Multi-Level Security Provision in Post-Conflict Societies:
Local Perspectives from Liberia and Sierra Leone

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Abstract:

Sierra Leone and Liberia both recently emerged from over a decade of civil war, which left their security infrastructure and policing mechanisms in shambles. Generally, efforts to reform and reconstruct the security sector have centred on re-establishing the state's monopoly on the use of force, ignoring the potential of non-state policing structures to play a key role in this regard. This corresponds with the academic focus on strategies undertaken by external or state actors in ensuring the survival of the local population, whilst giving little attention to the efforts made by locals themselves to survive amidst hostile situations. Moreover, one key criterion for determining the efficacy – and, hence, incorporation into reform efforts – of policing structures tends to be ignored, namely whether those the security provision is intended for actually feel protected.

This is the starting point for my paper, which attempts to fill this gap by presenting empirical evidence from Liberia and Sierra Leone of local perceptions of the policing structures citizens rely upon for security, including not only external and state, but also local, non-state actors.

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used for data gathering, the results of which could be presented during the panel: 1) survey poll, carried out in three urban areas in both countries, 2) eight in-depth focus group discussions and 3) sixty focussed, semi-structured interviews, conducted with elites and experts (local and international); the expert interviews provide the more 'objective' perception of the respective security arena. Where available, non-conventional literature and other documents (e.g. internal reports, factsheets, crime statistics) were gathered to substantiate the 'objective' performance of security actors.

The two case studies permit a comparison on various levels, particularly since Sierra Leone's post-conflict period is 'older' than that of Liberia. The influence of an external peacekeeping force, for example, can be examined, for these have withdrawn from Sierra Leone but are still a key player in Liberia.

Though it may be too early to evaluate the security sector reform (SSR) strategies undertaken thus far, the results obtained from the case studies highlight issues – and actors – that should be included in such strategies to improve their likelihood for success.

The paper will reveal that non-state policing mechanisms play a significant role in security provision, particularly on the local, community level. Considering the state of the national security apparatus in both countries, alternative policing structures will remain crucial for some time to come, as will external support of reconstruction efforts. Hence, the suitability of state-centred approaches to SSR – driven by external support – is certainly questionable.

1. Methodology

Basically, the method applied here is a structured focussed comparison, as outlined in George and Bennett's work on case studies and theory development in the social sciences (George/Bennett 2005:67f). It is *focused* in that it considers a selected aspect of each of the cases, i.e. the security sector. It is *structured* in that the same set of research questions are posed for both cases.

Field research was conducted in both countries extending over a period of three months each. The findings are based on a multi-method approach combining unique empirical data from:

1) a survey poll of 700 respondents in three urban areas in both countries,

2) four in-depth focus group discussions (FGDs) each comprising 6-8 participants and

3) around 30 semi-standardised interviews with elites as well as local and international experts.

Where available, non-conventional literature and other key documents (e.g. internal reports, fact sheets, crime statistics) were gathered to substantiate the, as it were, 'objective' performance of security actors.

The survey poll was intended to give an impression of the perceptions of general and personal security of the urban citizens, as well as revealing citizens' assessment of different actors as regards their role in providing public and personal security. The questionnaire included a number of items on the socioeconomic background of respondents, allowing a more differentiated analysis of the security needs and the perceptions in terms of various criteria, e.g. age, gender, ethnic group, religion and so on.

With the FGDs, we zoomed in on security perceptions and included issues such as security actors involved and the relationships between these. Discussants were chosen according to two criteria: the members of each respective group had to be 1) *homogeneous*, i.e. have a similar background (social status, occupation) and 2) *virtual*, i.e. discussants within each group should not be familiar with each other. Hence our groups comprised 1) teachers and students, 2) heath workers, 3) market women and 4) community or youth leaders. Note here that the selection of the types of groups was solely based on considerations of feasibility.

The composition of the focus groups was intended to reduce the risk that status-related barriers or entrenched roles would unduly influence participants' responses. A local partner was employed to moderate these discussions.

The interviews conducted with elites, such as local government representatives, traditional authorities and key representatives from civil society, enabled a comparison of perceptions 'from below' with those 'from above'. The expert interviews add a more objective view on the security sector in each respective country. For this presentation, I want to focus more on the public perceptions of security, and refer to selected interviews as the need may arise.

2. Selected Empirical Results

The results from the fieldwork will be presented in two parts. Section 1 provides an illustration of how ordinary citizens perceive and define security today, and how these perceptions have changed since the end of the last civil war. Following this brief illustration of the context, section 2 reveals which actors are considered to be providing for both personal and national security in these societies and what modes of interaction exist between various security actors.

2.1 Perceptions of Security

Generally speaking, the majority of respondents from both countries have a favourable perception of the both the general as well as their personal security situation today. Table 1 is based on a question posed to survey poll respondents in both countries and reveals that more than 60% of respondents from Liberia rated the situation as 'okay' or 'very safe'; just over a third felt differently; and 10.5% still thought the country was not safe at all. A related question about personal safety attracted a more positive response: 69.3% of the respondents felt personally secure and only 6.2% not safe at all.

A noteworthy result from the survey is that Liberians have a more favourable perception of their country's general security situation than their neighbours, although Sierra Leone has enjoyed a longer post-conflict phase. Only 47% of Sierra Leonean respondents rated the security situation in their country as 'okay' or 'very safe', compared to more than 60% in Liberia (Table 1). Only by a small margin do most Sierra Leoneans have a negative perception of the overall security situation. Similar results were seen in perceptions of personal security, as the majority of Sierra Leoneans polled personally felt 'very safe' (20.7%) or 'okay' (40.9%). They appear to be more sceptical than Liberians, with 37.8% of respondents saying they feel unsafe as compared to less than a third of Liberian respondents.

Table 1: Perceptions of general and personal safety in urban Liberia and Sierra Leone compared

	Public safety (in %)			Personal safety (in %)	
	Liberia	*Sierra Leone*		*Liberia*	*Sierra Leone*
Very safe	20.3	14.7		25.6	20.7
It's okay	40.1	32.3		43.7	40.9
Fairly unsafe	26.9	37.9		23.5	27.5
Not safe at all	10.5	13.4		6.2	10.3
No answer/ Don't know	2.2	1.7		1.0	0.7

Liberia N = 698; Sierra Leone N=702

Although the same survey could not be conducted in 2003 prior to the signing of the peace accord, the research team tried to grasp the dynamics of security provision before and after the end of the civil wars by asking respondents to compare the current situation with the one before the respective peace agreement. Not surprisingly, the results of the survey revealed a significant shift in security perceptions, both in perceptions of the respective country's security as well as at the level of personal safety (Table 2). However, only 28.4% of Liberian respondents, for example, said their personal safety was 'very much better' than before the end of the last war. This certainly falls short of the expectations that some UN administrators may have about the impact of the UNMIL mission.

Table 2: Perceptions of changes in security, general and personal, since before the end of the civil war in Liberia and Sierra Leone compared

	Public safety (in %)		Personal safety (in %)	
	Liberia	*Sierra Leone*	*Liberia*	*Sierra Leone*
Much better	33.7	31.8	28.4	27.4
Somewhat better	51.3	60	57.7	63.4
No Change	6.3	4.6	5.6	4.4
Worse	4.4	2.1	4.6	2.6
Much worse	2.5	0.4	2.4	1.6
No answer	1.7	1.1	1.3	0.7

Liberia N=698; Sierra Leone N=702

2.2 Perceptions of Security Actors and their Interactions

Before turning to empirical results, let me briefly elaborate on the historical similarities between Liberia and Sierra Leone: In both countries, the post-colonial state never held the monopoly on the use of force before nor after the end of the civil war. Instead, under the direction and supervision of international peacekeeping forces, (transitional) governments were installed. The national security forces clearly lacked the capacity to guarantee law, order and the safety and security of citizens – indeed, in the case of Liberia, they were dissolved altogether, while in Sierra Leone, a radical overhaul of the country's armed forces has taken place.

The empirical results from the fieldwork are a reflection of this state of affairs. The lack of a state monopoly on the use of force has resulted in the increased importance of external and non-state actors in the provision of security, particularly on the community level.

2.2.1 Selected Results from Liberia

Of the several interesting findings that were gained from the fieldwork conducted in Liberia, three results are particularly noteworthy:

1) In Liberia, for instance, it comes as no surprise that when asked whom they considered to be the most important security provider for their personal security, a majority of respondents named the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) as this one actor. Table 3 depicts the results received for this open question[1]. We tested these results with a second question, this time a "closed" one: respondents were asked to rate each listed actor according to the level of importance they had for their security, with UNMIL again receiving the most positive rating. (Table 4)

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[1] The open-ended question from the survey was designed in such a way as to encourage the respondents to name the most important group in each case without being influenced or guided towards any particular answer. If we had asked respondents to choose from a list of specific actors, we may have unwittingly excluded certain actors who in fact play a key role in security from the respondents' perspective. In a second step, multiple-choice options were offered in order to test the data obtained from the open-ended questions. We found very little difference between the two sets of answers.

Table 3: Which group is the most important one for your personal safety?

Actors	Percentage
UNMIL	75,9
Liberia National Police	17,9
Armed Forces of Liberia (incl. Armee)	2
Ex-Combatants	0,1
ECOWAS	0,1
Poro/Sandee	0,1
Vigilante Teams	0,1
Family	0,1
no answer/ don't know	*3,4*

N: 698

Table 4: Perceptions of Security Actors in Urban Liberia (in %)

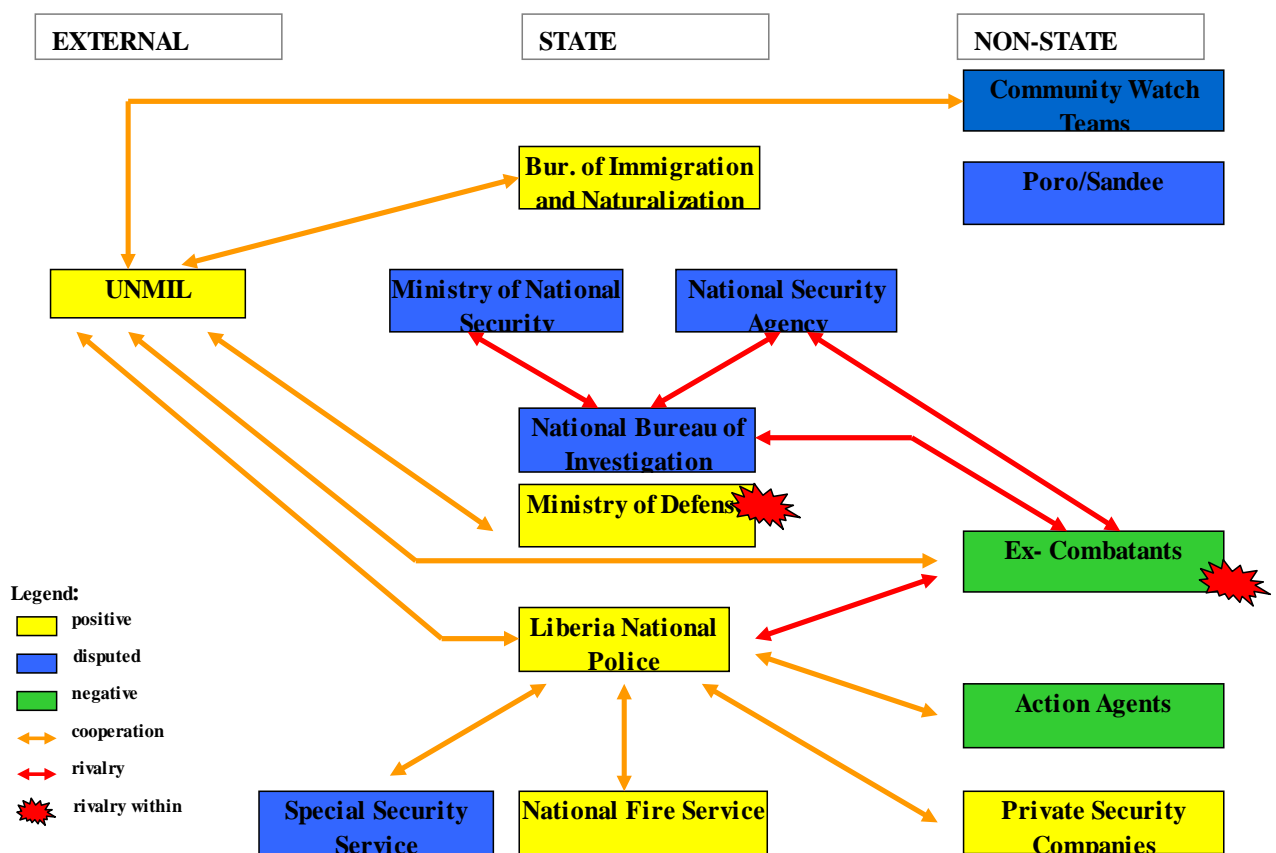| Types of Actors		very/somewhat important to personal security	does not affect my personal security	somewhat/a big threat to personal security
International	UNMIL	94.9	2	1.4
State	Liberian National Police	91.9	4.6	2.9
	Armed Forces of Liberia	64.8	23,8	9.3
Internat. / comm. non-state	Private Security Co.'s	38.3	52,2	3.8
Domestic non-State	Community Watch Teams	56.6	17,9	15.5
	Poro/Secret Societies	15.7	46,4	26.1
	Political Party Militias	7.2	36,3	42,8
	Street Boys	0.4	6,3	78.6
	Ex-Combatants	3.3	6,9	86.8

N = 698 (out of total sample of 700); Percentages of 'Don't know' and 'no answer' responses not shown in table.

Yet, when one considers the fact that, at the time of survey, they were the only viable, armed security actor around, a rating of around 75% of respondents claiming UNMIL to be *the* most important security provider is no longer as positive. Some results from the focus group discussions underline this point. Though three of the four FGDs rated UNMIL as being positive, one group (youth and community leaders) noted them as being neutral/disputed, meaning that they were not always considered as contributing towards security, particularly on the community level, where they showed little presence. In the Liberian capital Monrovia, for example, UNMIL troops essentially patrol the main thoroughfares and show little if any presence in outlying areas of the city. The results for UNMIL may even be more dramatic for the rural areas, where there is hardly any UN presence.

2) A second, and certainly the most remarkable, finding was the relatively favourable perception of the state security actors - the Liberian National Police and the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) - given their current reorganisation and history of violence against citizens in the past. This is reflected in the finding that while some 20% believed the armed forces, for example, had no impact on their security, almost two-thirds regarded the AFL as important for their personal security. This seems to reflect a wish among the respondents for the AFL to play a prominent role rather than a rating of their actual performance.

3) A third result can be illustrated by one of the mapping exercises from the focus group discussions, and that is the importance of community-based informal actors in the security arena. The mapping exercise was one of the key outcomes of all our FGDs. Discussants were asked to identify all relevant security actors, determine their relative significance and depict the interactions among these various actors within the security arena.

The map below reveals that, to ordinary Liberians, a variety of actors – beyond the state and external ones – play a role in providing or threatening security in Liberia today. Two informal actors were considered particularly significant: the community watch teams and the Poro/Sandee. The secret societies – the Poro and Sandee – not only play a negligible role in the urban areas, where they tend to have a negative image; but above all, they are decoupled from all the other actors. Indeed, to some extent they are viewed as a threat. Admittedly, rural dwellers assign them a central role in active conflict resolution, with Poro hierarchies thus remaining significant actors in providing institutional responses to armed violence in some communities (Sawyer 2005). However, the absence of points of contact with other security actors indicates that their involvement in the development of strategies for security sector reform would very likely be problematical. This does not apply, however, to the community watch teams.

Diagram 1 – Level of interaction between various security actors in Liberia today:

| EXTERNAL | STATE | NON-STATE |

Community Watch Teams

Poro/Sandee

Bur. of Immigration and Naturalization

UNMIL   **Ministry of National Security**   **National Security Agency**

National Bureau of Investigation

Ministry of Defense

Ex- Combatants

Legend:
- positive
- disputed
- negative
- cooperation
- rivalry
- rivalry within

Liberia National Police

Action Agents

Special Security Service   **National Fire Service**   **Private Security Companies**

As in the case of Sierra Leone, with the rise in crime and the lack of adequate state-led responses to the problem, community watch teams have become more prevalent in Liberia. The fact that community-based neighbourhood watch teams are (re)emerging, points to similarities with Sierra Leone's experiences after the civil war. However, unlike the Sierra Leonean case, where there was an attempt by the government to formalise police-community cooperation through the Police Partnership Boards, those in charge in Liberia have hitherto limited their strategies to publicly calling for increased community action.

2.2.2 Selected Results from Sierra Leone

In addition to the aforementioned Police Partnership Boards, the data gathered from the fieldwork in Sierra Leone revealed the existence and relevance of several actors in providing or threatening security, with the constellation of security actors being somewhat different than that within Liberia's security arena.

1) First of all, Table 5 shows that, here, the external actors – UNAMSIL, ECOMOG, IMATT[2] - do not play as significant a role in the provision of security. Although some respondents still consider them to be the most important security providers, they are considerably less prominent than their Liberian counterparts.

Table 5: Which group is the most important one for your personal safety?

Actors	Percentage
Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces	37,2
Police	35,8
UNAMSIL	11,7
ECOMOG	3,2
Government	2,2
Former Warring Faction 1: CDF	1,7
Husband/family/individual	1,1
God	1,1
Rebel/Ex-Combatant	1
President	0,9
Youth Groups	0,6
Foreign troops (general)	0,5
Traditional Authorities (Paramount Chief/village authorities)	0,4
Private Security	0,3
SLP Operational Support Division	0,3
IMATT	0,2
Mende	0,2
Former Warring Faction 2: RUF	0,2
Other	*1,4*
None	*0,8*

Valid N: 651 (24= no answer, 27= don't know, total N 702)

Table 6: Perceptions of Security Actors in Urban Sierra Leone (in %)

Types of Actors		very/somewhat important to personal security	does not affect my personal security	somewhat/a big threat to personal security
State	Sierra Leone Police	87.8	3.4	8
	Rep. of SL Armed Forces	81.4	5	10
Internat. / comm. non-state	Private Security Co.'s	54.6	38.6	1.6
Domestic non-State	Secret Societies	26.6	50.9	19.7
	Youth Wings Pol. Parties	30.6	33.5	30.3
	Ghetto Boys	4.4	16.2	76.8
	Bike Riders	39.1	30.1	26.6
	West Side Boys	*2.9*	*17*	*74.6*
	Civil Defence Forces	*20.5*	*20.5*	*54.1*
	Revolutionary United Front	*2.3*	*16.1*	*78*

N = 702 (out of total sample of 700); Percentages of 'Don't know' and 'no answer' responses not shown in table.
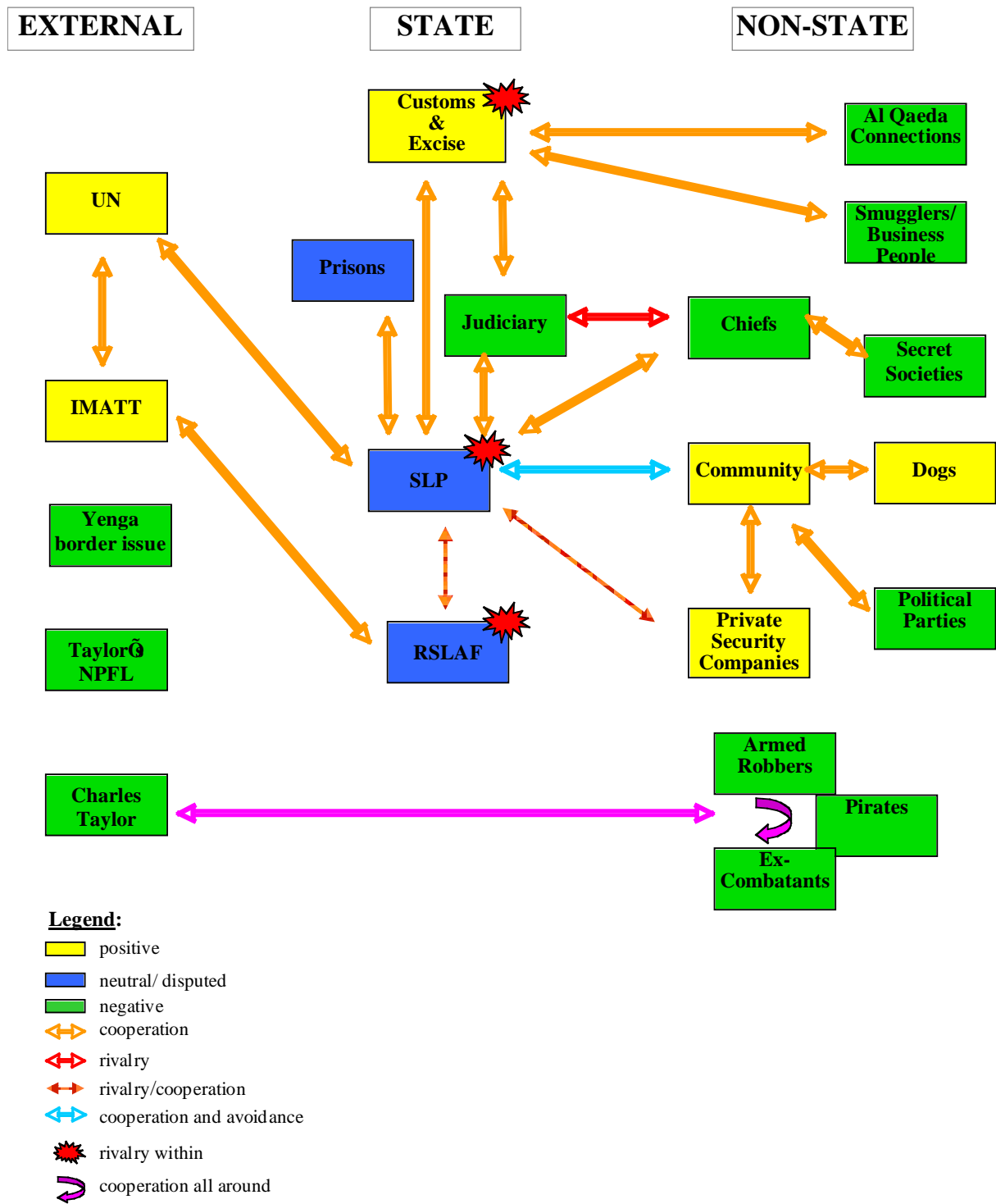
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[2] The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group and the (British-led) International Military Advisory and Training Team, respectively.

2) Tables 5 and 6 also reveal that most respondents consider the state actors – namely the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) – to be *the* most important security providers. As in Liberia, the Sierra Leone government and its security forces scored high in the respondents' expectations for the provision of national security (Table 7). Surprisingly, focus group discussions revealed that the fact that the RSLAF stayed out of sight and were confined to their barracks was what accounted for the discussants' favourable assessment of this actor. This to some extent also explains why more than two-thirds of survey poll respondents considered the RSLAF as very important for their personal security, despite the violent, even criminal, history of the military in the country.

   FGD discussants had a relatively negative opinion of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP). This deviates from the positive ratings given to the SLP in the survey poll, where as many as 87.8% of respondents considered them to be very or somewhat important for their personal security. What explains this disparity? Interviews conducted with local and international experts on security-related issues reveal that, despite their high expectations about concerning the role of national security forces such as the police force, Sierra Leoneans are very aware of the shortcomings of the police forces in particular. As with their Liberian counterparts, the SLP receive external support and training, in this case they received from the Commonwealth Police and the civilian police section of UNAMSIL. However, their ability to perform their duties is hampered by a lack of equipment and insufficient remuneration for their services.

3) Thirdly, and in contrast to Liberia, secret societies appear to play a more significant role in terms of providing security in Sierra Leone than in Liberia. Whereas in the latter case, very few respondents considered secret societies as important security actors (15.7%), almost one-third of Sierra Leonean respondents rated them positively. That most respondents (around 50%) considered them to be insignificant for their personal security is certainly partly attributable to the fact that the survey was conducted in three urban areas of the country. Focus group discussions and interviews confirmed the increased importance of such traditional actors in rural Sierra Leone.

4) Another interesting result is the generally positive rating given to private security companies (PSCs). While a not insignificant total of 38.6% of respondents said that PSCs had no impact on their security, quite a number of respondents considered them to be 'somewhat' or 'very' important for their personal security (54.6%).

5) Finally, the mapping exercises conducted during the focus group discussions produced some striking results and led to the identification of additional actors that were considered relevant in the security sector, most prominently among these were the community watch teams. It also served to confirm findings from the survey poll. By and large, a number of informal, i.e. non-state security actors appear to play a role in Sierra Leone's security arena. (Diagram 2) Also, external actors continue to play a role despite the withdrawal of UNAMSIL troops in December 2005. However, as in the survey poll, they feature less prominently. Whereas external actors were included in the mapping exercises conducted by the teachers/students and the health workers, the market women and the youth/community leaders considered them irrelevant in terms of providing security. As mentioned above, the traditional actors – secret societies and chiefs – not only feature more prominently, but are also integrated into Sierra Leone's security architecture, as shown by the lines of interaction with other security actors.

Diagram 2 ĞLevel of interaction between various security actors in Sierra Leone today:

EXTERNAL **STATE** **NON-STATE**

Customs & Excise

Al Qaeda Connections

UN

Smugglers/ Business People

Prisons

Judiciary

Chiefs

Secret Societies

IMATT

SLP

Community

Dogs

Yenga border issue

Political Parties

TaylorĞ NPFL

RSLAF

Private Security Companies

Charles Taylor

Armed Robbers

Pirates

Ex-Combatants

Legend:

- positive
- neutral/ disputed
- negative
- cooperation
- rivalry
- rivalry/cooperation
- cooperation and avoidance
- rivalry within
- cooperation all around

3. Conclusion

How can these results be interpreted?

First of all, results reveal that both Liberians and Sierra Leoneans ideally prefer state actors to non-state actors. State security actors – both the police and the military forces – received remarkably positive ratings despite obvious shortcomings in terms of equipment and training as well as their general history of violence and oppression. However, their positive assessment is less a reflection of their actual performance, and should be interpreted more as an indication of the high expectations citizens have towards these actors.

Given the lack of a state-produced alternative, citizens resort to privately produced security – and this is a second similarity – mostly by way of communal self-help organisations and, to a lesser extent, from commercial actors. The mixed results received for the various non-state groups point to the need for a further assessment of these actors in order to determine whether they should be incorporated or excluded from security sector reform efforts. Notwithstanding their varying importance of non-state security actors and given the fact that, in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, the national security apparatus is still not fully functional, citizens will turn to such alternative informal actors for security provision for some time to come.