

DISCUSSION PAPER 36

## Does One Size Fit All?

The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission Revisited

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## 1. Introduction

Societies emerging from protracted conflict and violence face numerous challenges at the individual, community and national levels. Depending on what role they actually played during hostilities, and whether their territory or communities were directly affected, the effects of prolonged exposure to violence could vary from individual to individual and from one community to the other. This is particularly so for many of the post Cold War conflicts and civil wars that erupted in Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Côte d'Ivoire to mention but a few. Accordingly, the needs and coping strategies of those who participated actively in the civil wars, government soldiers, rebel militias, civil defence groups, the internally displaced, refugees, amputees, rape victims; and those that experienced other forms of violence, are not necessarily the same. For instance, the experiences of those who lost property are not the same as those who lost loved ones and "bread winners". Not unexpectedly, a variety of strategies have been suggested for "healing" the wounds of the past and coping with the future, thereby facilitating national reconciliation and peace building in post conflict societies. One of these approaches is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, TRC, believed to provide a platform for victims and perpetrators alike, to have a voice that would enable them to come to terms with the horrifying past.<sup>1</sup>

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions as strategies for coming to terms with the past in Africa came into prominence following the example of South Africa after the end of apartheid and the return to majority rule in 1994. In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, where hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives in a systemic pogrom, the Rwandan authorities put in place local mechanisms, the *Gacaca* Courts, to establish the truth about what happened to promote national reconciliation in general. And although it is yet to be established, the Accra Agreement that led to the end of the second civil war in Liberia in 2003, made provision for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.<sup>2</sup> From such a perspective it is tempting to argue that there has emerged what we can call a "one size fits all" syndrome, that is, if the TRC "worked" for South Africa, a point that is the subject of intense debate within and outside South Africa itself, then it is "good" for Sierra Leone, Liberia or, for that

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1. See Ilan Lax, "Methodologies for Finding the Truth" [www.sierraleone.org.trcbook-ilanlax.html](http://www.sierraleone.org.trcbook-ilanlax.html). Lax was a one time member of the South African TRC. For more on the phenomenon of TRCs and post conflict reconciliation, see also Mattarollo (2002). Mattarollo was Chief, Human Rights Section, UNAMSIL in Freetown. See also Evaldsson (2005), Borer (2001), and Hartwell (2000). For a general survey on the impact of the end of the Cold War on Africa, see Akinrinade and Sesay (1998).

2. In Rwanda, local methods are being used to complement the UN sponsored Tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania, and they are called *Gacaca* Courts. See for instance, National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Rwanda Opinion Survey on "Participation in *Gacaca* and National Reconciliation", January 2003. I would not be surprised if a TRC were eventually to be set up in DRC at the end of the war in that country. A Special Court has been mooted already.

matter, any other African society that is emerging from protracted violent conflict. It is to be noted, however, that several countries outside Africa had earlier set up truth commissions for similar purposes: Cuba, Chile, Argentina, Haiti, among others.<sup>1</sup>

The difficulties inherent in such a position are obvious. First, the backgrounds, contexts, trajectories as well as consequences of conflict do vary from one African country to another. Second, while atrocities are committed during conflict and civil wars, their specific nature also tends to differ. In the case of Sierra Leone, there was large-scale amputation involving one or both limbs, rape, kidnappings and other forms of impunity that were quite unprecedented in the history of civil war not just in West Africa, but also in other parts of the world. It was apparent, therefore, that the TRC was intended to address impunity and provide relief to both victims and perpetrators in Sierra Leone, among other things.

## 2. Objectives of the study

The main purpose of this study is to draw attention to the TRC phenomenon in Sierra Leone, to stimulate discussion on the diverse questions surrounding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone, especially its impacts on the post conflict situation in the country. It seeks to identify the contribution of the TRC to post war peace building and reconciliation processes in Sierra Leone; for example, if an orthodox TRC was the most appropriate exercise and the lessons that could be learned from the experience. Another goal of the project is to document the multiple and conflicting perceptions among various groups in the country of the TRC processes, and how all these perceptions were reflected in the Commission's work and recommendations. It is important, for instance, to find out if Sierra Leoneans believed less expensive but more locally rooted methods of promoting reconciliation between perpetrators and victims, instead of the orthodox TRC, would have worked better. Finally, it is expected that the study will form the basis for future empirically grounded research and policy analysis, more extensive research and perhaps even collaboration, between the author and those working on the various innovative but

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1. There is, as expected, a very rich literature on the South African Truth Commission and processes, although there is no general agreement on what the impact of the process has been on post conflict reconciliation in that country. Interestingly, BBC World screened a programme on conflict resolution titled *The Peace Maker* and a section of that programme was devoted to the reconciliation in Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. In one of the clips, two men, a victim and perpetrator, an IRA operative, confronted each other in the presence of Desmond Tutu. He asked the victim, apparently a policeman who was shot if he was willing to forgive the perpetrator, and he said yes. He was also happy to know the identity of the perpetrator. The perpetrator explained the circumstances at the time saying that he had to do what he did, but expressed regret over the incident and in the end, both men shook hands and embraced each other in symbolic reconciliation. Apart from those already cited, see also Vora and Vora (2004), Pedain (2004) and Avruch and Vejarano (2002).

home-grown mechanisms for promoting reconciliation in post war Sierra Leone and elsewhere.

Being a pilot study, the study does not in any way pretend to treat in great detail the intricate range of problems and arguments in the literature, especially with regard to the Sierra Leonean experience.

### 3. Scope of the study

The study was restricted to Freetown, the capital. This is important as the capital is more than in many countries in Africa, both the political and socio-economic nerve centre of the country. Besides, the war also made it a microcosm of the country since the conflict drove hundreds of thousands of people to seek refuge in the capital which was, until 1999, a safe haven. Significantly, many of the displaced citizens have not returned to their homes even after the end of the war, giving the city an ethnic mix that is rich enough for the study. Finally, Freetown experienced unprecedented destruction following its invasion by the RUF and its allies in January 1999. I had extensive interactions with many of the respondents in the field survey interviews, as well as other city dwellers who did not participate in the study. As expected, most of the respondents who participated in the survey reported that they suffered various forms of personal loss in the course of the war, including the death of loved ones. They also knew victims of other forms of arbitrary violence such as rape, crude amputations and wanton destruction of property, by the RUF and its allies, government forces and their collaborators, especially the Kamajors. Finally, participants in the study also claimed to know some of the perpetrators. In that regard, they were also victims of the war, a point emphasized by the Chairman of the TRC, Joseph Humper:

...all over the country, the scars of the conflict are refusing to heal...The question many people are asking is, why? Why were we visited with the conflict? Why were civilians the target of attack rather than opposing armed forces...? Why were our women and children made objects of pleasure and abuse in the course of the war? Why were our buildings and other infrastructure deliberately and systematically targeted...? There is no family, village, community, chiefdom or district that has not been affected by the conflict one way or the other. To that extent, we are all victims of the conflict.<sup>1</sup>

From the above point of view, restricting the study to the capital, Freetown, has its efficacy.

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1. Address by Rt. Rev. Dr. Joseph Humper, Chairman, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the Commission on Friday, 5th July 2002. Accessible at [www.sierra-leone.org/josephhumper070502.html](http://www.sierra-leone.org/josephhumper070502.html).

## 4. Methodology

The study relied on two broad sources of data: primary and secondary. For primary sources, field interviews were held in Freetown, the Sierra Leonean capital, over a period of six weeks in January and February 2006. Targets of the interviews were drawn from a broad spectrum of society: elites/political leaders, religious and traditional leaders, and members of the public, including ordinary men, women and youths, with the aim of eliciting their opinions on the effectiveness of the TRC in promoting national reconciliation and peace in the country. The respondents were randomly selected, and open-ended interview guides were used. In addition to the interview surveys a total of six focus group discussions were also held with select members of the four categories identified above.

For secondary data, extensive library work was done between April and June 2005 at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, University of Uppsala, Sweden, during the author's residency as Claude Ake Visiting Professor. The period provided me with enviable access to a rich collection of books, journals, and Internet sources. The data obtained in Sweden were complemented with further in-depth library research in Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Finally, unpublished manuscripts and public lectures I delivered in and outside Nigeria between 2003 and 2006 provided additional background material for the study. The next section examines the background causes of the civil war and its aftermath.

## 5. Civil war and paradise lost

### 5.1 Prelude to civil war

Sierra Leone's contemporary history, political system, problems, conflicts and crises can best be understood first of all, by grasping its complex historical experiences and circumstances, especially the forces, interests and contradictions which that history has generated, and also by closely examining the country's inevitable location and roles in the global political economy. It can be argued that Sierra Leone's story, like that of most other countries in Africa, is one of lost opportunities – a squandering of wealth, a “paradise lost”, and the descent from the proverbial “grace to grass”. That is rather unfortunate because unlike many countries in Africa, Sierra Leone had a good head start even under colonial rule, which could have laid the basic foundation for economic development and prosperity as well as a thriving democracy. The country boasts the oldest university in West Africa, Fourah Bay College, now almost two hundred years old. The settlers and free slaves from Britain and the New World, the Creoles, had a good lead not only over the indigenous people in the country but also those in other British colonies in West Africa at that time. For a long time, they provided the cream of the civil service in the colonial territories of the Gambia, Gold Coast (Ghana) and Nigeria. Again the Creoles provided almost

exclusively, and for many years, personnel for professions such as law, medicine, teaching and the clergy. The Creoles also supplied the early black missionaries on the West African coast as well as some of the early nationalists: the first Bishop of West Africa, Samuel Ajayi Crowder, had his roots in Sierra Leone, as did Herbert Macaulay and Wallace Johnson.<sup>1</sup>

At independence, and like other former British colonies, Sierra Leone inherited a Westminster style of government with modifications to accommodate the peculiarities of local conditions. And in 1967, the country provided the first case in post independence Africa of an opposition political party successfully unseating the ruling Sierra Leone Peoples Party, SLPP, at the polls; although it took over a year before the victorious party, the All Peoples' Congress, could take over political power.<sup>2</sup> It is rather ironical therefore, that the APC which enjoyed a relatively free and level political playing field while in opposition should at the same time instigate the destruction of all democratic tenets, practices and institutions during its long years in power. The road to dictatorship started with the political leadership at the highest level: Siaka Stevens, who had refused to be associated with any particular tribe or ethnic group while in opposition. However, soon after gaining political power, he tried directly and indirectly to advance the interests of the Limba ethnic group, a small group that was hitherto unknown for its political ambitions, and bring them into the limelight of national politics and culture. Soon, Limba became one of the national languages, and with that, the rendition of national news in Limba became mandatory. The president and the APC tried spiritedly to advance Limba interests in other spheres such as employment, the army, scholarships, etc. To effectively pursue the politics of exclusion and ethnicity, the elites formed the Ekute club, made up of senior political office holders, civil servants, traditional rulers and educated Limbas from all walks of life who assiduously peddled and executed the Limba agenda in the country to the indignation and frustration of the Mende and Temne ethnic groups who constituted more than half of the country's population, and who once dominated post independence politics and the political scene in the country.

Stevens and the APC also assaulted the judiciary, which became virtually subservient to the presidency, especially on sensitive political issues. For instance, the Chief Justice and Attorney General held office at the pleasure of the president. Other judges could face premature retirement if they became uncontrollable and too independent. The press was not spared either. By the early 1980s, it had been successfully gagged as all independent newspapers were forced out of business by draconian press laws.<sup>3</sup> Although he cultivated a political reputation through and received support from the Trade Union Congress as former General Secretary of the

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1. For more on this, see Sesay (1978) and Sesay (1999a).

2. For an excellent treatment of Siaka Stevens' political u-turn, see David Luke (1984) and Sesay (1999b).

3. For more on this phenomenon, see Sesay (1999a).

Miners' Union, Stevens also appreciated the power of labour and soon emasculated it. Collective bargaining became impossible while strikes were to all intents and purposes banned.<sup>1</sup> The APC emasculated civil society forces and groups, paying particular attention to students who were in the vanguard of the opposition movement that vehemently resisted authoritarian rule from 1967.

The last straw, however, was the creation of a one party state in Sierra Leone in 1978.<sup>2</sup> For several years before then, the country had operated as a de facto one party state, following the disappearance of the opposition parties in Parliament and the appointment of the armed forces commander as member of Parliament and minister of state in the Ministry of Defence. Thereafter, Stevens and his cronies targeted the commanding heights of the economy, the diamond industry, and the Central Bank of Sierra Leone, turning them to conduits for siphoning off scarce foreign exchange. Indeed, the popular saying, commonly used even by the president, is: "wu si then tie cow na dey e go eat", which literally translates as, "a cow grazes where it is tied". Eddie Momoh, ace journalist, poignantly captured this phenomenon thus:

For the most part, it would seem that Stevens was convinced that whosoever controlled the state resources...could build personal power. He dished out state resources as political patronage. He doled out huge sums of money... "as if money grew on trees". He wanted money even when he had enough.<sup>3</sup>

Another keen observer of the political scene then, had this to say:

...allocating the foreign exchange proceeds became the subject for presidential approval. It is a unique situation, as the central bank was completely rendered redundant by the arrangement, which also vested a lot of patronage in Stevens.<sup>4</sup>

Quite as expected, the social sector, education, health, water supply, roads, transport etc, broke down completely under the weight of the corrupt and prebendal system. Widespread unemployment left many youths without means of livelihood. Expectedly, they felt excluded, marginalized and angry towards a system that had virtually reduced them to vagabonds and beggars in their own country. This situation accounted for what some scholars have put forward as the "greed and grievance" thesis in explaining the events in Sierra Leone that led to the war in 1991.<sup>5</sup>

The exit of Stevens and his replacement by a hand picked successor and former Commander of the Armed Forces of Sierra Leone, Major-General Joseph Momoh in 1985, did not ease the pains of daily survival for the majority of the popula-

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1. See Luke (1984).

2. For the background to the conflict, see Abdullah (1998), Richards (1996) and Bangura (1997).

3. Eddie Momoh quoted in *West Africa*, London, December 2, 1988, p. 2513.

4. J.D. Fearon, "International Financial Institutions and Economic Reform Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa", in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 26(1), 1988, p. 131.

5. See Collier, and Hoeffler (2004) and Paul Collier (2000); also Richards (1996) and Bangura (1997).

tion, and most especially the idle youth. The politics of Momoh's succession has been treated exhaustively elsewhere (Sesay 1999a). Suffice it to say that his tenure capped the misfortunes of the country and its already emasculated and marginalized citizenry. Although the new president had called for a "New Order" soon after he assumed office, he lacked the legitimacy, vision and political will to make a clean break with the past. Corruption, economic mismanagement, political ineptitude, favoritism and sycophancy assumed such a magnitude that the country was more or less turned into the proverbial banana republic. The economy collapsed totally as did social infrastructure like health, education, transport etc. As government failed to raise revenue even from the main source, diamonds, it became highly dependent on external financial support from traditional allies like Britain, and international agencies such as the UN, for its budgetary needs. Of course, even much of what was provided by the donor community was equally misappropriated by those in government and their cronies. In other words, under the administration of Joseph Momoh, the burden as well as survival instinct of the ordinary Sierra Leonean became overstretched.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Momoh's mortal sin was his neglect of the civil war which started in March 1991 with sporadic rebel attacks in the south eastern parts of the country by the Revolutionary United Front, RUF, led by a disgraced army corporal Foday Sankoh, with help from Charles Taylor across the border in Liberia.

Although ostensibly a protest against the shabby way Momoh was prosecuting the rebel war, the coup by Captain Valentine Strasser did not bring the war to an end. In fact, with time, Strasser too became politically ambitious and was unwilling to hand over power to civilians, contrary to an earlier promise.<sup>2</sup> A palace coup led by his second in command, Steven Maada Bio, ousted him in 1996. Bio promised to return the country to civil rule as soon as possible and subsequently organized elections three months later, in March 1996, which brought to power Tejan Kabbah, a former bureaucrat with the UN system, who pledged to bring the civil war to an end.

## 5.2. Civil war, and good-bye to innocence

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s signalled the end of one of the most important eras in history, the Cold War, a

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1. The author was confronted with this reality while on holiday in Sierra Leone in 1989. A close relation needed medical attention and I took her to Connaught Hospital, Freetown, then the main hospital in the country. There were no facilities available. I had to bring along pillow cases, bed covers, and a bucket to fetch water. The screens dividing beds had all disappeared so there was no privacy for patients. Moreover, I not only purchased the drugs outside the hospital of course, but I had to pay a doctor and a nurse working in the hospital to administer the drugs and make sure that the patient took them as and when necessary, according to the doctor's prescription. While visiting my relative, a young lady of 21 suffering from tetanus was brought in half naked, and deposited on the bed next to that of my patient. Without relations to foot the medical bills, she had no attention and died less than twelve hours later. Such was the dilapidated state of the health sector and facilities in the country.

2. For details, see Sesay (1998).

euphemism for the most intense ideological rivalry between the east and west, and backed by the world's greatest military alliance systems that were also armed to the teeth. Ironically, while the end of the Cold War led to the withdrawal of the great powers from Africa, it also triggered the collapse of central authorities in many African states that were once bankrolled and "protected" by Washington and Moscow. The sub-region that was perhaps the most affected was West Africa, which experienced concurrent bloody civil wars in Liberia, 1989–1997, and then 2000–2003, and Sierra Leone, 1991 to 2000.

It is now widely acknowledged that the war in Sierra Leone was anything else but civil. The "uncivil war" as Charles Ukeje, prefers to call it<sup>1</sup> was the most savage in the history of postcolonial West Africa as the sub-region became one of the most volatile in Africa. It has been estimated that over 10,000 child soldiers were involved in the war. The Sierra Leone civil war generated over 400,000 refugees, most of whom lived in very harsh and inhuman conditions in neighbouring countries.<sup>2</sup> The "network" wars in Sierra Leone and neighbouring Liberia destabilized the sub-region for over a decade spilling over to Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau and Guinea Conakry.

The Revolutionary United Front, RUF, was particularly notorious for its crude and indiscriminate amputation of limbs, a phenomenon that was to give different meanings to popular English phrases such as "short sleeve" and "long sleeve". In the idiom of the RUF, "short sleeve" meant crude amputation of either or both hands from the elbow, while "long sleeve" was cutting off the hand from the wrist. There was

...widespread and systematic sexual violence against women and girls including individual and gang rape, sexual assault with objects such as firewood, umbrellas and sticks, and sexual slavery (Human Rights Watch, [www.hrw.org/background/af-rica/sl.bck0226.htm](http://www.hrw.org/background/af-rica/sl.bck0226.htm)).

And according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report,

As the conflict exploded into appalling brutality against civilians, the world recoiled in horror at the tactics used by the RUF, its allies and opponents. Reports emerged of indiscriminate amputations, abductions of women and children, recruitment of children as combatants, rape, sexual slavery, cannibalism, gratuitous killings and wanton destruction of villages and towns. This was a war measured not so much in battles and confrontations between combatants as in attacks upon civilian populations. Its awesome climax was the destruction of much of Freetown [the capital] in

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1. This phrase was first used by Charles Ukeje in his chapter "State Disintegration and Civil War in Liberia" in Sesay (2003).

2. For more on this see Tarik Kafala, BBC on line, 31/7/2003, and Steven R. Ratner, "War crimes, categories of", on [www.crimesofwar.org/thebook/civilwar.html](http://www.crimesofwar.org/thebook/civilwar.html), 1 and A.P.V. Rogers, "Civil War", on [www.crimesofwar.org/thebook/civilwar.html](http://www.crimesofwar.org/thebook/civilwar.html)

January 1999. (Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume 2, Chapter 1: Executive Summary, Freetown: TRC, 1–2)

Various organizations and individuals around the world have extensively documented these atrocities and war crimes which formed the basis for the Special Court that was set up in the country to try those who bore “the greatest responsibility for the atrocities” committed during the war.<sup>1</sup>

The brutality and “uncivil” character of the war also caught the attention and imagination of the international community and in particular, the sub-regional economic grouping, the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, which tried valiantly to bring it to an end.<sup>2</sup> The July 1999 Lomé Agreement between the Government of Sierra Leone and the RUF provided for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bring about national reconciliation especially between perpetrators of atrocities and victims of the war. The next section examines some of the literature on TRCs as post conflict reconciliation and peace building mechanisms.

## 6. TRCs and post conflict reconciliation: A synoptic review of the literature

The literature on Truth Commissions is still nascent, much of it reflecting the fact that there is no universal agreement on what constitutes “truth” and “reconciliation”<sup>3</sup> not least in post conflict contexts. What is presented in this essay, therefore, does not pretend to be exhaustive. Rather, it is meant to capture and highlight some of the key issues in post conflict reconciliation in general, and in particular, as they relate to the Sierra Leonean experience since 2002.

According to Ilan Lax, one time member of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “reconciliation is a journey not an event. What Truth Commissions seem to do is help nations set out on the journey from a proper footing.”(Lax 2001). In other words, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions like that in South Africa, and in Sierra Leone, do not provide “quick fixes” to the legacies of punitive actions or to the challenges of reconciliation in post conflict societies. Rather, they act as “first aid” kits, “guides” or “signposts” on the long road to national settlement and post conflict peace building. It is assumed that the transition from war to peace and national reconciliation will be long and tortuous, but

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1. See Lomé Agreement for details on this.

2. The literature on the peace keeping and conflict management operations of the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, is rich. See the following for instance, Vogt (1992), Adebajo (2002), Sesay (1999b, 2000, 2002 and 2002). A diverse collection of literature on ECO-MOG can also be found on the website of the Washington, D.C. International Peace Academy, IPA.

3. For interesting insights into these contentious issues, see among others, Shaw (2005), Dougherty (2004), Sida (2003), *Truth and Reconciliation in Sierra Leone*, UNAMSIL (2002) – see in particular the preface by Ambassador Oluyemi Adeniji, IDEA (2004,) Pham, Weinstein and Longman (2004), Wustenberg,(2004), Rotberg and Thompson (2000). For an Australian perspective on truth and reconciliation, see [www.racismnoway.com.au](http://www.racismnoway.com.au)

necessary and expedient if stability and sustainable long-term peace are to be accomplished. This logic, no doubt, informed some of the expectations of the TRC in Sierra Leone; including those of President Tejan Kabbah and his ministers at its inauguration in 2002. According to the Supplement to the Sierra Leone Gazette, the Commission was mandated:

to create an impartial historical record of violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law related to the armed conflict in Sierra Leone from the beginning of the conflict in 1991 to the signing of the Lome Peace Agreement; to address impunity, to respond to the needs of the victims, to promote healing and reconciliation and to prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered.

And to the Attorney General, the Commission would

investigate and report on the causes, nature and extent of the violations and abuses...to work to restore the human dignity of victims and promote reconciliation by providing an opportunity for victims to give an account of the violations and abuses suffered and for the perpetrators to relate their experiences, and creating a climate which fosters constructive interchange between victims and perpetrators, giving special attention to the subject of sexual abuses and to the experiences of children within the armed conflict...

The TRC would expose atrocities committed during the war and

the suffering of the victims is to be acknowledged and, in deserving cases, reparations are to be made to the victims. ...the main purpose of the TRC is to heal the wounds of the nation. Thus, far from being faultfinding and punitive, it is to serve as the most legitimate and credible forum for victims to reclaim their human worth, and a channel for the perpetrators of atrocities to expiate their guilt and chasten their conscience. The process is likened to a national catharsis, involving truth telling, respectful listening and above all, compensation for victims in deserving cases...<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the Report of the Commission was to contain

... recommendation concerning the reforms and other measures, whether legal, political, administrative or otherwise needed to achieve the object of the commission, namely the object of providing impartial historical record, preventing the repetition of the violations or abuses suffered, addressing the impunity, responding to the needs of the victims and promoting healing and reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Act, Supplement to the Sierra Leone Gazette, Vol. CXXXI, No. 9, Freetown, February 10, 2000, p .4).

Official statements from highly placed political figures in the country during and after the inauguration clearly indicate that the Sierra Leone TRC was expected to

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1. "Addressing Impunity Using Diverse Approaches: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Special Court", Chapter III, in *Truth and Reconciliation in Sierra Leone*, Freetown: UNAMSIL, 2001.

contribute significantly to post conflict peace building efforts. In fact, it is not a hyperbole to say that in some respects, the truth commission was anticipated to perform almost “magical” functions; heal the wounds inflicted on individuals, families, communities and the nation during the rebel war. The TRC was also to provide succour to the victims and enable the perpetrators not only to purge their minds and heave a sigh of relief, but also to obtain forgiveness for their transgression, thereby paving the way for their reintegration into the society.

Unfortunately, TRC documents and official comments on what the truth commission processes were expected to achieve in Sierra Leone, did not say at what point reconciliation should commence – is it immediately after the cessation of hostilities when the wounds are still fresh or after a time-lag when the wounds have healed enough? These themes were the focus of the IDEA (2005) report on “Reconciliation Lessons Learned from United Nations Peacekeeping Missions: Case Studies from Sierra Leone and Timor L’Este”. By way of a preface to the report, Mark Salter noted the need to understand the comparative experiences of, and lessons from, the United Nations involvements in advancing transitional justice and reconciliation, especially in regard of the role of external actors in supporting and promoting national and local processes of reconciliation. A central theme in this regard, is the primacy of local agency and capacity – in terms of ownership, design and management – in the delivery of acceptable and sustainable reconciliation, leaving the international community with the responsibility for providing support and assistance. There is also the need to situate reconciliation to suit a country’s historical and cotemporary experiences and situations, instead of imposing general “one-size-fits-all” frameworks that are likely to woefully fail in the end. It is therefore important to bear in mind, according to Salter, that the need for reconciliation is not a sufficient condition for post-war peace-building without also vigorously pursuing justice. His conclusions, then, include the following: (1) the need to create a synergy between government institutions, local non-governmental organizations and other groups on the ground, as well the international community, in designing and implementing reconciliation processes; and (2) the need to tackle the problem of sustainability and the potential conflict enhancing impacts of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions - including paying attention to problems associated with a country’s attempt to address the material and social legacies of protracted violent conflicts and civil wars.

Björn Petersson (2005:8–9) proposed understanding, first, the character of recent violent internal conflicts before designing reconciliation packages given the multiple sources of different conflicts in different countries. In the main, according to him, sustainable reconciliation should be a “context-specific, home-grown and long-term” process “made up of a number of ingredients, including “truth”, “justice” and reparations to victims”. In the case of Sierra Leone, “the public discourse is more about individual forgiveness than about justice and reparations”; two critical ingredients underlying the success of such exercises. Reviewing the Sierra Leone

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SLTRC), Petterson identified several of its shortcomings. For one, although it had a mandate “to respond to the needs of the victims”, it could not cope with the deluge of requests for material benefits (p. 10). In addition, the Commission was too “process-oriented”, focusing as it were, on public truth-telling that was expected to lead to forgiveness, while overlooking the need to prioritize the issues of reparations as an important step towards true reconciliation. Moreover the Commission focused too much on the pursuit of individual and community reconciliation communicated in an imposed fashion, and failed to effectively mobilize the public. Further shortcomings were the lack of partnership between the Commission and key local institutions, time and resource constraints as well as its excessive workload, the reluctance of people in high places to testify at public hearings, and the less than enthusiastic role of the Government of Sierra Leone, to mention a few.

Another important point has to do with the role of the international community. According to Petterson, this could be very crucial in terms of measuring the success or otherwise of truth and reconciliation commissions. This, according to him, is particularly so as extreme care must be taken if such international support is not to fall short of popular expectations, or end up as “remote control”, a situation whereby international support is reduced to “visiting periodically and sending trouble-shooters when necessary” (2005:19). In the latter case, the capacity of the international community to fully “grasp the on-going dynamics in and around the Commission and to effectively assess the current and future needs in the area of reconciliation, is significantly eroded”. Finally, Petterson was very critical about the effectiveness of government in addressing the many causes of the Sierra Leone civil war, because “[Reconciliation] is not only an inter-personal and inter-communal process but also linked to government policies and structural macro-level reforms to address the original causes of the conflict” (2005:23). This, in part, is where the much-suggested political will on the part of President Tejan Kabbah’s government becomes relevant and immediate.

Like Sierra Leone, according to Chris Dolan (2005), East Timor is another small country – coming out of long years of competing European colonial claims between Portugal and Holland, and later, Indonesian rule – at the centre of massive international attention and intervention. He outlined the sequence of occupations and transitional periods leading to the considerable legacy of wounds and divisions in contemporary East Timor; reviewed the role of key actors involved in addressing the myriad post-conflict challenges, including their respective views and agendas; and the implications of making reparation a priority over and above bringing perpetrators to justice; highlighted key elements of the multi-pronged approach to reconciliation and justice under the auspices of the UN Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET); and whether, if implemented more strategically, external interventions in East Timor’s transitional justice and reconciliation could offer a

model for other post-conflict situations. Finally, he examined some of the limitations – especially the relatively narrow focus on particular elements of a far larger legacy of injustice – which had not taken cognizance of the underlying psychological needs of both individuals and communities.

Drawing on lessons from 26 country case studies in Central and South America, Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa, Sriram (2001:91–107) challenged the common treatment in the transitional justice literature of the peace/justice trade-offs as overly simplistic, if not a false dichotomy, and in the process, illustrated what she described as the more nuanced set of choices that make accountability more or less possible (p. 103). According to her, beyond their inherent “moral virtues”, “sacrifice of justice for the sake of stability”, or indeed the “official acknowledgment of wrongdoing” that truth commissions possess, the “choice is not a simple one of “punish or pardon”, but rather, there exists a continuum of options available to transitional regimes and international actors who seek to assist them, ranging from complete amnesty through commission of inquiry and lustration, to wide-ranging prosecutions”. She identified three factors that make accountability more or less possible: the international political and historical contexts, the history of past abuses, and the nature of civilian-military relations and/or the balance of power between the government and the opposition (p. 91).

In her view, while reformers need not cater excessively for the security forces, “recognising their corporate interests and incentives may enable new, often fragile, regimes not only to avert crises but to institute healthier civil-military relations in the long-run” (p. 92). Rather than refute the claim that accountability entails some degree of moral compromise, Sriram highlighted instead, “the benefits which some trade-offs might reap in the realm of institutional, political and military reforms, which can, in turn, yield significant benefits for future protection of democracy, stability and human rights” (pp. 92–93). Invariably, “the desire for justice on the part of victims could increase with the aggregation of abuses”, but also “exhaustion from the conflict could lead many to compromise with former abusers and to grant them amnesty”. From the 26 case studies, Sriram noted that the level of accountability that can be attained by transitional regimes is more a function of the international context and balance of forces than the nature of past abuses which has “largely anecdotal evidence” to support it. She concluded that one general lesson from the dilemmas that transitional regimes face is that there is a continuum of options with no definitive one “right” answer. Also, that generalisations are impossible with any certainty on what type of transitional situation results in what level of accountability “because each State has a distinct history, culture and set of political problems” (p. 102).

In “Reflections on the Abidjan Peace Accord”, Bangura (1997:217–241) identified some of the positive gains of the Accord of December 1996 ending the five and half year civil war in Sierra Leone, but also the potential dangers or “vital omissions” which included the failure to provide a time-frame for the various aspects of

the Peace Commission, the problem of atrocities – visible and widespread – during the war years, and the huge costs of the war. Apart from these points, the Accord was criticized for granting RUF leaders absolute immunity from any prosecution for war-related crimes, its silence on the rights and interests of women, its lack of reference to other critical actors in the war, especially the Kamajors. Also, in spite of the laudable goals of equity, grassroots participation and the anti-poverty thrust of the Accord, no attempt was made to address the problems which the neo-liberal paradigm of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund was likely to create for the implementation of specific provisions- especially the socio-economic plan as contained in Article 26. Finally, as Bangura noted, the Peace Accord omits to specify what would happen in the event of a deadlock between the arms of the proposed Peace Commission (p. 236–240). This last point is particularly instructive given the fact that eventually, the SLTRC and the Special Court set up to try those responsible for the most heinous war crimes, were at loggerheads with each other especially on jurisdictional and procedural matters.

Karen Lundwall (2001) rightly noted that research on the psychological effects of wars and their aftermaths, despite the atrocities that mark them over a prolonged period, is still in its infancy. According to her, whereas reconciliations attempted through truth commissions are popular at the societal level, they could have an effect at the personal level as well; hence the increasing interest in what the psychological literature has to say regarding violence, its development, effects, and the possibilities of prevention and reconciliation. In this regard, she noted the growing scholarly and public policy interests in reconciliation as a measure for the prevention of further conflicts against the backdrop of the vicious cycles of war, countries that resolve conflicts peacefully are inclined to continue living in peace.

Avruch and Vejarano (2002:31–76) insisted that truth commissions, more than 20 since 1973, mostly united by having the word “truth” somewhere in their titles, nevertheless demonstrate great diversity in terms of their socio-political settings, levels of support (international, governmental, popular), resources and constraints, and their varying degrees of success (pp. 37–38). They identified five problematic areas of such commissions as: the problem of justice; problem of truth; problem of reconciliation; problem of democratisation; and finally, the often-ignored problem of culture (p. 38). For instance, on justice, they argued that truth commissions cannot by their nature deliver on justice involving criminal proceedings against perpetrators of violence. They also cannot establish the correct facts on a matter or render verdicts or punishment. This, according to them, explains why there is less focus on criminal justice in favour of “quasi-justice forms” such as “transitional justice”, “restorative justice” or “retroactive justice”, to mention a few (p. 31). The problem of truth, on the other hand, arises from “the complexity and multiplicity of truth” since different sides have their own versions of the history and truth of what

really happened (p. 39). What these differences clearly point to, is that the notions underlying truth commissions are still heavily contested.

There is substantive controversy, not just on the role of the international community but also on the duration of their involvement in countries making the difficult transition from war to peace. Aspects of the latter controversy were brought to the fore in the 2004 Report of the International Crisis Group (ICG) on Liberia and Sierra Leone titled “Rebuilding Failed States” which proposed that the international community needs to make genuinely long-term commitments of between 15 and 25 years in order to enable new political forces to develop and mature in post-war countries. In the case of the two countries, the ICG argued that interventions are failing to produce states that will be stable and capable of exercising sovereign responsibilities. This is because in their traditional format of troop deployment for peace-keeping, DDR, elections, etc., external interventions treat peace building efforts as implementing an operational checklist, involving fixes to various institutions and processes within a compressed time-frame, without tackling underlying political dynamics. In the light of this, the ICG identified what it considered to be the four major objectives that the international community must pursue vigorously in countries emerging from prolonged civil wars. These are: donors must make good their financial/technical commitments to post-war reconstruction projects; make a long-term commitment towards assuring minimal security, not of 2–5 years but of 15–25 years; return political control and responsibility more quickly to local actors – a “radical retreat” accompanied by an equally radical intrusion into the economic area, especially through managing revenue collection for a considerable period of time (ICG 2004:2–3).

Rosalind Shaw (2005) described the SLTRC as a “standard part of conflict resolution “first-aid kits”, even though there was clear preference for a “forgive and forget” approach deriving from local strategies of recovery and reintegration (p. 1). Put differently, she noted that the SLTRC valorised a particular kind of memory practice: “truth telling” based, unfortunately, on problematic assumptions about the purported universal benefits of verbally remembering violence. In her view, the “ideas concerning the conciliatory and therapeutic efficacy of truth telling are the product of western culture of memory... truth commissions do not constitute therapy” (p. 2). On why the majority of Sierra Leone people want to “forgive and forget”, Shaw argued that apart from fear of retaliation by perpetrators, fear of government reprisal and concerns arising from the concurrent operation of different transitional justice mechanisms such as the Special Court alongside the TRC, a fourth critical issue hardly recognised and addressed was the country’s deeper historical legacy of violence and its linkage to the development of grassroots practices of social recovery.

Shaw (2005) also acknowledged the material dimension of truth-telling vis-à-vis the fact that many of those who testified before the SLTRC ended up by appeal-

ing for economic assistance (p. 7). She argued that the citizens did not wait for the TRC before working to rebuild their lives and social communities – most especially by adapting long used local techniques of healing, reintegration and reconciliation (with NGOs and religious groups). There is also a prevalence of what Shaw called “social forgetting”, as a different process from individual forgetting involving “a refusal to reproduce the violence by talking about it publicly” (p. 7). Accordingly, such a process of social forgetting “unmakes” past violence and “remakes” ex-combatants as new social persons. Yet, although the practice enables and sustains ongoing processes of healing and social recovery to take place, it should not be taken as an absolute panacea (p. 8). Also, if care is not taken, a TRC could serve a “destructive” end in the context where survivors of violence want some form of retributive justice against perpetrators which is not the case in Sierra Leone.

Dougherty (2004:1–19) examines critical elements germane to the establishment of the SLTRC, including its controversial relationship with the Special Court. Again deriving from Priscilla Hayner’s comparative insights on truth commissions as a *process*, encompassing public engagement, full participation of stakeholders and the supportiveness of the truth commissions to victims and survivors; as a *product*, through their public hearings and written reports evaluated in terms of the quality and nature of the product, the extent of truth revealed, proposals and recommendations for reform and accountability; and finally, *impact*, focusing on truth commissions’ contributions to long-term healing, reconciliation and reform (p. 2).

Phuong Pham et. al (2004:602–612) examined the implications of trauma and PTSD for attitudes towards justice and reconciliation after the Rwandan genocide where 10 per cent of that country’s population of 7.7 million died during the first few days of war in July 1999. Acknowledging the implementation of a new judicial programme, *Gacaca* building on a tradition local dispute mechanism, Pham et al. argued that despite the activities of the different judicial responses, their tangible contributions to the process of reconciliation are not sufficiently known. According to them, reconciliation is a process whereby individuals, social groups and institutions: (1) develop a shared vision and sense of collective future (“community”); (2) establish mutual ties and obligations across lines of social demarcation and ethnic groups (“interdependence”); (3) come to accept and actively promote individual rights, rule of law, tolerance of social diversity, and equality of opportunity (“social justice”); and (4) adopt non-violent alternatives to conflict management (“non-violence”) (p. 604). In conclusion, Pham and his collaborators argued that the “relationship of judicial trials to reconciliation cannot be assumed, nor can we assume that all trauma survivors necessarily see justice in the same way”. Besides this, their Rwandan data indicated that “openness to reconciliation is related to multiple other personal and environmental factors that must be considered in developing policies for peace building in societies that are emerging from mass violence” (p. 611–612).

It is clear from this brief review of some of the literature that though popular lately, TRCs could equally be controversial. For example, it is apparent in the literature that a lot is expected from truth commissions not only in the Sierra Leonean situation, but also in other countries where the mechanism has been/was put in place after long years of violence. What has not been properly addressed, however, and again, particularly in the Sierra Leonean case, is the extent to which the high expectations from truth commissions contained in the literature can be achieved in a small country like Sierra Leone, which is still under what I can call “international receivership” or what Rosalind Shaw describes as “UN-ization” and NGO-ization. This is extremely doubtful and constitutes the focus of part six of this essay (Shaw 2005).

Various definitions of what constitutes reconciliation have been suggested in the literature. According to Karen Brouneus at Sida

Reconciliation is a social process that involves mutual acknowledgement of past suffering and the changing of destructive attitudes and behaviour into constructive relationships toward sustainable peace...In other words, reconciliation mainly focuses on remembering, changing, and continuing with life in peace. Reconciliation does not require forgetting, forgiving or loving one another (Sida 2003).

And from the viewpoint of the Catholic Relief Services, CARITAS,

reconciliation refers to restoring the right relationships between people who have been alienated and separated from each other during conflict. Reconciliation occurs not only in relationships, but also at the spiritual, personal, social, structural and ecological levels (CARITAS, [www.crs.org/our\\_work/what\\_wedo/programmes-areas/peacebuilding/definitions.cfm](http://www.crs.org/our_work/what_wedo/programmes-areas/peacebuilding/definitions.cfm)).

From such perceptions, it is arguable that reconciliation takes place when two parties, individuals, communities, groups, etc, within a given country or entity that once perceived each other as “enemies” openly “forgive” one another for past wrongdoing. In the particular case of Sierra Leone, it is plausible to say that reconciliation would have been achieved if former members of the RUF, the AFRC, Kamajors (perpetrators) on the one hand, apologized for their transgressions and victims, on the other, embrace them openly.

In her study of Cuba, Holly Ackerman identified six steps in the reconciliation process. First, is “reconciliation as an event”, and she argues that reconciliation is like a journey, it starts with a single step, “divided factions literally meet and sit together for the first time in an effort to begin to exchange views and initiate a process of accommodation on past differences...”. In step two, reconciliation is seen as involving the “dissolution of conflicting identities”, a process that is perhaps similar to that in South Africa, where apartheid, a racist system, for many years separated whites and blacks was dismantled in the 1990s with the hope for a “new” South Africa in which skin colour would not be the basis of interpersonal relationships, access to opportu-

nities, etc. Ackerman noted however, that in “order to achieve this [desired] social conversion, individuals and institutions must recognize their past mistakes, and set out on a new path”. The third step on the reconciliation road is facilitating “mutual coexistence among distinct groups”, and it involves “building respect for differences, communicating across differences and celebrating unique ways of being”.

The fourth phase is “reconciliation as individual moral evolution”, and it “involves confession, repentance, atonement and forgiveness...it is a model (of reconciliation) based on individual transformation” . In the fifth stage, reconciliation is effected through the instrumentality of the “rule of law via effective guarantees of human rights”. The main concern in this phase is establishing the “truth of past human rights violations and ...installing a more effective rule of law to protect the restored balance”. Finally, reconciliation can be conceived of as “community building”, the centrepiece of which is “interdependence”. The nation has been divided because significant numbers of citizens have ceased to see that collective well-being depends upon mutual respect” (Ackerman 1999:342–43). However for this process to succeed, “there must be truth telling as well as a sense of community among the citizens who would resolve to bury their differences in the interest of building a united nation”. Also, the targets of reunion should de-emphasize all those things that tend to divide them and to accentuate those that unite them in the interest of national peace and peaceful co-existence.

In terms of conceptualisation, Lundwall (2001:23–25) noted that there is little critical discussion in the literature regarding, and defining, the term reconciliation, except perhaps for the definition proposed by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in South Africa, which identified five critical issues in reconciliation. According to her, reconciliation has a non-racial ideological connotation; reconciliation as an ideology for bridging gaps between separate communities; the religious ideology of reconciliation which emphasizes forgiveness; reconciliation as a human rights approach to regulating and preventing violations of rights from happening again; and finally, reconciliation as a form of community building. She drew on the four characteristics of truth commissions described by Priscilla Hayner, that they: focus on the past and investigate the pattern of abuses over a period of time, not a particular event; are a temporary body that completes its work with an official report; are officially sanctioned, in order to assure the accessibility of information; and that their recommendations are taken seriously.

What is obvious, then, is that there is no widely accepted technical or popular definition of reconciliation, in spite of the recent “boom” in academic interest and actual processes. According to Lundwall the difficulty in adequately defining reconciliation derives in part from whether it is at the level of society or the individual victim. According to her, quite often, the goal of truth commissions is to promote reconciliation on a national level – whereas at the individual level, issues such as healing and reconciliation are deeply personal processes. Again, this is so since there is no

guarantee that knowledge of the whole truth will lead to a survivor's reconciliation with his or her perpetrator. Thus, Lundwall sees reconciliation as "the formation of lasting peace on both societal and individual levels...involving different processes but striving towards a common goal: to facilitate coexistence...not by forgetting or altruistic forgiveness, but by verbalising and acknowledging a violent, conflictive past". Yet, Lundwall left many unanswered questions which she agreed form part of the "important and inspiring challenges for the twenty-first century", including: What is perceived as reconciliation among different people who experience/have experienced intractable conflict? What psychological mechanisms are involved in healing and reconciliation? How can individual tendencies towards accepting reconciliation be measured? What factors facilitate and promote reconciliation within individuals and within societies? What are the psychological effects of participating as a victim, witness, perpetrator, or commissioner in truth commissions, etc?

Consequently, while each of the definitions and expositions presented here has some merit, especially in the realm of theory, it is not so certain if they would work when put to the test in post conflict societies embarking on the delicate and uncertain road to reconciliation, reconstruction and peace building. It is significant to also note that the definitions presented here implicitly or explicitly refer to post hostility/post conflict situations, and bringing together once more, individuals and groups that had been separated from each other and/or alienated as a result of conflict and war. Thus, for the purpose of this study, post conflict reconciliation should be seen as an impromptu attempt by individuals and local communities, supported by the international community, to put the past behind them and bring erstwhile enemies or opponents together in a way that would heal the wounds resulting from long years of war, atrocities and impunity, such as was the case in Sierra Leone. It is perceived that only after reconciliation has been accomplished would the post conflict peace and stability that are required to jump-start and fast-track the process of rebuilding the state, commence. Finally, reconciliation traverses the whole gamut of post conflict activities to include socio-economic reconstruction, peace building and political reform, including opening up the political space for popular participation.

From the foregoing discussion, there is no doubt that post conflict reconciliation is a complex, delicate, even uncertain process. It requires the active involvement of everyone in the society: perpetrators, victims, and guarantors of peace agreements. It would also require putting in place novel socio-economic programmes, institutions and structures designed to address not only those background factors and issues that gave rise to the conflict in the first place, but also to take advantage of new opportunities, in the post conflict society. However, the success or failure of the reconciliation process itself would very much depend on several critical factors both internal and external to the post conflict society/state. First, would be the presence or absence of local capacity to see the processes of reconciliation through in all their ramifications. Second, is the extent of the damage caused to the national economy

and social infrastructure, resulting from the war. That is, whether national infrastructure was extensively damaged or if atrocities were widespread, thereby causing extensive trauma among the local population. Third, it is important to find out if the war left deep rooted physical scars on segments of the population, i.e. large numbers of amputees and victims of sexual violence, as is the case in Sierra Leone, etc. Fourth and closely related to the previous points are the circumstances and nature of the affected state and its ability to stand by and large on its own feet, after the hostilities. I would argue that the more the state is able to take quick ownership of the reconciliation processes unaided, the more autonomous resources it commands, the more comprehensive and successful would the post bellum reconciliation become.

This is an important point because the ownership, pace and even the degree of success of the national reconciliation processes may well be a function of how autonomous the state is at the end of hostilities. For instance, while extensive and horrendous damage was done in South Africa by several decades of apartheid and armed struggle, the country was nonetheless able to embark on the long road to national reconciliation almost completely under its own steam. Yes, external agencies and friendly states did contribute to the process, but there was never a doubt that the South African government and state were in full control, the owners and drivers of the process.<sup>1</sup> It is also important to note that the apartheid years created world class infrastructure – even though accessible only to whites – in that country and laid the foundation for a solid economy as well. In studying the experiences of post conflict reconciliation in Sierra Leone, or for that matter other post conflict societies, several important questions must, therefore, be asked and answers provided, in order to fully appreciate the limitations of the TRC processes in that country. In doing so, it is important to note that even in the best of times, Sierra Leone, a mini state, was highly porous and depended overwhelmingly on the good will of the donor community for its survival. Again, it is important to stress that even in geographical terms, Sierra Leone is the sixth smallest country in Africa, a fact that has sombre implications for its capacity to “go it alone” in many spheres of state activity even in peace time. The devastating effects of the fratricidal war accentuated the country’s external dependence and called into serious question its ability to fully implement a TRC process successfully, a fact that has been overlooked in the main literature.<sup>2</sup>

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1. For more on this, see Vora and Vora (2004), Pedain (2004 and 2005), Evaldsson (2005) and Tristan Anne Borer (2001) among many others.

2. See for instance, Sida (2003) and Shaw (2005).

## 7. The Sierra Leone TRC: Matters arising

What have been the experiences of Sierra Leone in post conflict reconciliation? What institutions and processes, if any, were put in place to heal the sore wounds of long years of “uncivil” war, trauma and impunity, and how successful have they been? Can there be effective reconciliation in Sierra Leone without punishment for perpetrators? Indeed can telling the truth lead alone to national reconciliation in post conflict Sierra Leone? Is reconciliation between perpetrators and victims a straight road or a “spaghetti” junction that is full of dangerous challenges for perpetrators, victims and government? Is reconciliation “a once and for all” act or along a continuum?<sup>1</sup> Who is to be reconciled with whom: is it the perpetrators with individual victims or vice versa, perpetrators and their communities and neighbourhoods? Where the victims are children is reconciliation possible between them and perpetrators or, is it between the perpetrators and third parties, i.e. parents, extended family members, etc? If the latter, can we really speak of “reconciliation” as such in the “absence” of the victims, and what are the consequences for the success of such a methodology for victims, their families and long-term national peace and stability? How do we reconcile perpetrators and victims within the same family; women with men, men with men, children with parents, etc? What has been the role of civil society, government and the international community in the reconciliation process? What are the perceptions of the reconciliation processes by various segments of society in Sierra Leone? The last question is important because ultimately, it is the public, the ordinary man and woman, youth and child in the country that bore the brunt of the war and it is they, more than any other person, or group, who should also know “where the shoe pinches most”. It is arguable that whether national reconciliation and healing in the country succeeds or not would depend on how the Sierra Leonean “public” feels about the entire process; especially as the “public” harbours both perpetrators and victims, the communities and families which are so critical to the success of post conflict peace and stability in the country. What are the challenges faced by Sierra Leone, a country that is still under “international receivership” and “reconstruction” and what are the implications of such challenges for the reconciliation processes? These are pertinent questions that must be answered in any discussion on the post conflict reconciliation efforts in Sierra Leone, or for that matter, other countries emerging from protracted conflicts.

Before we turn our attention to these vital queries, it is pertinent to note that the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission was in many ways a child of circumstance, being born at a very difficult time in the civil war and against the backdrop of a frantic search by the international community and local stakehold-

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1. For more insights into the problem see Sesay (2003), Sesay (2005) and Sesay, “Uncivil Wars, War Crimes and Post Conflict Reconciliation in Sierra Leone and Liberia”, public lecture delivered at the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, June 2, 2005.

ers for an immediate end to hostilities. Created under the Lome Peace Agreement of July 7 1999<sup>1</sup>, and months later, in February 2000, by an Act of the Sierra Leone Parliament, the TRC was a bold attempt to placate both the victims and perpetrators. It was in fact advertised to Sierra Leoneans as a veritable mechanism capable of “healing” the deep wounds of the war. Article XXVI (1) of the Lome Agreement states that a:

...Truth and Reconciliation Commission shall be established to address impunity, break the cycle of violence, provide a forum for both the victims and perpetrators of human rights violations to tell their story, get a clear picture of the past in order to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation.

According to Part III, section 6(1) of the TRC Act:

The object for which the Commission is established is to create an impartial historical record of violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law related to the armed conflict in Sierra Leone from the beginning of the conflict in 1991 to the signing of the Lome Peace Agreement; to address impunity, to respond to the needs of the victims, to promote healing and reconciliation and to prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered.

In addition, the Commission was also to

...investigate and report on the causes, nature and extent of the violations and abuses...to work to restore the human dignity of victims and promote reconciliation by providing an opportunity for victims to give an account of the violations and abuses suffered and for the perpetrators to relate their experiences, and creating a climate which fosters constructive interchange between victims and perpetrators, giving special attention to the subject of sexual abuses and to the experiences of children within the armed conflict...

Finally, the report of the Commission was to contain

Recommendation concerning the reforms and other measures, whether legal, political, administrative or otherwise needed to achieve the object of the commission, namely the object of providing impartial historical record, preventing the repetition of the violations or abuses suffered, addressing the impunity, responding to the needs of the victims and promoting healing and reconciliation.

In the next section, some of the problematic assumptions that informed the choice of the TRC as an instrument of post conflict reconciliation in Sierra Leone will be unmasked.

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1. For more details, see *Peace Agreement between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United front of Sierra Leone*, (1999).

## 8. Challenging assumptions of TRCs and post conflict reconciliation in Sierra Leone

One of the most important assumptions that informed the setting up of the TRC in Sierra Leone, like elsewhere in Africa, is that truth would lead to national reconciliation by enabling victims to confront the perpetrators, after which they were expected to forgive them and move on with their lives. This assumption is reminiscent of the biblical injunction about forgiving trespasses –in the same way God forgives our sins we should forgive those of others. From such a perspective, the TRC certainly struck a familiar chord that is in line with the forgiveness that individuals seek from God for their transgressions, no matter how grievous they may be, and the expectation that God in His infinite mercy will forgive sinners who genuinely and openly admit their transgressions. In Christianity and other faiths, it is also believed that complete forgiveness of sins is possible and that absolution paves the way for the erstwhile sinner to gain the kingdom of God in the hereafter.

While this study does not pretend to question the capacity of God to totally forgive sins and other earthly trespasses, it is not clear if human beings are capable of such full forgiveness especially over matters concerning war crimes. For instance, is it possible for an individual that has lost both hands to crude amputation in Sierra Leone to forgive the perpetrators? Even if it were possible to do so, under what circumstances would it be sustained? Clearly, the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the TRC tend to expect, and indeed extract, too much from the individual, especially the victim, without cast-iron guarantees of appropriate material and non-material rewards. This explains why coming to terms with the past and coping with future challenges would largely depend on individuals' wartime experiences on the one hand, and the post conflict circumstances they face, on the other, i.e. a victim's physical, material, health/mental state and needs etc. How then, can victims (individuals or groups) be encouraged to forgive and forget, and come to terms with their present state and the future? Finally, since reconciliation takes place at several levels in post conflict societies, it is necessary to understand these multiple layers and their intricate linkages to post conflict reconciliation processes.

What is incontrovertible, though, is that the requirements of reconciliation in the spiritual kingdom are significantly different from those in the political, material, and social realms. In the spiritual kingdom, reconciliation is perceived as transcending the materialism of this transient world and assures transgressors or sinners eternal bliss, a world of abundance and self-contentment. Unfortunately, that is by no means the case in the hard reality of the political and material world in which we live. Beyond the spiritual realm, then, reconciliation requires taking cognizance of the materialism of this ephemeral world, if it is to succeed. In the material and physical dominion, the expectations of victims are governed by hard political and economic calculations, opportunity costs and sometimes, even double speak, by

prominent political office holders that often do not reflect the reality of street conditions. This point was recognized by the then Interim President of Liberia, Gyude Bryant when he noted publicly, that "...it is difficult to talk about grace when you have no food and you are hungry and cannot feed your children and everything you have has been looted".<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, coming to terms with the past and accepting future challenges should be much easier when the diverse physical and social needs of victims and perpetrators are effectively catered for. Put differently, it is much easier to "heal" the wounds of victims of violence in coping with their situations if listening to the "truth" and accepting an apology based on the "truth" are also backed by "material justice". Unfortunately, Truth Commissions and indeed, most post conflict governments, do not always make such cast-iron guarantees to victims. Besides, if TRCs are perceived as providing significant signposts as well as "first aid kits" on the tortuous road to national reconciliation after violent conflicts, then there must be ways of measuring their overall success. Regrettably, experience has shown that that has not always been easy to do, for success or failure may be subject to several personal considerations and extraneous factors. Even in South Africa, the overall achievements of the trail blazer, the South African TRC, are still controversial.<sup>2</sup>

Even if the Sierra Leone State were inclined towards providing material and other forms of compensation to victims, in theory, it would be difficult to do so in practice since the state/country is itself a "work in progress", depending overwhelmingly on input from and control by the international community. In such a state of affairs, the government or the state is hardly in a position to determine the pace or priorities of the "construction project" in a way that would ensure long-term peace, security and stability. Finally, it is possible that the TRC and even the Special Court might have been used as part of an elaborate "exit strategy" for the guarantors of the peace processes that led to the end of hostilities in 2000. If this suspicion is correct, it raises serious questions on both its appropriateness and capacity to contribute positively to important ancillary processes that could stimulate national reconciliation in the country.

Apart from the above difficulties, other important questions have also been raised to challenge the very theoretical foundations of TRCs. Rosalind Shaw, for instance, notes that it cannot be assumed that "Truth telling is healing on a personal level: truth Commissions do not constitute therapy".<sup>3</sup> Shaw even questioned the whole essence of telling the truth as a national healing process:

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1. Quoted by James Selheim in "Liberia Struggles toward an Uncertain Future", in Episcopal Church News, on [www.episcopalchurch.org/3577\\_19493\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_19493_ENG_HTML.htm), accessed on 2/5/05

2. Good examples are: Vora and Vora (2004), Pedain, (2004) Evaldsson (2005) and Tristan Anne Borer (2001).

3. Quoted in Hartwell (2000).

The idea of healing a nation that is wounded or traumatized is primarily a nation-building rhetoric...[it] derives from nineteenth century models of society as akin to an organism that can be healthy or sick. Such biological models for society have, however, long been discredited. While violence certainly disrupts and transforms social institutions and practices, it is not valid to conceptualize these changes in terms of a damaged collective national psyche that can be healed through a cathartic process of truth telling (Shaw 2005).

In a similar vein, Michael Ignatieff also queried the logic of Bishop Tutu's assumption "...that a nation has a psyche, not many, that truth is one, not many, that truth is certain, not contestable; and that when it is known by all, it has capacity to heal and reconcile..." (Hartwell 2000). This point is worth emphasizing further because according to Brandon Hamber:

...it is a mistake to assume that story telling and giving testimony, either in public or private spaces, equates with healing. Truth alone will not lead to reconciliation nor will it guarantee that a human rights culture will permeate the society and that those who suffered in the past will be able to deal with their traumas (Hartwell 2000).

No doubt, the civil war in Sierra Leone, or for those matter that in Liberia and other African countries since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, impacted differently on individuals, groups and communities. Accordingly, dealing with the past successfully, and coming to terms with the challenges of the future also vary. Whatever the case may be, it is our contention that coming to terms with the past and accepting future challenges would be much easier if the material, psychological and other special needs of victims and even perpetrators are also catered for in the post conflict dispensation both in the short and long-term.

Not only that, even the timing of the reconciliation processes and institutions may be critical to their success or failure. For instance, at what point should a TRC be put in place, even if there is widespread agreement that it is desirable? Is it before or after economic and political reconstruction has been effected in the war-torn country? In this respect, what would happen to the reconciliation processes in states that are heavily dependent on external goodwill to function? If external funding were to suddenly stop in such a state, what would be the fate of the TRC processes and future of the state itself? Unfortunately, the highlights of typical TRC documents are usually not very helpful in finding answers to these vital questions, since they tend to present a rather simplistic understanding of very complicated phenomena. Under such conditions, experience is perhaps the best teacher and guide. For as Beth Dougherty has convincingly posited, even if the TRC in Sierra Leone or any other country were to produce an excellent report and recommendations, "there is no guarantee that the political will, financial resources, or administrative capacity

will be available to implement them”.<sup>1</sup> Even the incurable cynic would therefore be forgiven for asking the question: then why bother at all?

The next section focuses attention on the perceptions of the public in Sierra Leone’s capital, Freetown, of the usefulness of the Truth Commission in promoting national reconciliation and long-term peace and stability in the country. By doing so, it is hoped that our earlier discussion on the country’s past and contemporary experience, will shed more light on the utility as well as the limitations of TRCs as a “first aid” tool in the post-conflict peace building continuum, whether in Sierra Leone or elsewhere in Africa in the future. Thus, what are the broad and specific perceptions of the TRC across the spectrum of stakeholders in Sierra Leone: the elites, political, traditional and religious leaders; members of the general public, women, youth, victims and perpetrators? What in their views are the major fault-lines in the task of promoting reconciliation in the country, or even the limitations of the Commission in the judgment of the public? What are the victims’ perceptions of the reconciliation processes? Would the public have preferred local mechanisms for reconciling perpetrators and victims? What is the perception of stakeholders of the ability of the state in Sierra Leone to meet the material and other commitments consequent upon the TRC processes? What are the indispensable strategic ingredients for the success of the TRC from the perspective of members of the public in Sierra Leone?

## 9. Perceptions of TRC processes in Sierra Leone

This section is based on data obtained during the field work in Freetown early in 2006, with a view to finding out what the general perceptions of the TRC processes were. Respondents were divided into four broad categories of Sierra Leoneans as follows:

i) the elites/political leaders, ii) members of the general public, iii) traditional leaders and iv) religious leaders. In terms of the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, 71.8% of the elites were males, and 58.1% of members of the public, were males. Taken as a whole, 63.4% of all respondents were males while 36.6% of the total sample was female (Figure 1).

The majority of the respondents among the elites, 69.2%, were married while 61.3% of members of the public were single. In the total sample, there were more single, 49.5%, than married, 46.5%, respondents (Figure 2).

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1. See Vora and Vora (2004) and others, on this important point.

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by gender (%)

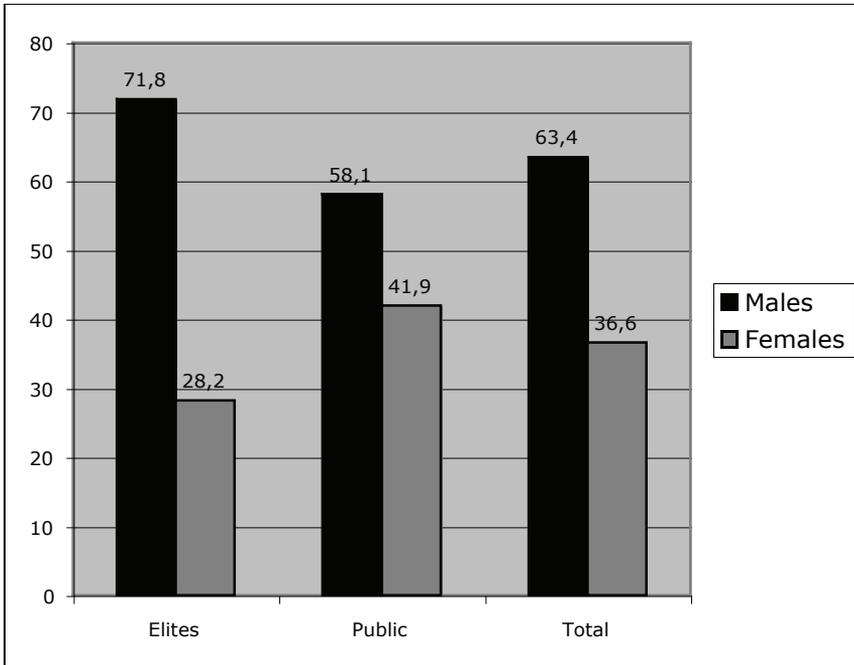
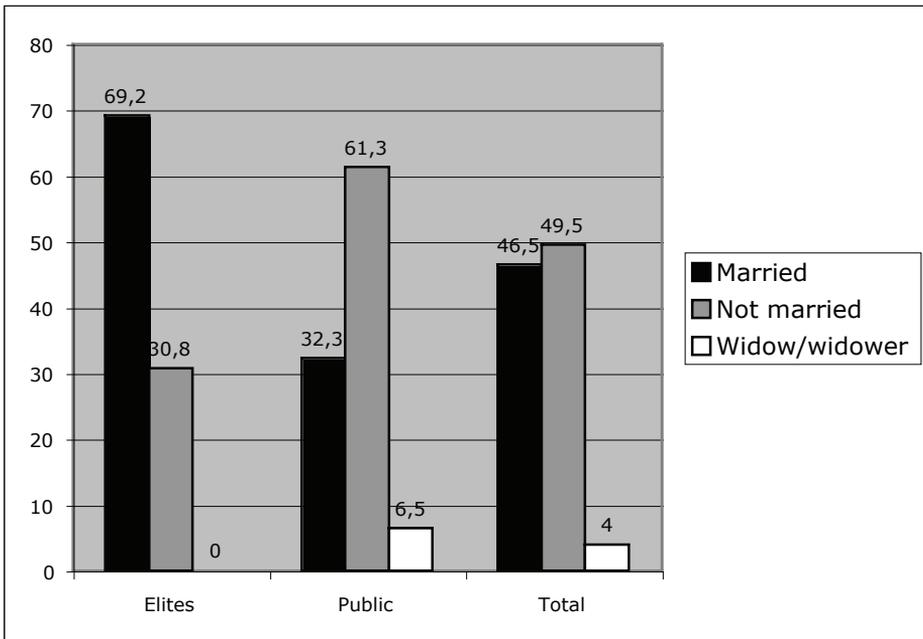


Figure 2: Distribution of respondents by marital status (%)



The religious affiliations of the respondents showed that 74.4% of the elites and 77.4% of members of the public, were Christians. In the total sample 76.2% were Christians while 23.8% were Muslims (Figure 3). This is rather surprising because it is generally believed that there are more Muslims in Sierra Leone than Christians. The finding of the study may not be unconnected with the fact that there is a high concentration of Christians in the capital compared to the rural areas.

The educational status of the respondents shown in Table 1, revealed that 84.6% of the elites had university education, whereas only 46.8% of members of the public had secondary school education. In the total sample 43.6% had university education while 33.7% had secondary education.

Figure 3: Distribution of respondents by religious affiliation (%)

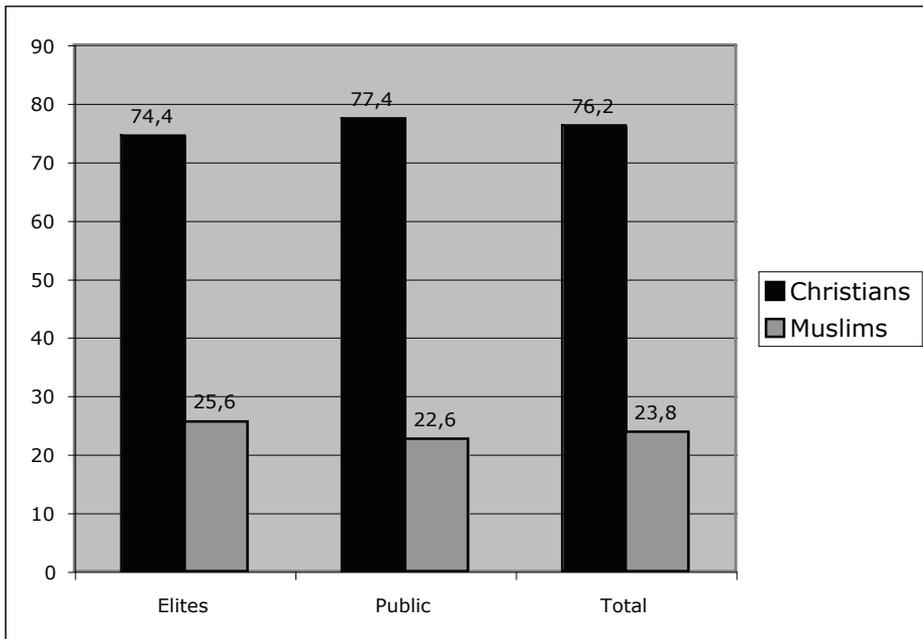


Table 1: Educational status of respondents

|                  | Elites |       | Public |       | Total |       |
|------------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
|                  | n      | %     | n      | %     | n     | %     |
| Illiterate       | -      | -     | 04     | 6.5   | 05    | 5.0   |
| Primaryschool    | -      | -     | 18     | 29.0  | 18    | 17.8  |
| Secondary school | 06     | 15.4  | 29     | 46.8  | 34    | 33.7  |
| University       | 33     | 84.6  | 11     | 17.7  | 44    | 43.6  |
| Total            | 39     | 100.0 | 62     | 100.0 | 101   | 100.0 |

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by ethnic origin

|               | Elites |       | Public |       | Total |       |
|---------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
|               | n      | %     | n      | %     | n     | %     |
| Mende         | 09     | 24.3  | 12     | 20.7  | 21    | 22.1  |
| Limba         | 04     | 10.8  | 10     | 17.2  | 14    | 14.7  |
| Susu          | 01     | 2.7   | 03     | 5.2   | 04    | 4.0   |
| Loko          | 06     | 16.2  | 08     | 13.8  | 14    | 14.7  |
| Fourah Bay    | 02     | 5.4   |        |       | 02    | 2.1   |
| Krio          | 08     | 21.6  | 06     | 10.3  | 14    | 14.7  |
| Temne         | 02     | 5.4   | 04     | 6.9   | 06    | 6.3   |
| Mandingo      | 01     | 2.7   | 04     | 6.9   | 05    | 5.3   |
| Sherbro       | 02     | 5.4   | -      | -     | 02    | 2.1   |
| Sherbro mende | 01     | 2.7   | -      | -     | 01    | 1.0   |
| Fullah        | 01     | 2.7   | 07     | 12.1  | 08    | 8.0   |
| Kissi         | -      | -     | 04     | 6.9   | 04    | 4.0   |
| Total         | 37     | 100.0 | 58     | 100.0 | 95    | 100.0 |

Table 2 represents the ethnic composition of the respondents, revealing that 22.1% were Mende, 14.7% each were Limba and Temne while 10.5 were Creole. This result is also quite revealing because the Temne constitute the second largest ethnic group in the country after the Mende. But then the ethnic sample also reflects the diversity of the country, and a sufficiently representative sample of the different ethnic groups.

Figure 4: Distribution of respondents by employment status (%)

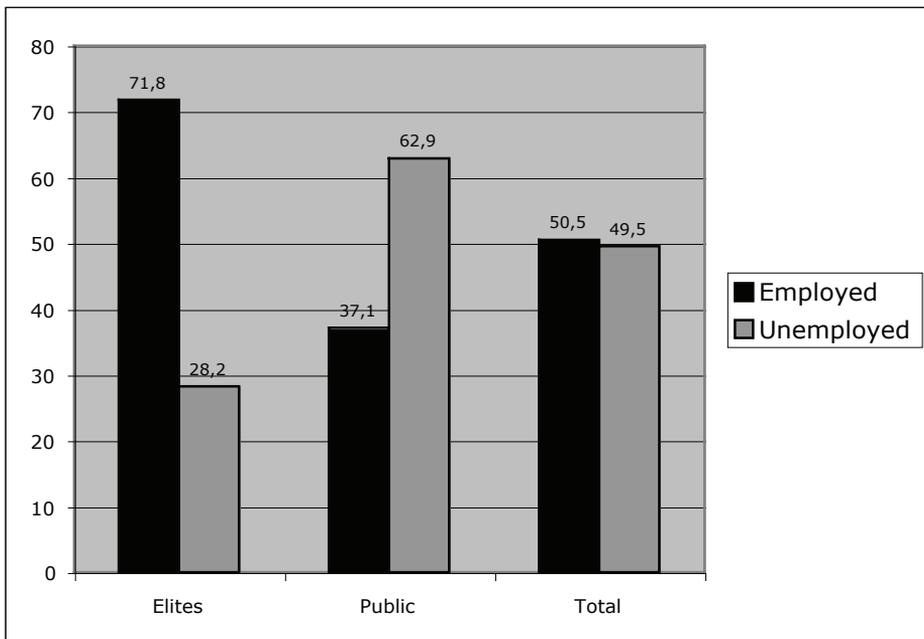


Table 3: Distribution of respondents by occupation

|              | Elites |       | Public |       | Total |       |
|--------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
|              | n      | %     | n      | %     | n     | %     |
| Unskilled    | 10     | 25.6  | 27     | 46.6  | 37    | 38.1  |
| Skilled      | 01     | 2.6   | 14     | 24.1  | 15    | 15.5  |
| White collar | 03     | 7.7   | 04     | 6.9   | 07    | 7.2   |
| Professional | 23     | 59.0  | 04     | 6.9   | 27    | 27.8  |
| Student      | 02     | 5.2   | 09     | 15.5  | 11    | 11.3  |
| Total        | 39     | 100.0 | 58     | 100.0 | 97    | 100.0 |

Slightly above half of the respondents 50.5%, were employed and 49.5% were unemployed, (Figure 4). More revealing is the fact that as many as 38.1% of the respondents were unskilled workers, but 27.8 % were professionals, 15.5% were skilled while 11.3% were students (Table 3). Of course, that they have, or do not have skills, is not to suggest that most of the respondents are gainfully employed. Although conclusive statistics are not available, it is generally acknowledged that the high unemployment rate among the youths, especially in Freetown, in particular and Sierra Leone in general, was an important factor in the ability of the RUF to easily recruit youths for the civil war.

### 9.1 Awareness of the TRC

Broad awareness of the existence and activities of the TRC is important for its success in promoting national reconciliation. It was therefore important to find out the extent to which respondents were aware of the existence of the Commission. So respondents were asked whether they were aware of the existence of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up at the end of the civil war. Except for 17.7% of members of the public, all other categories of respondents, said that they were aware of the existence of the Commission (Figure 4). This implies that of the total sample, an overwhelming 93.8% were aware of the TRC and only 6.2% were not aware that it had been set up after the war. This is not however surprising since much of the publicity was centred on Freetown and its environs.

Table 4: Respondents' awareness of the TRC

|       | Elites |       | Public |       | Traditional leaders |       | Religious leaders |       | Total |       |
|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|       | n      | %     | n      | %     | n                   | %     | n                 | %     | n     | %     |
| yes   | 39     | 100.0 | 51     | 82.3  | 50                  | 100.0 | 26                | 100.0 | 166   | 93.8  |
| no    | -      | -     | 11     | 17.7  | -                   | -     | -                 | -     | 11    | 6.2   |
| Total | 39     | 100.0 | 62     | 100.0 | 50                  | 100.0 | 26                | 100.0 | 177   | 100.0 |

On the sources of their information about the TRC, 41.0% of the elites said that they first heard about it on radio and television, compared with 33.3% who said they first got to know about it in the print media. The majority of the traditional leaders however confirmed that they first heard about the TRC on television. In the total sample of the two categories of respondents, that is the elites and traditional rulers, 36.6% said that they first heard about the TRC on television, 19.8% said it was on radio; 15.8 said it was on radio and TV and only 12.9% said that they got to know about the Commission in newspapers and magazines. Significantly, all the FGD discussions revealed that participants were aware of the TRC and its activities. Another interesting finding is that majority of the traditional and religious leaders, 63.2%, admitted that although they were aware of the Commission, they were not consulted before it was set up, while half of them, 30.3% acknowledged they had prior consultations with government.

## 9.2 Expectations of the TRC

Since the TRC was promoted as a mechanism that would restore peace and stability through reconciliation between perpetrators and victims, it was expedient to find out the views of respondents on their expectations of the TRC. Not surprisingly, their opinions varied across the different groups. Among the elites, 43.8%, and among the members of the public 47.9%, said they expected the TRC to unite the victims and the perpetrators, while half of the traditional leaders, 50.0 %, expected it to bring peace to Sierra-Leone. Again, this is very significant since traditional leaders were also expected to play an important role in the reconciliation process, especially in the reintegration of former fighters and perpetrators into their communities. However, a significant proportion of the elites 34.4%, said they expected the TRC to dig out the facts about the issues and factors that led to the war. In the total sample, 30.1% of the respondents said they had expected the TRC to unite victims and perpetrators. More importantly, only 26.8%, less than a third of all respondents, expected the Commission to bring lasting peace while 20.3% expected it to dig out the causes of the war. The small percentage of respondents that expected the TRC to “dig out” the causes of the war is surprising, since telling the “truth” is one of the most important prerequisites for “forgiveness” and reconciliation in post conflict societies.

The majority of the elites, 62.5%, acknowledged that their expectations from the TRC were not met, against 59.6% of the members of the public that said their expectations were partially met. Furthermore, an overwhelming number of the traditional leaders, 74.0% said that their expectations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were only partially met. In short, among all those that participated in the survey, 58.2% believed that their expectations were only partially met. Among the religious leaders however, 42.3% believed that setting up the Truth Commission

was a good development while another 38.5% believed that peace would not have been achieved in the country without the Commission.

The expectations of the participants of the focus groups discussions (FGDs) conducted as part of my research were broadly similar to those of the survey interviews respondents. According to one participant, the TRC was expected

*...to bring to light the causes and effects of the war". "to give recommendations for the prevention of future conflict and to reconcile the conflicting parties and the victims. (FGD 3)*

Another participant emphasized the expectation

*that the TRC will create a forum for perpetrators to confess their atrocities and beg for forgiveness. We expect that those who bore the brunt of the war would be compensated and victims empowered especially the amputees. (FGD 1)*

One point that resonated across the board during the FGDs was the feeling that their expectations were only partially met. According to one respondent's opinion:

*the whole truth did not come out, partly for security reasons, while other people were entertaining the fear of reprisals from the public. The real facts were concealed. So many victims forgave but did not forget because they still suffer pains with nobody to assist them. (FGD 2)*

On what they understood by "forgiveness" a central theme in the truth and reconciliation logic and literature, many of the FGD participants were rather philosophical as they referred several times to the holy books. However, some were not so sure if there could be real forgiveness given the desperate socio-economic conditions of many victims of the war.

*Although it is difficult to forgive, the probability is still there. We also wrong God and he forgives us. Forgiveness always follows true confession, but when there is no confession then forgiveness may be difficult. (FGD 4)*

However others queried the whole essence of forgiveness in the circumstances of post conflict Sierra Leone

*What is forgiveness for a widow with so many children that she cannot ordinarily cater for? The sight of the combatants inflicts more pain on such people. If our needs are not adequately met, true forgiveness will not be possible. (FGD 6)*

### 9.3 The TRC's methods

On the appropriateness or otherwise of the procedures adopted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 50% of the survey respondents acknowledged they were not satisfactory. However, a significant number among the elites, 31.4%, expressed the view that the processes were satisfactory. Also significant is the fact that the majority of the traditional leaders, 76.0%, opined that the methods adopted

were adequate. In the total sample, 56.8% of the respondents believed that the methods adopted by TRC were adequate while 35.2% felt they were not satisfactory. It is important to note, though, that among the elites, the majority, 63.6 %, believed that the methods were not satisfactory because the perpetrators were not made to apologize to the victims, while 27.3%, almost a third, believed that many of the people that appeared before the Commission were not sincere. All those who expressed the view that the methods used by the TRC were not adequate also believed that only those in big towns had the opportunity to witness the proceedings. This was also the view of a Sierra Leonean faculty member at Fourah Bay College, Freetown, that I had the privilege to interview in February 2006.<sup>1</sup> However, only 14.0 % of the elites agreed with the choice of witnesses, while 64.0% of the traditional leaders agreed with the choice of witnesses that appeared before the Commission. On the whole, 53.9% of all the respondents approved the choice of witnesses while only 24.7% disapproved.

#### 9.4 Duration of the TRC's activities

On whether the Commission had adequate time to carry out its activities, the majority of the elites, 59.0%, believed that the time devoted to the proceedings was sufficient while the majority among the traditional leaders, 86.4%, believed that the time was not enough. Significantly, the majority of the total sample, 65.1%, were of the opinion that the time devoted to the activities of the Commission was not enough. In fact, 57.6% of the respondents expressed the view that the Commission ought to have been given more time. Moreover, 22.0% of respondents said that the Commission had many things to do with very little time, while 20.3% believed that some important stakeholders were not given the opportunity to appear before the Commission, although they did not identify them..

The general disposition of the citizens towards the activities of a Truth Commission is important for at least two reasons. First, it is a barometer of their acceptance or otherwise of the Commission. Second, the success or failure of the Commission and related activities may also hinge on the amount of cooperation it receives from the citizens as a whole. Thus it was important to gauge the attitude of the citizens to the Commission. In this regard, the majority of the elites, 51.3%, believed that people cooperated with the TRC while 28.2% said that people's attitude was antagonistic. Among the traditional leaders, 38.0% said that the public attitude was friendly and cooperative while only 24.0% believed that the attitude was antagonistic. In the total sample, 43.8% believed that the general attitude was cooperative. Various reasons were given for people's attitudes to the Commission, among which was its short duration. Of the total sample of respondents, 48.8% be-

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1. Interview conducted in Hamburg in 2006 during a meeting at a workshop.

lieved that there were more than enough witnesses while another 20.9% said those who were ready to witness were never given the chance to do so.

The ambivalence of the respondents and other Sierra Leoneans towards the Truth Commission is not unconnected with the existence of the Special Court side by side with the Commission. It was obvious from the discussions I had with several people in different locations in Freetown that many perpetrators were not sure of the consequences of appearing before the Commission since there was also a Special Court in Freetown to try those accused of war crimes. The existence of the Special Court was also cited as one of the reasons some respondents believed perpetrators and other witnesses before the Commission did not tell the whole truth. The simultaneous existence of the Commission and the Special Court was also an issue that cropped up during the Hamburg interview. The controversy clearly pointed to the dilemma of the guarantors of the peace in Sierra Leone. On the one hand, they and every Sierra Leonean were by 1999 anxious to restore peace in the country. On the other hand, they were reluctant to allow those who committed war crimes, especially senior segments of the rebel movement and the Kamajors, who were accused of bearing the greatest responsibility for the atrocities, to get away with impunity. It was indeed a delicate balance.

#### 9.5 Respondents' understanding of "truth"

One of the more controversial issues in truth and reconciliation processes is the different understanding of the "truth", and establishing when a witness is telling or has told the truth. This is partly because "truth" and "telling the truth" tend to be culturally bound to a great extent. For instance, telling the truth in a European context may be quite different from in an African setting, and even between groups in the same country/state in Africa. More importantly, under what conditions people would be inclined to "tell the truth, and nothing but the truth" in an African setting may also be subject to both subjective and objective factors. What were important from the point of view of the study, then, were the respondents' perception and understanding of the truth, and whether they believed that the "truth" from their point of view, was told during the TRC hearings. This is very important because a cardinal requirement for successful post conflict reconciliation under the auspices of Truth Commissions is getting to the bottom of what happened especially during the hostilities. In other words, establishing the truth no matter how unpalatable it may be was a central requirement for forgiveness and ultimately, reconciliation. On their understanding of the meaning of truth, and what it is, the majority of the sample interviewed, 68.8%, described truth as expressing what one saw as it actually happened, while only 12.4% said truth is a statement based on facts; whether or not one witnessed the events in question. It would appear that most of the respondents had a clear idea of what constitutes the truth in any given situation (Table 5).

Table 5: Respondents' understanding of truth

|   | Elites |       | Public |       | Traditional leaders |       | Religious leaders |       | Total |       |
|---|--------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|   | n      | %     | n      | %     | n                   | %     | n                 | %     | n     | %     |
| Expressing what you saw as it actually happened | 37     | 94.9  | 37     | 59.7  | 37                  | 74.0  | 11                | 42.3  | 122   | 68.9  |
| Acknowledging what is right                     | 1      | 2.6   | -      | -     | -                   | -     | -                 | -     | 1     | 5.6   |
| Facts approved by people                        | 1      | 2.6   | -      | -     | -                   | -     | -                 | -     | 1     | 5.6   |
| Accepting one's wrong doings                    | -      | -     | 07     | 11.3  | -                   | -     | -                 | -     | 7     | 4.0   |
| Being sincere from the heart                    | -      | -     | 08     | 12.9  | -                   | -     | -                 | -     | 8     | 4.5   |
| Statement based on facts                        | -      | -     | 10     | 16.1  | 07                  | 14.0  | 05                | 19.2  | 22    | 12.4  |
| Fairness and equity                             | -      | -     | -      | -     | 06                  | 12.0  | 10                | 38.5  | 16    | 9.0   |
| Total   | 39     | 100.0 | 62     | 100.0 | 50                  | 100.0 | 26                | 100.0 | 177   | 100.0 |

When the FGD participants were asked to explain what they understood by the “truth”, they were of the view that the “truth is a statement that describes reality without any embellishment, no addition or subtraction”. (FGD 1)

*Truth is saying the right thing. A statement that can be supported with facts or proof. It is simply the reality and has no element of lie or doubt. It is always uttered in confidence and clear conscience. Truth is a statement that conforms to the reality and not otherwise. (FGD 1)*

The study further showed that 48.0% of the traditional leaders were of the view that the truth was not told at the TRC, while 38.0% believed the truth was told. On the other hand, the majority of the religious leaders, 61.5%, believed that the truth was told during the proceedings while only 19.2% believed that the truth was either not told or that it was only partially told. Nevertheless, 46.1% of the total sample believed that the truth was told during the TRC proceedings. Among the traditional leaders, 36.8% were of the view that some facts were not revealed while 31.6% believed that some people lied and that the TRC process was a failure. 46.1% of the traditional leaders believed that the truth would have or could have been ensured if those that gave evidence were asked to swear on the Bible or Koran.

However, and importantly, a significant number, 38.2%, believed that administering the oath in a shrine would have encouraged people to speak the whole truth. On what they understood by reconciliation in a post conflict society, an overwhelming number of the survey respondents, 83.9%, explained that reconciliation involves accepting former opponents; 33.3% understood reconciliation to mean bringing people together in the spirit of forgiveness for past wrongs, while 32.8% said “it is uniting former enemies in a harmonious way”. Finally, while 38.2% of the traditional and religious leaders believed that the TRC promoted reconciliation, 32.9% of both groups were of the view that it did not (Table 6). What is significant to note here is the unanimity among the respondents on what constitutes reconciliation. It is obvious from their responses that they all had a clear idea of what reconciliation was in the circumstances of Sierra Leone at the time of the interviews and focus group discussions.

Table 6: Respondents’ understanding of reconciliation

|   | Elites |       | Public |       | Traditional leaders |       | Religious leaders |       | Total |       |
|---|--------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|   | N      | %     | N      | %     | N                   | %     | N                 | %     | N     | %     |
| Bringing people together in the spirit of forgiveness for past wrongs | 16     | 41.0  | 08     | 12.9  | 19                  | 38.0  | 16                | 61.5  | 59    | 33.3  |
| Accepting former opponents  | 15     | 38.5  | 16     | 25.8  | 19                  | 38.0  | 10                | 38.5  | 60    | 33.9  |
| Uniting enemies in an amicable way                                    | 08     | 20.5  | 38     | 61.3  | 12                  | 24.0  | -                 | -     | 58    | 32.8  |
| Total   | 39     | 100.0 | 62     | 100.0 | 50                  | 100.0 | 26                | 100.0 | 177   | 100.0 |

More important, is the fact 70.9% of all the respondents believed that the present peace in the country would endure, while 29.1% believed that such optimism was not borne out by the realities on the ground.

Reconciliation in the understanding of some FGD participants represents a process of fence – mending between two or more individuals or groups in conflict.

*It means bringing together again two or more conflicting parties in order to settle their differences. Reconciliation is a process of fostering peace among people who are enemies. It is a process restoring unity. (FGD 2)*

Nonetheless, some FGD participants were of the view that the TRC only partially facilitated reconciliation and that the wounds of the war were only partially healed.

*Some of the wounds are so deep that they will need the grace of God to be totally healed. To heal the wounds I think is not even in the mandate of the TRC given the length of time they had which was too short. (FGD 5)*

### 9.6 Knowledge of perpetrators and victims

More than half of the elites, 55.3%, a very high 82.3% of the members of the public, and 71.3% of the other categories of respondents, revealed that they knew someone who was involved in the war. Slightly more than half of the respondents, 51.6% of the elites and members of the public confirmed that they knew some of those who were killed, and also confirmed that among those that they knew, 23.7% were amputated, while 20.4% lost all their property. Among the elites and members of the public, 35.9% and 87.1% respectively, confirmed that they lost valuable property on account of the war. However, 64.1% of the elites and 12.9% of members of the public stated that they did not lose any property to the war. When asked to describe the type of property lost to the war, 65.2% of those interviewed confirmed that it was household property while only 15.2% said they lost academic materials and documents. More interesting is the fact that 76.9% of those who said they did not lose any property to the war attributed it to God’s providence, 15.4% said they did not live in places hit hard by the war while only 7.7% said they were not in the country during the war.

Unfortunately, a simple majority of the respondents, 58.2%, agreed that they lost loved ones to the war, while 41.2% said they did not lose any close relation. Of those who lost relatives and friends, 13.4% said they lost uncles (Table 7).

Table 7: Distribution of respondents who lost loved ones to the war

|       | Elites |       | Public |       | Traditional leaders |       | Religious leaders |       | Total |       |
|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|       | n      | %     | n      | %     | n                   | %     | n                 | %     | n     | %     |
| Yes   | 16     | 41.0  | 47     | 75.8  | 25                  | 50.0  | 16                | 61.5  | 104   | 58.8  |
| No    | 23     | 59.0  | 15     | 24.2  | 25                  | 50.0  | 10                | 38.5  | 73    | 41.2  |
| Total | 39     | 100.0 | 62     | 100.0 | 50                  | 100.0 | 26                | 100.0 | 177   | 100.0 |

Furthermore, Table 8 shows that 24.0% of the respondents confirmed that their relatives lost limbs against 76.0% that said their relatives did not lose any limbs during the war.

Table 8: Distribution of respondents whose relatives/friends lost limbs during the war

|       | Elites |       | Public |       | Traditional leaders |       | Religious leaders |       | Total |       |
|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|       | n      | %     | n      | %     | n                   | %     | n                 | %     | n     | %     |
| Yes   | 13     | 33.3  | 18     | 29.1  | -                   | -     | 10                | 38.5  | 41    | 24.0  |
| No    | 26     | 66.7  | 44     | 71.0  | 44                  | 100.0 | 16                | 61.5  | 130   | 76.0  |
| Total | 39     | 100.0 | 62     | 100.0 | 44                  | 100.0 | 26                | 100.0 | 171   | 100.0 |

Of the relatives whose limbs were amputated, those who lost a leg were 29.6%; while 25.9% lost both hands, and 18.5% lost one hand. Among the elites and members of the public, 46.2% and 72.5% respectively, believed that the RUF was responsible for most of the crimes committed. Coincidentally, 61.1% of the total number of respondents were of the same opinion while only 25.6% believed that government forces were also actively involved in committing war crimes. Several participants in the FGD sessions admitted that they knew many of the victims of the war while others confessed they lost loved ones, close relatives, friends and even valuables in the conflict.

As a very important component of the TRC process and requirement for post conflict reconciliation, forgiveness is vital to durable peace and stability in Sierra Leone. It was, accordingly, important to find out from the respondents if they were ready to forgive the perpetrators. All the elites, traditional leaders as well as 80.8% of religious leaders and 87.1% of the members of public disclosed that they could forgive the perpetrators of war crimes. In the same vein, all the elites and 82.3% of members of the public were of the view that they could be reconciled with the perpetrators. These findings are in line with the conclusion of the Final Report of the TRC that the majority of Sierra Leoneans were ready to forgive the perpetrators.

### 9.7 The TRC and reconciliation in post conflict Sierra-Leone

If facilitating national reconciliation was the main objective of the TRC, then the respondents were not impressed with the achievements of the Commission, as was clear from their responses. For instance, the majority of the elites 65.8% believed that the TRC did not facilitate reconciliation, while 72.7% of the members of the public believed that it facilitated reconciliation. In the total sample of respondents, 54.3% believed that the TRC facilitated reconciliation in the country. Of the rest who believed that the TRC did not aid the reconciliation process, 40% were of the view that reconciliation is a natural process that takes a lot of time to achieve. More significantly, 26.7% said that the TRC officials were corrupt, while another 20.0% were of the view that the TRC did not meet the expectations of the victims and so could not promote national reconciliation. However, the majority of all the respondents, 58.5%, believed that the TRC had healed the wounds created by the war, while 24.5% said it had not. Among the respondents, 36.4% believed that the TRC

did not heal the wounds of the war because the amputees continued to grumble over their excruciating conditions. They also expressed the view that the amputees were largely unhappy because they were not compensated.

### 9.8 Role of government in the reconciliation processes

It is important to point out that while 27.3% of respondents said that many people were generally annoyed over the activities of the Truth Commission, a very high majority, 61.8%, also expressed the view that they were not satisfied with government's performance, since the end of the war. Pressed further on what they thought the government should do for the victims of the war, 25.0% of respondents expressed the view that victims should be provided with financial support although they did not say how much each was to receive as compensation/reparation. Also important is the fact that a significant number of respondents, 21.9%, suggested that rural people ought to have been adequately sensitized on the activities of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, while 12.5% said that local chiefs should have been adequately involved in the truth and reconciliation process. A preponderant number of the elites, 84.6%, said that the government was not doing enough for the amputees because many of them were still on the street begging for alms; that they had not been empowered; and that there were no provisions for their education, food, clothing and shelter. Of those who were not satisfied with government's handling of the plight of the amputees, 31.6% believed that they (amputees) needed to be empowered in diverse ways, especially financially, while 26.3% suggested that they should be provided with either jobs or loans to start small scale businesses.

Finally, all the traditional and religious leaders, as well as the elites/political leaders, were unanimous in the view that they all have important roles to play in restoring peace to Sierra Leone. When they were further asked what their roles should be, the traditional leaders said that encouraging the local people to swear by means associated with shrines and other revered places, would have compelled them to speak the truth, which would have made a significant contribution to the TRC process. On their part, the religious leaders acknowledged their role to be that of always preaching the message of peaceful co-existence to their congregations. Asked if they were satisfied with government's reconciliation policies, only 26% of the traditional leaders described government's performance as satisfactory, 62.0% said it was very unsatisfactory while 12% were of the view that government policies betrayed the victims of the war and impunity.

### 9.9 Awareness of local mechanisms for promoting reconciliation

Ideally, local mechanisms for reconciliation should be used as much as possible in post conflict societies like those in Africa. Among other things, they are cheaper, local community friendly, and also likely to command acceptance from the people. Depending on the circumstances and how they are used, they could also be much

Table 9: Respondents' views on whether local methods for promoting truth and reconciliation exist in Sierra Leone

|       | Elites |       | Public |       | Traditional leaders |       | Religious leaders |       | Total |       |
|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|       | n      | %     | n      | %     | n                   | %     | n                 | %     | n     | %     |
| Yes   | 17     | 43.6  | 12     | 21.8  | 07                  | 28.0  | 15                | 57.7  | 51    | 35.2  |
| No    | 22     | 56.4  | 43     | 78.2  | 18                  | 72.0  | 11                | 42.3  | 94    | 64.8  |
| Total | 39     | 100.0 | 55     | 100.0 | 25                  | 100.0 | 26                | 100.0 | 145   | 100.0 |

more efficient than the borrowed or externally-imposed ones. It was therefore important to find out from the respondents if there were any indigenous mechanisms for promoting reconciliation among the various groups in the country, and whether they were used (Table 9).

When the respondents were probed further on whether they were aware of local methods for promoting truth and reconciliation, 64.8% believed that there were no local methods while only 35.2% said there were local techniques. Of those who agreed that local methods existed, 28.1% identified swearing by the individual's belief system. The Majority of the elites (66.7%) and traditional leaders (59.1%) believed that the local methods would have been more successful while the majority of the members of the public 62.0% and religious leaders 61.5% believed that the local methods would not have been as successful as the method used by the TRC.

There was divergence of views between the survey respondents and participants in the FGDs on the efficacy of the TRC versus traditional or local methods of reconciliation. Most FGD participants expressed the view that if local methods had been adopted, they would have been more successful. According to them

*Many people were not sincere in their testimonies and some that had deep scars and pains of the war and who should have been allowed to speak were merely spectators at the proceedings. (FGD3)*

Some of the participants in the FGDs were of the view that the TRC was based on western values of truth and reconciliation, while it operated in an alien African environment that was far from western<sup>1</sup>. FGD participants believed that traditional means of truth telling and reconciliation such as going to villages for cleansing should have been used, since the atrocities committed by the rebels and Kamajors were believed to have offended the gods who, in turn, had to be appeased in the affected communities.

1. Yes, the TRC Chair is a Sierra Leonean but no effort was made to use local mechanisms of reconciliation and truth telling by the Commission.

*The traditional chiefs should have pioneered the reconciliation. They should have used traditional means such as swearing by the gods which people fear so much. That would have encouraged many to speak the truth in the process. The local chiefs should have been in charge of everything. (FGD<sub>3</sub>)*

Among the respondents, those who believed that the present peace would endure reasoned that peace is God given, and that rehabilitation and reconciliation are already taking place, even if they are halting sometimes, and that no Sierra Leonean wants war again, people are tired of fighting.

Table 10: Respondents' views on whether the present peace would endure

|       | Elites |       | Public |       | Traditional leaders |       | Religious leaders |       | Total |       |
|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|       | n      | %     | n      | %     | n                   | %     | n                 | %     | n     | %     |
| Yes   | 28     | 73.7  | 47     | 81.0  | 26                  | 52.0  | 21                | 80.8  | 122   | 70.9  |
| No    | 10     | 26.3  | 11     | 19.0  | 24                  | 48.0  | 05                | 19.2  | 50    | 29.1  |
| Total | 38     | 100.0 | 58     | 100.0 | 50                  | 100.0 | 26                | 100.0 | 172   | 100.0 |

From Table 10 above, a majority of elites/political leaders, 73.7%, 81.0% of members of the public, 52.0% of the traditional leaders and an overwhelming number of religious leaders, 80.8%, believed that the present peace would endure. Of the total number of respondents, 70.9% were confident that the peace would hold, in spite of the challenges facing the government and people. General war weariness and the harsh realities of life for those caught between the government and rebel forces were a good lesson in keeping the peace. Yet, 29.1% of all the respondents still harbour the suspicion that war may break out in the country if care is not taken. They expressed fear that peace might not last for long; that government seemed not to have learnt any lessons from the past; that there were still cases of flagrant abuse of public office by office holders; as those at present in power wanted to hold on to it by all means possible, many other fundamental causes of the war were yet to be effectively addressed. The present government, they noted, would open old wounds, unless the attitude of public officers' changed for the better. This pessimism was shared by FGD discussants.

*Unless we change attitude, I am afraid, we may experience another war. (FGD 4)*

Lastly, survey interview respondents thought that the TRC's recommendations were not fully implemented and that on the whole, the Commission had not been a success. This last point is important in the light of the views of the FGD participants who noted that what is in place now is conditional peace; it will only endure if the

recommendations of the TRC are fully implemented. However, those who strongly believed that the peace was tenuous and might not last for long, expressed the view that the root causes of the war had not been addressed.

#### 10. Conclusion: Ownership, capacity and long-term utility of a truth commission

It may yet be too early to pass a definitive judgment on the effects of the TRC process in Sierra Leone on national reconciliation and peace building. Nonetheless, certain important issues are already obvious and call for critical attention. The first is that the long-term success of the Commission cannot be divorced from the general post war climate in Sierra Leone. This is vital because the state is itself being “reformatted” by the international community after over a decade of debilitating civil war that left its economy and political institutions in a complete shambles. Of course, it is inconceivable that it would on its own embark upon extensive and credible programmes of reconciliation and reconstruction if that means meeting the needs of its citizens especially those who had suffered physical and emotional losses, etc. Put differently, the success of a TRC will depend to a large extent on whether it is able to address the background conditions that led to the hostilities on the one hand, and on the other, its ability to put in place mechanisms that will effect qualitative changes to the post conflict political and social conditions of the population in particular and the country in general. This point was stressed by Rodolfo Mattarollo, of UNAMSIL in Freetown in 2002.

In countries where they have had the greatest impact, truth commission reports, and especially their conclusions and recommendations, have acted as a kind of foundation stone, signalling a society’s decision to turn over a new page in its history. In this way, the society in question has also shown determination to move into a new phase in which the rule of law can prevail, democracy can be built and human rights can be respected, guaranteed, and promoted...in fact an important characteristic of truth commissions...has been their clear desire to break with the past (Mattarollo 2002:19).

Two broad points can be discerned from this conclusion. First, it should be clear by now, even to the casual observer, whether the objective situation in Sierra Leone, post TRC, has significantly changed or not. The second point is that given the present position of the victims of war-time crimes, especially those identified in the Final Report of the TRC as having special needs, it may not be out of place to conclude that truth-telling as a means of healing the wounds of the past and coping with the future, without socio-economic empowerment is ephemeral; a mere short-term palliative that does not address substantive and long-term needs in the post conflict dispensation. This cynicism is also shared by the Final Report of the TRC:

Truth-telling without reparations could be perceived by the victims as an incomplete process in which they revealed their pain and suffering without any mechanism in place to deal with the consequences of that pain or to substantially alter the material circumstances of their lives. In that regard, the Commission concurs with the view expressed by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that without adequate reparation and rehabilitation measures, there can be no healing or reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

Given the inability of the government to implement most of the recommendations of the TRC, the above conclusion has serious implications for lasting peace in the country. Besides, even if the peace were to be preserved, it would not address the dire needs of the amputees and other war affected persons especially those in the vast rural areas.

Perhaps more crucial is the perceived inability of the state to effectively address the plight of war victims with special needs, and the socialization processes of children and other members of the extended families of victims. The pent up anger of the victims and the danger that poses to long-term reconciliation came out clearly during the testimonies of victims, during the proceedings of the Commission.

*We the amputees, how are we in this world now? I am not speaking for myself here. The government should not leave our case behind. It is not for us, it is for our children. If my child grows up and asks me who chopped off my hand, I will say these people did it to me. That will bring the war again. If you say peace should come, we the amputees should bring the peace. I can't be struggling and say that I am living in peace. That is why our case should be pushed forward. If our problem is left behind, [the] war will not end. We the amputees we all have children... we have no hands. We should be assisted. If we are assisted we will have peace of mind. All our children can think for themselves now. They ask us who chopped off our hands and feet. We have to make our children reconcile their minds. (Adama Koroma, a female victim, testimony to the Commission and answering the Chairman's questions.)*

Asked by the TRC Chairman what his recommendations to the Commission would be, a male victim replied thus:

*The first thing I want to recommend is that most of us are willing to forgive, but to sustain this forgiveness, you can all see that we have lost our dignity because we used to be fit to fend for ourselves but this is not so anymore. That has caused most of us to become beggars in the streets... So I will recommend to the Commission that they should put mechanisms in place, which will ensure that there are provisions for us, which will be sustainable and not something that we can eat in a single day, something that will be sustainable maybe for as long we are alive and even our children...*

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1. *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone* (hereafter simply TRC Report), Volume 2: Chapter 4: Reparations, on official website of the SLTRC, [www.trcsierraleone.org/drwebsite/publish/index.html](http://www.trcsierraleone.org/drwebsite/publish/index.html)

Finally, the report was categorical on the precarious nature of the post hostilities peace building and reconstruction efforts if victims are not well catered for.

Some are faced almost continuously with those who have harmed them in their own communities, their presence serving as a constant reminder of the violation suffered. Moving beyond this state is impossible given the economic and social conditions that victims find themselves in and their dependence on handouts. The humiliation of being dependent on the charity of others and often having to beg in order to live re-victimizes victims, leaving lasting scars and wounds that may fester thoughts of bitterness and anger. This may constitute the seeds of future violence. A reparations programme has the potential to restore the dignity of victims whose lives have been most devastated to move beyond the position they are in as a consequence of the war. The restoration of the dignity of victims can help to create the conditions necessary for reconciliation.

Sound as the above arguments are, the truth is that government is incapable of doing much for the victims. According to a keen observer of the political scene in the country, there are clear signs that the government of Tejan Kabbah is doing little to address the underlying factors that led to the war in the first place (interview in Hamburg). This misgiving is further buttressed by a recent study on post war regimes and reconstruction in Liberia and Sierra Leone:

...some of the expectations of Sierra Leoneans regarding President Kabbah's ability to propel the country's post conflict peace building project were dashed. On assuming the mantle of leadership, for example, he appointed a 22-member cabinet drawn mainly from his SLPP party faithful and supporters. Although this action is not in conflict with the country's constitution, it is not a true reflection of the spirit of reconciliation in a post war society (Gbla forthcoming).

Another keen observer lamented:

The tragedy of Sierra Leone is catastrophic failure of leadership, compounded by Kabbah's government, which is increasingly out of step with the pulse of the nation.<sup>1</sup>

It would appear, then, that government is doing business as usual. But the danger of this déjà vu attitude was brought home rather dramatically in early May 2004 when some 200 amputees mounted a violent protest in the southeastern town of Kenema, to bring their desperate plight to the attention of the government. According to their spokesperson, three amputees had died the week before the protest due to medical neglect. Much more illuminating was their complaint that the post conflict reconciliation policies of government favoured and even valorised ex-combatants; they are "sent to school, given scholarships to study at home and abroad without caring about the victims".<sup>2</sup> Another amputee lamented: "What puzzles me is that

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1. Luseni Wanjama, in *For Di People*, Freetown, 25 July 2005 p. 3. Quoted in Gbla (2003:7).

2. BBC *Focus on Africa*, May 2 2004, 6:05 pm.

the perpetrators are cared for and those of us who are victims are left out. What will happen to us in the future?"<sup>1</sup> These expressions of frustration draw attention to two interrelated developments in post war Sierra Leone: the apparent preference given to ex-combatants and even perpetrators, evident in some government programmes, on the one hand, and on the other, the apparent inability of the state to mount credible and autonomous post war reconciliation programmes. The hard fact is that government does not own the whole of post conflict reconciliation processes and agenda, as long as they are externally driven. Unfortunately, the concerns and priorities and even the focus of the donor community, including many Non-Governmental Organizations, are not necessarily the same as those of the state and people of Sierra Leone. For instance, the amputees' colony has been disbanded without compensation or the necessary social and economic infrastructure in place to cater for their needs. Thus, while they were literally emptied into communities without any means of livelihood that would also guarantee their dignity, the perpetrators were given a package of support worth about Le300,000 during the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration exercise. Much preferred by the donor community as a stabilizing force, in the eyes of the victims, DDR seems like rewarding the perpetrators of violence, and has created a yawning gap between the victims and government on the one hand, and between victims and perpetrators on the other. Certainly, such a situation is far from ideal for long-term peace and reconciliation, contrary to what the popular arguments would have us believe.

In that regard, although in some respects the Truth Commission was patterned after that in South Africa, there are significant differences between them. The initiative in South Africa was largely conceived and driven from within. Also, South Africa has the resource capacity at its disposal, thereby making itself much more autonomous of external influence. Thus, it is arguable that the activities and recommendations of its TRC, in spite of their severe limitations, were within reach of government, given the political will. However, in the case of Sierra Leone, there was too much reliance on the international community, which typically made financial pledges but frequently fell short in redeeming them. Consequently, the much announced rehabilitation programme especially for amputees, victims of sexual violence, children etc. could not be implemented as planned. For instance, a critical issue is caring for HIV/AIDS victims in the absence of facilities and expertise in the country. According to the Final Report of the TRC, for example, there are only 300 medical doctors in the whole country, and half that number reside in the capital, Freetown.<sup>2</sup> The implication is that since many of the victims of sexual violence reside in the countryside, they would not have access to even those limited facilities

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1. Gibrilla Dumbuya, a victim, answering questions from the TRC Chairman at a public session in the northern district of Moyamba, quoted in *TRC Final Report*, Volume 2, Chapter 4: Reparations.

2. *TRC Final Report*, Volume 2, Chapter 4: Reparations.

that are in place. This, perhaps, was why the Truth Commission recommended setting up four regional centres but that is hardly enough to cater for the needs of all victims, especially in the light of crushing poverty and poor transport infrastructure. In short, most victims would not be able to access treatment in the proposed regional centres if they are finally created given the distances, even if treatment were to be free.

That, to me, is perhaps the crux of the matter. Sierra Leone cannot embark upon the imperative transition from insecurity to genuine peace and development in a fragile political and economic situation without a massive injection of material and financial assistance from the international community. But that cannot be assured anymore because the donor community has its tolerance limit, and the present “good will” cannot continue indefinitely. Indeed, there is now a lively debate in donor countries on what to do with basket cases like Sierra Leone, and some have even suggested a return to the “protectorate system” of old.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the pace, the content, the extent and even the quality of the peace and security and development programmes in the country will depend very much on how far the international community is still ready to go. What is clear so far is that there is an evident scaling down of donor activity in the country.

The problem is that while it is logical to argue that the TRC provides “restorative” justice which is the foundation of healing and reconciliation, it would not make much sense if the victims are left on their own and to fend for themselves. For instance, how would a youth whose limbs have been amputated secure his/her daily needs with dignity in a country where the majority of able bodied citizens live below the poverty line? Sierra Leone, after all, was among the poorest countries in the world, long before the war. Certainly, the fratricidal war had exacerbated the situation for the majority, but more especially so for the amputees and others with special circumstances. The important question, then, is: Will the affected youths and adults ever forget the past and move on, when the past is deeply etched on their individual and collective daily experiences? The answer is certainly no, and that has significant bearing on long-term peace and understanding in the country.

Furthermore, the truth of the matter is that if the family – both the immediate and extended members – on whom most Sierra Leoneans depend in times of need, is unable to provide physical, emotional and material buffering to victims, it is doubtful if the community could fill such an important gap. Moreover, in such a situation, it would be very difficult for homes and communities that have amputees and other victims of the war with special requirements, to forgive perpetrators, especially if they – the perpetrators – also live in their midst. The point is that as long as

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1. The donor community is now seriously discussing the possibility of introducing once again the trusteeship system for failed states especially in Africa. Obvious candidates for this new system are countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia in West Africa. This was the theme of an international conference, *Trusteeship: A Question for the 21st Century*, that I had the privilege of attending in Bellagio, Italy, in February 2006.

victims nurse disaffection towards government and perpetrators, they will continue to transmit negative socialization behavioural traits to their children and members of their extended families and communities. The hatred and frustration will linger for a long time in such families and even after the death of the original victim.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the “reminders” of the war are still very much evident to the visitor as soon as he arrives in the capital, Freetown.

At Mammy Yoko helipad, where helicopters from the international airport drop off passengers coming to Freetown, young Joseph Fofanah – perhaps 13 years old – walks up to one of the cars taking the visitors to their various destinations. Without a word, he holds up the remnants of his arms – amputated above the elbows by combatants during the war – and begs for help. Other amputees do likewise. “I don’t know what the TRC or the Special Court is. I have nothing to say about him (the person who cut off his arms) but just help me with something to eat”<sup>1</sup>.

Several other crucial questions will have to be answered either now or at some point in the future if the reconciliation exercise is to have lasting impact not only on all those affected by the war, but the rest of society. For instance, how do you reconcile babies who were amputated with their perpetrators? Is such reconciliation going to be by proxy, that is, between the parents of amputees and the perpetrators? Would such babies receive compensation from the state at any time in the future in the form of educational subsidies or scholarships? But even if compensation were to be paid, will it go directly to the parents? It would seem to me that the ideal situation would be to set up a *Reparations Fund* for such children/victims while they are yet to reach the statutory age of majority of 18 years. But is that possible at the moment? It is very doubtful. My submission is that for reconciliation to take deep roots, adult victims and families of those yet to reach maturity would have to be economically empowered to minimize the risk of “rejection”. That however leaves the whole question of how to heal the emotional wounds of young victims of the uncivil war, babies, toddlers, etc. especially the trauma and related psychological problems, wide open. I am not sure if government has an effective answer to their predicament.

A study conducted in 2001/2002 on trauma among child soldiers in Sierra Leone and Liberia found that the “most visible symptoms of the phenomenon are; anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, aggressive behaviour, withdrawal, bed-wetting and recurrent nightmares” (Gbla 2003:180). The author lamented however, that much of what has been done for the child soldiers so far, has been in the areas of meeting their material and physical needs (Gbla 2003:183) The irony here is that while the youth were easily recruited into the war because of their dire state before the war, the post war programmes have not adequately addressed their predicaments either. In other words, like in pre-war Sierra Leone, the youth are yet to be given a

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1. Quoted in *IRINews.org*, Friday April 16, 2004, p. 1

“voice” in the scheme of things after the war. For sure, there is now a Ministry for Youth and Sports but there were no consultations between the government and the youth before it was set up, to find out what the priority areas in youth rehabilitation programmes should be. Yes, skills training schemes were made available, carpentry, tailoring, etc. but are they the preferred areas for youth empowerment?

It is common knowledge that most of the youth live in the rural areas and are mainly engaged in subsistence farming, and are also in urgent need of assistance. Thus, a more realistic and even “natural” response would have been food production, and a “back to the farm” scheme to placate the idle rural youth. But again we are confronted with the stark reality of local capacity which is just not there to handle such a programme. For the teeming youth, then, there is once again a sense of *déjà vu*, for the more things seem to change, the more they remain the same.

It is safe to conclude therefore, that by and large popular expectations from the TRC have not been met. For instance, although the Commission was to come up with a blueprint on how war could be avoided in future, many of its recommendations are hinged more or less on government good will, which cannot be taken for granted even at the best of times. For instance, although bad governance and especially policies of exclusion were singled out as the most important background factors that incubated the resentment which eventually triggered the war, there are no perceptible safeguards in place on how another war can be avoided in future. It would seem government is infected with the same old virus: corruption, marginalization, tribalism etc. Sadly, the virus seems to be resistant to all the remedies so far prescribed both by local and foreign stakeholders. Yes, there are halting attempts to decentralize governance in theory but, in practice, almost everything is still centralized around the President and the ruling party; access to economic and political resources and other benefits is still dependent upon how close an individual is to political power. Social services and related infrastructure are still concentrated in Freetown. Again, most of those who benefit from such services are the elites, including the Lebanese and Indians. It is therefore imperative for government to broaden its base so that other stakeholders are brought in, for that is the surest way of preventing a relapse into the old ways of doing things with all their attendant negative consequences. As a perceptive observer noted

My submission is that the “primary cancer” in our case may be and was and will always be grave social injustice and the desperate desire to deprive the less fortunate in society...whilst the “secondary infection” is the ...savage conflict which has eroded and deprived victims” knowledge of good and evil. Learning to uphold and administer justice fairly and fearlessly is the major therapy to that trauma (Momoh 2002:25).

The stark reality of Sierra Leone’s predicament is: how do you ensure good governance through “distributive justice” in an environment of extreme economic depriva-

tion? Unfortunately, this problem has been compounded by the fact that external engagements in post war or post conflict reconciliation and reconstruction projects in many parts of the world are not only transient, but are at one level, also elaborate exit strategies for the guarantors of peace agreements. From such a view point, then, once the most pressing aspects of the post conflict reconstruction project have been accomplished or are seen to have been realized, the international community is bound to withdraw and with that, there is no effective external superintending agency to monitor what goes on in the country. This is particularly so since even the recommendations of the TRC are of a long-term nature. From then on, the shape of the reconciliation and reconstruction activities and programmes would more or less depend on the local regime's understanding of what should be done, and more importantly, on availability of local capacity to do it. The inevitable conclusion, therefore, is that while true reconciliation is best promoted through inclusive democratic governance – a government that is not only responsible to, but also alive to the yearnings of the people – there is no guarantee that government will rise to the occasion and help its citizens break the yoke of extreme deprivation and squalor. However, unless the material, mental and physical needs of the people, especially the disabled are adequately catered for in post conflict reconciliation and reconstruction processes and programmes, it will be difficult for them to forget their past and look to a brighter future. As a diplomat in Freetown commented in respect of the TRC proceedings:

*Yes the stories will be told, but people will go back to live with amputees in the same community. How do you guarantee that revenge will not occur?*<sup>1</sup>

To avert such a doomsday scenario and consolidate the reconciliation processes so that both victims and perpetrators are fully rehabilitated and integrated into the larger society where they will not feel ostracized or marginalized, seems to me to be the biggest test facing not only the government of President Tejan Kabbah, but also those who are likely to succeed him in the near future. Will he or the successor regime measure up to it? Only time will tell.

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