Human security in Liberia

Local perspectives on formal and informal security sectors
Richard Reeve and Jackson Speare

Despite extensive initiatives to reform and enhance the security sector in Liberia since the end of the war, many Liberians still look to UN peacekeepers or informal security structures for their safety. As the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) draws down, how is human security really being delivered?

In 2010 International Alert spoke to communities in Bong, Grand Gedeh and Lofa counties about their perceptions of their own security. Research comprised focus groups and interviews in urban and rural locations across the three counties. In total 187 people were consulted.

Transforming Liberian security
Dismantling and rebuilding Liberia’s security services was a priority when its 14-year civil conflict ended in 2003. All parties to the war, including the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), had been implicated in serious human rights abuses. Outside Monrovia, there had been virtually no civilian police presence since 1990.

Formal security sector reform (SSR) began soon after disarmament and demobilisation of ex-combatants in 2004, with the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the US government leading the reorganisation of the police and military respectively. UNMIL has around 1,300 police and 7,770 armed troops with helicopters and armoured vehicles under a Chapter VII peace enforcement mandate. As well as back-stopping the fledgling Liberian security forces, UNMIL is mandated “continue to develop national security and the rule of law institutions that are fully and independently operational”.

In contrast to many post-conflict countries, SSR in Liberia has not privileged ex-combatants. The emphasis has been on creating small, financially sustainable and professional forces with recruits screened against past rights abuses. Not engaging the huge numbers of unemployed ex-combatants has particularly rankled with the 14,000 former members of the AFL who were laid off in 2005.

This approach has meant that re-establishing security institutions has been slow, with UNMIL filling the vacuum, especially outside Monrovia. At the time of writing, UNMIL still greatly outnumbers, outguns and outspends Liberian forces.

UNMIL re-launched the Liberia National Police (LNP) in 2004 and over the following year dissolved or consolidated many irregular security forces that had been established during the 1990s. Police stations have been constructed or refurbished, and some 4,200 police recruited, vetted, trained and deployed with UNMIL support. Larger posts now include specialist Women and Children Protection Units (WCPUs).

Despite these positive steps, police presence is barely felt in much of rural Liberia, where national police are vastly overshadowed by the presence of UNMIL troops andriot police. The informal security sector is also significant, including vigilantes and the authority of chiefs and elders. Many areas, particularly in the isolated interior or border regions, remain volatile, as shown by high incidence of lynching and arson, or the deadly inter-communal violence that erupted in Voinjama in February 2010.
The 2,100-strong AFL remains a work in progress and is unlikely to be fully and independently operational at least until 2014, the envisaged date of becoming ‘mission capable’ (ready to protect Liberia’s frontiers, for example). Limited numbers of armed Emergency Response Unit (ERU) and Police Support Unit (PSU) personnel reinforced the sparse LNP presence in Liberia’s hinterland counties, notably Grand Gede, in 2011.

**Community perceptions of state security services**

The SSR process has engaged local communities relatively openly, at least with regard to LNP. There were county-level consultations at district and county levels informed the security components of Liberia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy (2008–11) and accompanying County Development Agenda. Since 2009 the LNP has made efforts to adopt community policing models.

Despite this, research by International Alert during 2010 indicated that public perceptions of the police were often negative. In Grand Gede county, police officers were generally viewed as insufficiently motivated to adequately respond to crime, and lacking resources to patrol or be proactive in crime prevention. Women’s groups asserted that police often dropped cases of sexual or domestic violence, especially where the suspect was powerfully connected. Many women stated that they were reluctant to approach WCPUs in cases of domestic violence due to shame or fear of abandonment by their partners.

Many respondents said that it was necessary to pay police to investigate a reported crime – at least for fuel, stationery and telecommunications. Local police deny they ask for payment to investigate crimes but concede they face major logistical problems in operating anywhere outside the main towns, and sometimes find it too dangerous to patrol at night, even within towns.

In Bong and Nimba counties a number of police stations have been burned down by mobs enraged by the LNP’s perceived impotence or implication in crime. Burglary, sexual violence and disputes over land remain serious concerns to ordinary Liberians, along with worries over instability in neighbouring Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire.

In Grand Gede, people’s confidence in the armed forces was strikingly higher than in LNP. Numerous respondents advocated deployment of the new AFL to replace UNMIL in the county, because, for historical and ethnic reasons, the local people generally have closer ties to AFL than LNP. The withdrawal of Ethiopian peacekeepers from Grand Gede during 2009 was a source of concern to several respondents in Toe Town close to the Nimba and Ivorian borders.

**Security sector challenges**

Police lack sufficient equipment, resources and infrastructure, especially outside of Monrovia, where human power, vehicles and equipment are concentrated. A typical county LNP detachment has one or two functional pick-up trucks and a few motorcycles for perhaps 100 officers spread over several thousand square kilometres. LNP commanders acknowledge that large areas without road links are simply beyond their reach. In the three counties surveyed, there were no radios or secure communications, no computers or forensic equipment and rarely any electricity. There is seldom a budget for fuel, stationery or telecommunications. LNP remains effectively confined to towns and highways.

Only the thousand-or-so ERU and PSU are armed and trained to deal with violent public disorder owing to, among other things, concerns over police officers’ past over-readiness to use firearms. The regular LNP often retreats from situations of violent confrontation. The ERU relies on UNMIL helicopters for remote deployment and back up.

Police are also seen as unable to collect, preserve and present evidence sufficient for conviction – one of many weaknesses in the statutory courts system. One magistrate complained that many cases had to be dismissed due to LNP’s inability to prepare correct charge sheets. Without secure prisons, bail and transport, prisoners often escape or abscond. Conviction rates are low and slow. There also can be social stigma attached to pursuing retributive justice instead of resolving disputes through the family or clan. Corruption is a further problem, as some officers solicit investigation fees from those seeking protection.

Despite offering inducements in the form of access to secondary education prior to recruitment, LNP has struggled to reach its target of 20 per cent female officers. As of 2011, 16 per cent of LNP personnel were women. There is a shortage of female candidates with high school diplomas or the willingness to attend accelerated learning programmes.

Human and other essential resources are concentrated in Monrovia and coastal counties and there is an extremely low ratio of police to citizens outside these areas. According to figures compiled for the 2008 County Development Agenda, most coastal counties have a police-to-citizen ratio of 1:900; police in hinterland counties are much more scarce at 1:1700. In Bong and Nimba, two of the most volatile counties, this ratio was less than 1:3300.
In Grand Gedeh the number of police fell by one-third between 2007 and 2010. Lofa similarly registered a sharp drop in police numbers and Bong has also recently lost personnel. LNP commanders blame difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff due to poor pay, deployment to remote locations, competition from private security contractors, the lure of better training and opportunities in Monrovia and hostility from local communities.

Informal security providers: filling the gaps
The informal security sector in Liberia is very mixed in terms of its integrity and effectiveness. But given weaknesses in official structures and their limited reach beyond Monrovia, informal security and justice are an essential reality for many Liberians.

UNMIL deploys civilian police, formed police units (FPUs) for riot control, and armed troops. But UNMIL’s strength has been reduced by more than 40 per cent since 2007 and many units have been withdrawn or merged as the gradual shift to national security provision has progressed. The remainder are steadily being drawn down following elections in late 2011. UNMIL has enforced public order effectively; but it is remote from many Liberians, and responds to requests from the Liberian authorities rather than from communities.

Informal security providers have filled the gaps: traditional leaders, civilians deputised by chiefs or elders, community security groups and vigilante night patrols in urban areas. These can hold a considerable degree of local support. But they have no formal mandate, accountability is weak, their levels of legitimacy are mixed and their relationship with the police and courts can be antagonistic.

In Gbarnga and elsewhere, patrols are conducted by unions of motorcycle taxi riders, many of them former combatants who felt vulnerable to violence and interference by the police and have taken the initiative to provide security for themselves and their communities. Not everyone feels safer as a result but there does appear to be a significant level of support for the bikers among ordinary people. Business-protection groups also deliver informal security. Trading unions such as the Liberian Marketing Association take it upon themselves to regulate market areas.

Women’s groups have their own informal network of white-shirted ‘women peacekeepers’ who revisit the tactics of the wartime women’s peace movement and use shame to persuade young men to disengage from tense or violent confrontations. The Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) mobilises its members to confront and arrest alleged perpetrators of domestic or sexual abuse and deliver them to the LNP for prosecution.

Chiefs have significant influence over informal security mechanisms, though their authority over youth has waned since the war. Secret societies, usually known in north-west Liberia as Poro (for men) or Sande (for women), retain much authority in rural areas. They paradoxically represent both a force for social order and a potential impediment to the ability of the state to protect citizens and investigate crimes, having co-existed in a sometimes-uneasy partnership with ‘modern’ Liberian state security and justice institutions since their creation in the nineteenth century. LNP officers report the invocation of sacred forest reserves or the appearance of ‘bush devils’ (masked oracles) to deter police presence in certain areas and to protect customary investigations or punishments.

Regulating the informal security sector
There have been some efforts by LNP and the UN to reach out to community watch groups in order to make them aware of key rights and laws, provide basic equipment such as torches and high visibility clothing, and encourage them to liaise with community policing initiatives. Community police have engaged trade union security groups to deter them from enforcing their own justice.

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In Gbarnga, the mayor is involved in community policing in an effort to discourage mob justice (lynchings) and has divided the city into zones with elected representatives who report to her office. Complainants have a choice of dispute-resolution mechanisms, including ‘city corporation police’ (civilian municipal employees), LNP or traditional chiefs.

There has been tension between informal security structures and formal authorities over responsibilities and rights of adjudication. There is also a risk of ‘forum shopping’ by plaintiffs, with richer citizens favouring the formal circuit courts where entry costs may be prohibitive for poorer people.

The formal security sector will not be able to assume fully and responsibly the security functions exercised by UNMIL in the near future. A range of informal actors will continue to service the demand for security at the community level. With local security actors set to become more disparate...
and subject to varied or weak forms of official oversight, community oversight and an active civil society will be increasingly important in holding all security actors to account.

**People-centred security**

Considerable progress has been made since 2004 in reforming Liberia’s security sector and there have been valuable initiatives to include and consult local people. But reform is slow and still has a long way to go, while LNP capacities have declined in key areas even as the drawdown of UNMIL transfers greater responsibilities to Liberian institutions.

Overall, interviewees perceived that security had improved markedly since the end of the war and return from exile or camps, exemplified by the very low incidence of re-displacement. However they felt this owed less to security provision by LNP and more to UNMIL’s presence or regime change in Monrovia and Guinea. Some respondents felt violence had continued in forms that were inaccessible to the international security presence, for example within the family, and was disproportionately affecting girls or women. Regardless of their capacity to provide security and justice, the Liberian security forces are at least no longer widely seen as perpetrators of violence.

Targeted police reforms are required to improve security provision nationwide, with an emphasis on conflict-affected rural areas, where police presence is most needed and least evident. Conditions for police need to be improved – including better pay, accommodation, training opportunities and equipment – to promote recruitment, retention, standards and effectiveness. Deployment to hinterland counties could be incentivised to close the personnel gap. Recruiting local people in these areas could boost retention and build local trust. Building on progress to date, more attention should be paid to recruiting women police officers.

More broadly, investing in the transport infrastructure for hinterland counties by (re)building all-weather highways that link settlements to other towns and counties would improve mobility for more effective security provision.

Given the widespread negative perceptions of police in rural areas, initiatives to build community relations are also needed. Communication between local communities, police and government on security issues could be promoted through local dialogue forums and community radio stations using vernacular languages. Training and sensitising police, magistrates, justices of the peace, chiefs and local medical professionals on the protection of vulnerable girls and women is a priority.

Even expedited police reforms will take time to meet the population’s human security needs. Policymakers need to engage pragmatically with the country’s spectrum of informal security actors. The government and its donor partners should develop programmes with communities and civil society that work with informal security actors, to regulate their conduct, increase their accountability to local people, and – where appropriate – boost their capacity. Ongoing dialogue between communities and formal and informal security providers, and local and national government and donors, is crucial.

Initiatives like the Mayor of Gbarnga’s community policing projects show how informal and formal security structures can collaborate and complement each other. Guaranteeing the security of Liberian citizens who most need it means working with and supporting communities and civil society to engage both official and unofficial security actors and prioritise their accountability to the people whose welfare they purport to protect. Liberian and international civil society can facilitate dialogue among these disparate actors.

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