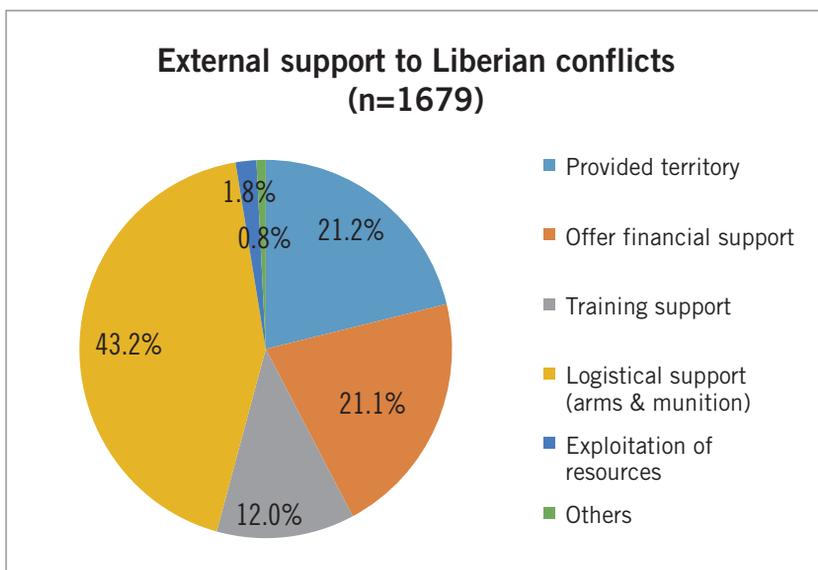


Figure 11: External support to Liberian conflicts

In Liberia, some people believed that there have been outside interferences, which have caused divisions. A total of 35.4% of respondents agreed with this notion, while there were no strong sentiments against this argument.

As can be seen in Figure 11, there are three main ways in which outsiders contributed to the Liberia civil war. At the top of the list is logistical support, especially the provision of arms and ammunitions (43.2%). This is followed by the provision of territorial access (21.2%) in the form of corridors to bring in fighting forces, or havens for recruitment and training bases. Respondents also reported that outsiders played a crucial role in offering financial support to rival warring factions.

In relation to curbing outside influences, respondents admitted that different strategies can be put in place to stop outsiders from contributing to conflict in Liberia, with three main interventions put forward. First, it is essential to increase border security (16.9%), and then support cross-border peace and security initiatives (11.5%). Finally, residents of local communities – mainly youths, elders and women (8.2%) – should be included in cross-border meetings on peace and security.

Promoting inter-ethnic cohesion

According to the study findings, there are abundant opportunities for reducing division among ethnic groups. Respondents were confident that virtually all available resources and strategies would make meaningful contributions in this regard. The most important actions for inter-ethnic harmony are reconciliation programmes (78.3%), inclusive dialogue (72.5%), civic education in schools (71.8%) and sports

and recreation (70.5%). There was strong optimism across the country that once the appropriate interventions are inaugurated, inter-ethnic harmony can become a reality once again. Nevertheless, the level of enthusiasm or prospect reported in Sinoe, Rivercess, Grand Kru and Montserrado was not as bright, as respondents in these counties were less hopeful of the restoration of inter-ethnic harmony.

Promoting national unity

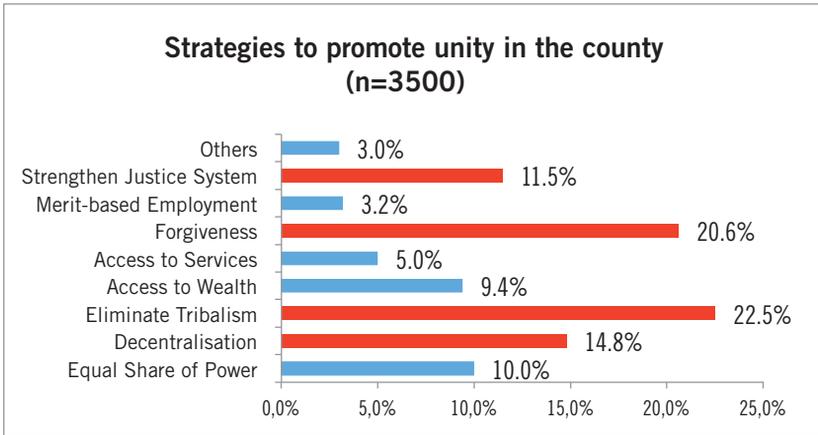


Figure 12: Strategies to promote unity in the county

Respondents were asked: “What is the best way to promote national unity in this county?” To this question, each respondent was restricted to select only one option. Four main strategies were proposed:

- elimination of tribalism;
- forgiveness;
- decentralisation of governance; and
- strengthening of the justice system.

Furthermore, citizens wanted government to bring more development projects to local communities, as well as to institute programmes that would support love and togetherness among citizens.

Findings from the study determine that Liberia is rife with existing and looming conflicts that have the potential to undermine national peace and stability. This assertion is reflected by the voices of ordinary citizens, community and local leaders from the countryside. The findings of this study essentially resonate with previous conflict-mapping exercises, as it reveals that there are three critical conflict drivers that present the most eminent threat to the sustainability of the nation’s fragile democracy: land/property disputes, corruption and border/boundary disputes. Together, these three drivers constitute a “dangerous triplet” and require bold, concerted national efforts to combat them with urgency and decisiveness.

Despite the plethora of conflict factors plaguing the nation, analyses of conflict drivers in Liberia reflect a pattern of apparent homogeneity, whereby the major drivers are central to most counties, with alternating degrees of risk intensity. However, these interlinking characteristics reveal a highly dynamic nature of the conflict phenomenon in Liberia. Understanding this paradox of dynamic homogeneity of Liberia's conflict paradigm is at the heart of successful peacebuilding programmes and reconciliation efforts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In view of these findings, the following actionable recommendations are proffered to support the government and its partners formulate effective policies and programmes, as well as to align peacebuilding and reconciliation strategies properly to achieve desired results:

Policy

1. It is recommended that the government, through the National Bureau of Concessions, establishes a robust monitoring and evaluation mechanism to track the compliance of all concession companies on matters relating to corporate social responsibilities.
2. The government, especially the legislature, is called upon not to include "Preposition 24" (to Christianise Liberia) in the pending referendum.

Programmes

3. The government – through the Land Commission; Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy (MLME); and the Center for National Documents and Records Agency (CNDRA) – should provide affordable surveying and deeds processing services across the country to deal with widespread land/property disputes.
4. It is recommended that the government expedites the construction of CSCs in the remaining counties, and also increases or diversifies the range of services they can provide.
5. The government must continue to create an enabling environment, attractive for business investment and, ultimately, job creation for local populations, utilising a tripartite strategy: technical and vocational capacity building for marketable skills; entrepreneurship skills for engagement in small businesses; and the creation of wage-earning income-generation activities.
6. It is recommended that the government carefully examines the feasibility of issuing a national citizens' identification card, and the legislation of a common language, to help address the national identity conflict that seems to deflate citizens' sense of nationalism.
7. It is recommended that the government invests more in programmes that promote social cohesion and inter-ethnic harmony, such as sports and recreation activities – for example, the National County Meet and other district-level tournaments.

Research

8. The PBO is urged to assess land/property disputes and border/boundary disputes further, to develop geospatial conflict portals that provide online maps of the conflicts in Liberia.
9. It is recommended that the government, through the PBO, engages pertinent gender stakeholders to research the possibility of harnessing the experience and expertise of women in national peacebuilding, particularly for land/property and border/boundary conflicts.

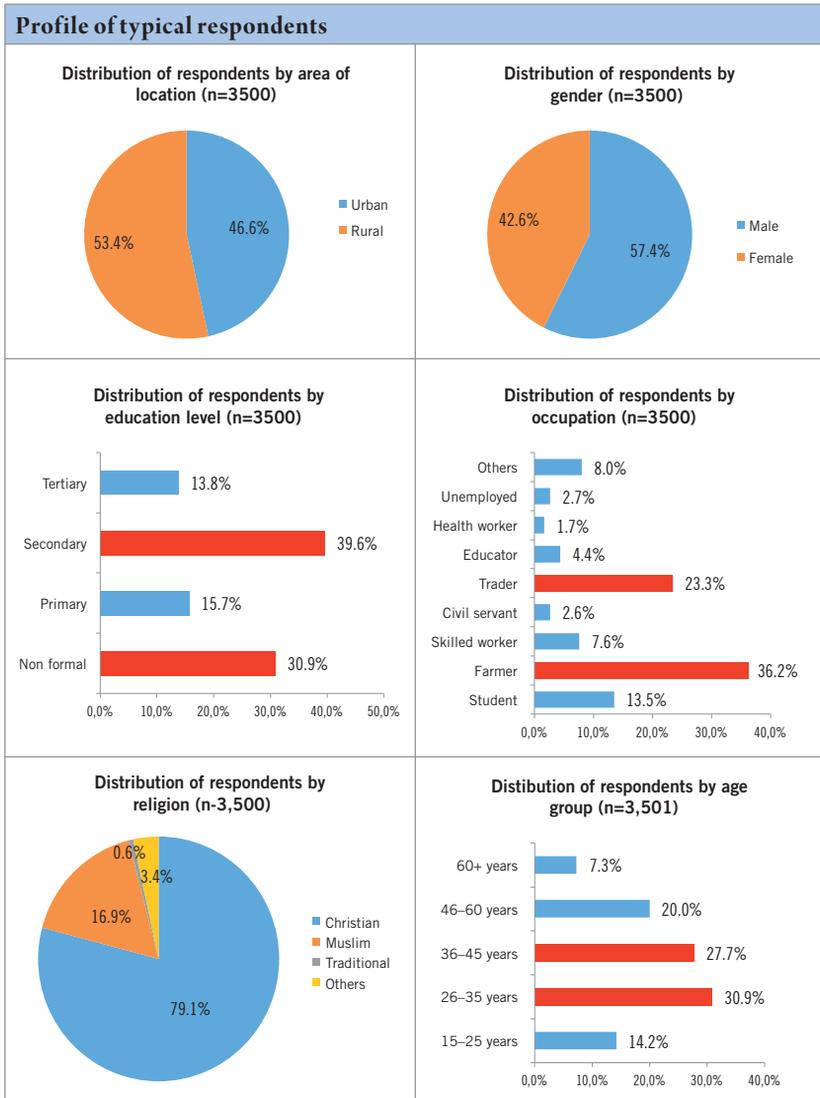


Figure 13: Profile of typical respondents

