‘CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE LIBERAL PROJECT IN GHANA AND SIERRA LEONE’

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Introduction

'Civil society' has become an important term within the discourse and practice of contemporary development, now forming a central element in the consensus that has emerged within the western ‘development community’ about how politics in African states (and elsewhere) is to be reworked in order to provide better ‘governance’ and ultimately the conditions for accelerated ‘development’. In this paper we examine attempts by western states and development agencies to ‘support’ and ‘encourage’ civil society in two African states: Ghana and Sierra Leone. These cases, while they are obviously very different, do nonetheless exemplify some of the typical forms of interventions that target ‘civil society’ in African states.

Our discussion of these interventions is informed by an understanding of the broad project of reform that western states and development agencies are attempting in most African states, which we have called, following Margaret Canovan, a liberal project. This phrase seems to us to better capture the general character of liberalism, moving beyond understanding it as simply a body of theory (although it does, of course, take a theoretical form) to understanding it as a project of social transformation that is at work in the concrete practices of political agents. We suggest here that the activities of Western agencies targeted at ‘civil society’ in Ghana and Sierra Leone should be viewed as a manifestation of this liberal project.

In making this argument we are situating ourselves not just in a particular understanding of liberalism, but more generally within a series of claims about the relationship between political concepts, categories and arguments and the activities of political agents. We do not have space to substantiate these claims here but the view we take sits between at least two other possibilities. The first is that the activities of political agents, in this case western states and development agencies, can be understood without reference to ‘ideas’ or ‘ideology’. From hard-nosed ‘political scientists’ to radical critics it has been commonplace to argue that

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1 Margaret Canovan, ‘On being economical with the truth: some liberal reflections’, Political Studies 38(1) 1990, 5-19. See also David Williams, The World Bank and Social Transformation in International Politics: Liberalism, Governance and Sovereignty (London, Routledge, 2008) and Tom Young, ‘A Project to be realised’: Global Liberalism and a New World Order in E. Hovden and E. Keene (eds.), The Globalisation of Liberalism, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002 pp.173-190
something other than ‘ideas’ is driving the activities of these agencies – usually the ‘interests’ of some group or another. There are good reasons why this kind of account will not stand on its own, partly to do with the difficulties of conceiving of agency devoid of some kinds of ‘ideas’, even if only ideas about what it is in one’s interests to do and why. If this is right the question is not ‘do ideas matter’ but ‘which ideas matter’, and this question is significantly an empirical one. It should be noted, however, that we do not think that the actions of these agencies can be understood simply with reference to ‘ideas’. The actions of concrete political agents in concrete settings are necessarily shaped by a host of contingent and practical matters.

The second possibility is much more expansive and follows Foucault in at least one of his modes (in *The Order of Things* for example), by investigating the very broad discursive structures that define the possibilities of subjectivity and knowledge. Our position is narrower, focusing on the particular patterns of liberal thought and practice (although that is itself a broad terrain) as manifest in specific political agents. Part of the reason for this is our understanding of liberalism precisely as a political project which has as its object the transformation of the social world rather than as simply one set of ideas that structure the broad possibilities of social life (although it can have this kind of quality to it). Liberalism is shaped by broader discursive possibilities of course but it is by itself narrower than these.

While this remains our general stance a subsidiary purpose of this paper (and some linked research) is to open up the question of the roles of different kinds of political agents at different levels of such transformational projects. In one sense of course there is nothing new here the tension between (say) London and the ‘man on the spot’ was obvious in colonial times but there has been relatively little attention devoted to this theme more recently. Part of developing the ‘liberal project’ idea is to unpack how it operates within and at different levels of various institutions.

The paper proceeds in three stages. In the next section we explore the place of civil society within liberal thought suggesting that it is characterised by certain tensions and ambiguities, themselves rooted in a fundamental tension in Liberalism between what might be called a ‘liberation narrative’ and a ‘transformation narrative’. We draw attention to three ambiguities: between private and public interests; the role of
‘identity’; and concerns about the scope of ‘civil society’ activity. We conclude by suggesting ways in which these tensions are explicable within a conceptualization of liberalism as a political project. In the sections that follow we turn to the discourses and practices of western agencies. First we briefly review the way in which the term ‘civil society’ emerged and its place within donor discourse and practice. Following from this we argue that much of the donor discourse about ‘civil society’ tracks the ways that liberal social and political thought has conceptualized ‘civil society’. In the final two sections we turn to the case studies showing how donor activities in these two countries illustrate both the ambiguities of civil society as a concept as well as the broader political project of liberalism.

**Civil Society and the Liberal Project**

‘Civil society’ holds an important if ambiguous place within liberal thought. As early as Locke, for example, we find the idea that a kind of autonomous ‘social’ realm provides an important foundation for theorising about political life. As the trajectory of liberal thought has developed this idea in various ways it has given ‘civil society’ a series of roles within the broader liberal account of political, economic and social life. Being rather schematic it is possible to identify four such roles.

- As a constraint on the power of the state (‘accountability’)
- As an arena within which individuals can pursue their own projects (esp. economic but not just these)
- As an arena of association ensuring a certain kind of freedom and allowing for the expression of diverse views and opinions
- As a place for the cultivation of certain attitudes and virtues

These understandings produce the familiar liberal account of the relations between state, society and individual in which individuals are free to pursue their economic and political aspirations and enabled both to cultivate the virtues that make such a society work as well as ensure that the state, while carrying out necessary public functions, does not become oppressive or its agents corrupt. This picture needs however to be seen against the background of the idea of liberation (from oppressive social arrangements and ideas) in which civil society ‘emerges’ and the idea of
transformation in which civil society has to be both constructed and defended. It is customary in political theory circles to ascribe this to different Liberal traditions but in fact it is there from the very beginning. John Locke in a work whose whole point is to argue that, ’the commonwealth seems to me to be a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving and advancing of their own civil interests’ is careful to add Christian preachers are bound to exhort all men to peace goodwill, charity, meekness and toleration; and in his educational writings to insist ‘on the importance of instilling a spirit of generosity and liberality (charity) in matters concerning property as a counterweight to the child’s will to dominate.2

Against this background a number of tensions/ambiguities in Liberal concepts of civil society can be identified.

- a tension between private and public interests - how can a sphere of private interests produce the public interest?
- an ambiguity over the role of ‘identity’- how are social groups not characterised by ‘interests’ to be understood and related to?
- and an ambiguity over the scope of ‘civil society’ activity – can civil society be relied upon to sustain a liberal order?

Our argument is that these tensions are explicable if liberalism is understood as a ‘political project’. In other words liberalism’s commitment to ‘civil society’ is hedged around by a host of other commitments which suggest that what is really being advocated or defended is a particular kind of associational life relating in particular ways to the state. It also suggests that ‘civil society’ is itself at least in part a constructed realm as certain kinds of associational life are to be reworked or even eliminated, and other forms encouraged, and finally it suggests that ‘civil society’ can play an important part in shaping the attitudes, mores and self-understanding of individuals who are to be encouraged to conceive of themselves and their relations with others and the state in particular kinds of ways. All of this, we suggest, is visible in the discourse and practice of western states and development agencies in their relations with African states.

2 Locke A Letter p.393 & p.404
Development and ‘Civil Society’

Despite the conceptual presence of some notion of civil society within Liberal thought its political deployment has of course varied with time and political circumstance. Against a backdrop of its use as political slogan in eastern Europe in struggles against Soviet domination, ‘civil society’ first emerged within the policies of western development agencies in the late 1980s and early 1990s as part of the broader ideas of ‘good governance’ and ‘democracy promotion’. The 1989 World Bank report that first articulated this idea in the context of Africa asserted that ‘underlying the litany of Africa’s development problems was a crisis of governance’.3 This idea of a ‘crisis of governance’ went beyond simply a concern with failing government institutions and focused attention on a much broader set of political and social factors.

Ultimately, better governance requires political renewal. This means a concerted attack on corruption from the highest to the lowest levels. This can be done by setting a good example, by strengthening accountability, by encouraging public debate, and by nurturing a free press. It also means empowering women and the poor by fostering grassroots and non-governmental organizations, such as farmers associations, cooperatives and women’s groups.4

The report stressed the need to harness and encourage ‘civil society’ in Africa and suggested that the ‘new approach should try to reconcile efficient government with the common desire of individual Africans to be independent economic operators, and of social, religious, and community groups to play their part’.5 It was argued that these ‘intermediaries’ could voice local concerns, bring a broader spectrum of ideas and values to bear on policymaking, and exert pressure on public officials for better performance and accountability.6 In 1994 it argued that,

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4 World Bank, Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth, p.6.
5 World Bank, Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth, p.59.
6 World Bank, Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth, p.59, p.61.
good governance is epitomized by predictable, open, and enlightened policymaking (that is a transparent process); a bureaucracy imbued with a professional ethos; an executive arm of government accountable for its actions; a strong civil society participating in public affairs; and all behaving under the rule of law.7

In 1999, the then president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn argued that one of the prerequisites for development is ‘good and clean government’, and that this meant increased governmental capacity, ‘open’ government, a transparent regulatory system an ‘absolute commitment to ‘clean government’ an ‘effective legal and justice system’ and a well-organised and supervised financial system, and finally the development of ‘civil society in all its forms’.8 Almost all other major Western donors and development agencies have followed the World Bank down this path – another striking example of the policy convergence that has characterised western agencies since the 1990s

This should not be seen as simply rhetoric. First, donors increased aid provision for ‘government and civil society’ from just over US$2 500m in 1989 to nearly US$ 12 500 in 2005 (by way of comparison lending for education was twice as much in 1989 but only two-thirds as much in 2005). Over the same time period direct support to NGOs nearly doubled.9 Between 2007-09 ‘civil society organisations’ were involved in the design and implementation of 7.5% of World Bank projects.10 Second, the concern with ‘civil society’ is related to other changes within the policies and practices of the western agencies, most notably cooperation with NGOs and ‘participation’.11 NGOs, particularly ‘indigenous’ NGOs, are seen as a part of civil society and Western NGOs, which have been increasingly cooperating with major donors, and are considered to be an effective tool for encouraging the emergence of civil society. In terms of ‘participation’, a concern with encouraging the participation of project ‘stakeholders’ has developed into a more expansive concern with eliciting

9 OECD figures
11 See Williams, The World Bank and Social Transformation in International Politics, pp. 64-69.
the ‘participation’ of ‘civil society’ in the formation of development strategies, notably through the PRSP process.

Finally, and most importantly, the concern with ‘civil society’ is understood by Western donors to be an essential part of the much broader project of institutionalizing good governance and democracy. The logic of the donor arguments is clear. In order for the state to provide the institutional and macroeconomic environment necessary for ‘development’ it must be made accountable for its actions (left to their own devices politicians will not do it). The state’s activities, then must be made as transparent as possible through various information provision services and encouraging a free press and public debates, and ‘civil society’ groups must be ‘empowered’ so that they can play a key role in pressuring the state for better performance. ‘Aware that they are being monitored by citizen groups, public officials know that they may be held accountable for budget discrepancies or failure to deliver adequate services’.12 In this way corruption can be curbed and the state can be made responsive to the demands of society, and the organized groups within civil society help sustain the political pluralism thought to be characteristic of, and necessary for, liberal politics. In this way donors exactly reflect the way that civil society is understood within liberal political thought.

But donor discourse also reflects the ambiguities and tensions of liberal understandings of ‘civil society’. There is a concern about whether civil society groups actually have the skills to enable them to hold governments to account: ‘the effectiveness of many initiatives is impaired by civil society’s lack of technical expertise in financial management and budgetary analysis’.13 There is also a concern with limiting the scope of civil society: ‘in some spheres ... there can be little compromise. Family and ethnic ties that strengthen communal actions have no place in central government agencies where staff must be selected on merit, and public and private monies must not be confused’.14 The same is true of other ‘indigenous’ institutions and practices. One Bank staff member has argued that certain African ‘cultural traits’ are not conducive to development. These, include placing a higher value on inter-personal relations than on personal achievements, emphasising

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13 World Bank, Demanding Good Governance, p. v11.
14 World Bank, Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth, p.60.
conspicuous consumption over productive investments, and valuing leisure and the ability to engage in rituals, ceremonies, and social activities, over labour. As Pierre Landell-Mills argued in a wonderfully clear articulation of the liberal project, ‘the challenge is to build on the elements that are compatible with modernisation and development, [and reject] those that are not’.16

Ghana

The World Bank’s 2004 Country Assistance Strategy argued that Ghana ‘is a country characterised by strong social institutions’ and ‘open public dialogue’: ‘social discourse covers a wide range of social, political and economic issues, animated by civil society organisations … think tanks providing solid local analysis and by other social institutions such as labour unions’. It also notes that the government has made ‘important strides to deepen its dialogue with the growing civil society movement and the private sector’. Despite this the Bank argued that ‘participation by civil society in the management of public affairs has been constrained by the lack of access to information’, that corruption is still a problem in some areas of public life, and that to build good democratic governance ‘it is necessary to empower the people to participate effectively … and to enhance transparency and accountability and reduce corruption’. This rather mixed assessment of Ghana’s progress towards better governance is typical of donor assessments of Ghana more generally: doing relatively ok but could do better. It illustrates very well, however, the logic of the donor position: the need for civil society organisations to hold the government accountable for its actions and to contribute to public debate. In 2000 the then World Bank country director in Ghana said that the two main benefits of greater civil society involvement were the generation of feedback to help the public sector

improve its performance and the improved accountability of government.\textsuperscript{19} Again donors have been increasing the funding for governance and civil society activities in Ghana, up from $29.5m in 2002 to $95m in 2005.\textsuperscript{20} In addition to this there has been a marked increase in the use of NGOs in project implementation and service delivery in Ghana, and direct support for NGOs in Ghana rose from $4.3m in 2002 to $14.9m in 2006.\textsuperscript{21}

It is also possible to see this concern with the role of civil society in good governance in the details of many donor projects. The Public Financial Management Project was focused on improving the central government’s budget management and revenue collection processes, but it also has as one of its objectives the strengthening of ‘civil society’ involvement in the area of economic management.\textsuperscript{22} This involved, among other things, support for organisations within the Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition (a ‘civil society’ organisation), funding for a variety of initiatives to encourage the participation of civil society in the oversight of economic management, including providing training for the media so it can ‘play its watchdog role vis-à-vis the fiscal and economic activities of the government.’\textsuperscript{23}

The details of other projects and programmes, however, also reveal many of the ambiguities and tensions about civil society we identified within liberal thought more generally. In particular the Ghanaian case demonstrates the considerable ambivalence about three key issues: participation (what kinds of ‘civil society’ get to ‘participate’?); identity (what is the role of ‘traditional’ forms of association?); and what we might call the ‘engineering of ‘civil society’ (the construction of association life based on certain attributes and skills).

\textit{Participation and its limits}

\textsuperscript{20} World Bank figures
\textsuperscript{21} World Bank figures
The Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) 2003-2005 is a remarkable document. It includes, for example, 106 specific targets for reform in the area of good governance and civil society participation. One of the distinctive features of the PRSP process is the way they are supposed to be prepared. ‘One of the key principles adopted in the preparation of the GPRS was the participation of Ghanaians to ensure national ownership of all stakeholders of the strategy formulation, programme implantation and monitoring’ (p. 5). This ‘participatory’ process had a number of elements (pp. 5-10). The process started with a national forum of stakeholders involved in poverty reduction activities including the government, NGOs, civil society and advocacy groups and donors. There then followed a more extensive consultative process involving 36 community groups, the Ghanaian media, the Trades Union Congress, student unions, professional bodies, representatives of women’s groups, NGOs and religious groups involved in service delivery, the Ghana Employers Association, research institutions, political parties and members of parliament. The draft GPRS was also discussed with development agencies operating in Ghana and government ministers. A total of 35 separate participatory activities were undertaken in the preparation of the GPRS.

In many ways, then, the Ghanaian PRSP does what the PRSP process is supposed to do. On closer inspection however some obvious issues arise. First there is a question about which ‘civil society’ groups get to participate. The document says that ‘groups for consultation were selected based on their ability to build broad legitimacy for the GPRS. The groups were seen as partners whose support was felt to be necessary for the implementation of the GPRS’ (p. 5). In other words, participation in this process was limited to groups that in some way or another are thought to be important for its implementation. Second, and perhaps more fundamentally, there is a serious question about what difference the consultative process actually made to the content of the strategy. It is clear that the final strategy document is one that does not depart in any significant way from the views of the World Bank and other


26 More generally on this see Frances Stewart and Michael Wang, ‘Do PRSPs Empower Poor Countries and Disempower the World Bank, or is it the Other Way Round?’, Queen Elizabeth House Working Paper QEHWPS108, October 2003.
development agencies. Third, there is the issue of conditionality. Abandoning the kind of conditionality associated with structural adjustment does not mean an end to intervention, ‘rather it is that intervention is not exercised solely through conditionality and adjustment, but to a significant degree through closer involvement in state institutions and the employment of incentive finance. This constitutes a less visible but perhaps more powerful role for donors’ (p. 77). And this role is obviously enhanced in a country such as Ghana which is heavily aid dependent (and which again raises questions about what ‘accountability’ and participation might mean). It is hard to avoid the conclusion, not that Western donors do not really ‘want’ participation, but that it is designed to elicit the consent of certain kinds of groups to a development strategy that is significantly determined by the donors.

Identity

The tensions over the role of identity within ‘civil society’ are particularly evident in Ghana with regard to ‘Traditional Authorities’ – the collection of Chiefs, Queens, Priests and other traditional authority figures whose role predates colonial rule and which still maintain considerable power and legitimacy in Ghana, particularly in rural areas. The relationship between these authorities and the state in Ghana has often been fraught, particularly in the immediate post-colonial period. The 1992 Constitution protects Traditional Authorities, but explicitly bars them from participating in party politics. In addition, the World Bank’s General Counsel expressed a series of reservation about traditional legal systems. While he accepted that these systems ‘help meet a fundamental need for justice’, he argued they had a number of problems. These include that fact that judgments are rarely recorded in writing and therefore can be ‘inconsistent and unpredictable’ and make appeal

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28 It is wrong to think of the Ghanaian government as passive in this process, but rather than being committed to the participatory process as a way of developing a better development strategy, it has been argued that the government saw the process as a necessary one to gain debt relief under the HIPIC initiative and mobilize additional donor funds. See Lindsay Whitfield, ‘The State Elites, PRSPs and Policy Implementation in Aid Dependent Ghana’, Third World Quarterly 31(5) 2010, 721-737.
difficult; that customary laws ‘can be discriminatory against women, children and vulnerable minorities;’ and that the ‘training of officials of traditional tribunals in elements of procedure and human rights’ may be necessary to improve the fairness of customary law processes.\(^\text{30}\)

The Bank has also been engaged in a series of projects that in one way or another are attempting to reduce and/or rework the role of Traditional Authorities. In 2003 the World Bank funded a *Land Administration Project*.\(^\text{31}\) One element of the project supported the revision of laws and regulation regarding land ownership and administration. This was seen as particularly important precisely because there are a variety of different types of land tenure systems in Ghana, some tribal, clan, or family based often overseen by Traditional Authorities, some commercial, and some held by the state.\(^\text{32}\) This review involved drafting new laws and resolving conflict and overlap between different systems. One outcome of this is expected to be the development of a more efficient land market, as it would enable more secure and transferable land titles, it would ‘instill order and discipline to curb the incidence of land encroachment, unapproved development schemes, illegal land sales, and land racketeering.’\(^\text{33}\) The Bank also funded a *Promoting Partnerships with Traditional Authorities Project* which ran from 2003-2006.\(^\text{34}\) The project was designed to test approaches to integrating Traditional Authorities into local government and improving their ability to deliver development services, especially health and education services. In some respect the project was a straightforward ‘capacity building’ project with various training programmes and workshops. In addition, it also provided training to improve the financial and management ‘skills’ of Traditional Authorities. But the project also provided support for a review of traditional laws and the role of traditional courts and review the need to codify and revise customary law (it is notable that this element of the project comes under the heading of ‘preserving cultural heritage’).


\(^{33}\) ‘Land Administration Project’, p.6.

\(^{34}\) World Bank. ‘Promoting Partnerships with Traditional Authorities Project: Implementation Completion and Results Report’, report no. IDA-37430, May 31 2007
It is clear from the participation of religious and faith-based groups in the PRSP process, for example, that Western donors are not operating with a strict secular-liberal account of ‘civil society’ in Ghana. On the other hand it is clear from the general view of Traditional Authorities and from the details of these projects that there are limits to the extent to which they are prepared to tolerate divergence from their own understandings of what are appropriate (liberal) social institutions. Traditional Authorities are not seen as ‘bad’ per se; indeed they are seen as being potentially important in the delivery of social services. Rather, where the social practices of these Authorities diverges from certain liberal understandings (legal norms, land markets) they are to be reformed.

*Constructing civil society*

There seems little doubt that in general terms there has been a rapid growth in various NGO and ‘civil society’ groups in Africa. Equally, there seems little doubt that some perhaps significant portion of this growth is the result of the easy availability of donor funds. In other words donors are themselves constructing the very civil society they profess to be ‘supporting’, and this give them a significant ability (at least in principle) to encourage some groups and not others. There are clear examples of this construction of civil society in several projects in Ghana. Two *Community Water and Sanitation Projects* (CWSP) emphasised the provision of water and sanitation services to communities who were willing to contribute towards the capital costs and the operations and maintenance costs of water and sanitation facilities. This approach was in deliberate contrast to previous Bank water supply projects which have been of a ‘top-down’ nature with little community participation. As a result, water supply facilities had been installed with little consideration for demand and sustainability, and ‘communities often saw no clear relationship between services rendered and tariffs charged’. Involving communities in decision making, and making them pay some of the costs of water supply facilities was seen as a way of ensuring the ‘ownership’ and sustainability of investments in water supply.35 Communities had to demonstrate that they could effectively operate, maintain and repair water facilities, collect revenue, keep records and accounts, and evaluate and

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resolve problems. Once it had been established that the community could meet the requirements for involvement, a contract was drawn up between the community and the partner agency, or NGO. At this time the community was required to show proof that cash contributions from its members had been deposited in a specially created bank account. Communities were expected to contribute 5-10% of the capital costs of the project, and then levy and collect tariffs to pay for operations and maintenance. The idea of developing community organisations is also visible in the Community Based Rural Development Project. In this case the project supports the development of rural infrastructure and the rehabilitation of community facilities, alongside capacity building for community based organisations. Building the capacity of these organisations will, so the project document suggests, improve good governance and lead to the empowerment of the poor by encouraging them to actively participate in issues which affect their daily lives. Concretely, however, this means they will be provided with support to enable them to ‘identity and prioritize their needs’, plan development programmes, access funds, and manage and maintain local facilities. This means training in management, small enterprise development, ‘group dynamics’, planning, budgeting, record-keeping, and managing back accounts. In addition, small contractors and ‘local entrepreneurs’ will be trained in the basic skills for organizing labour intensive construction projects.

In these projects Western development agencies are engaged not just in creating ‘civil society’ but in creating a ‘civil society’ with the right kinds of attitudes and skills. These are groups which can see a ‘clear relationship between services rendered and tariffs charged’, who can keep records and accounts, who can ‘demonstrate the capacity to manage and implement’ projects, and who have the understanding and capacity to repay official loans. That is, these groups are to be composed of individuals who have the skills necessary to function in the institutionally complex market economy, and who are to be encouraged to engage with the formal structures of the state and the economy. These kinds of groups seem to be what the World Bank has in mind when it advocates the promotion and

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39 ‘Community-Based Rural Development Project’, p. 4-5.
40 ‘Community-Based Rural Development Project’, p. 36.
development of a ‘civil society’. This is not to be composed of groups bound by affective ties, but rather recognisably modern associations, bound by their common interests in engaging with the market economy, and who are thus brought within the purview of the state.

Sierra Leone

For all sorts of reasons the civil society project in Sierra Leone has been more problematic largely due to a much greater degree of instability and violence. During the 1960s and 1970s the state was massively informalised, political activity of any kind was circumscribed, and economic decline, exacerbated by corruption and smuggling, was almost continual. This situation precipitated an uprising by the Revolutionary United Front, noted for its highly destructive tactics, which resulted in a decade-long and immensely damaging internal war. The end of that war in 2002 saw very extensive involvement by the ‘international community’ in the country which was also characterised by new modalities, for example, formal agreements as to expected policy and institutional changes, and long term aid commitments, with an unusually high concentration of resources on 'governance' issues. The British role in all this has been very prominent: the military intervention that brought the conflict in the country to an end was a British initiative; Blair was the first Prime Minister since colonial times to take any interest in Africa; and the post-conflict engagement has been largely, though by no means exclusively, driven by Dfid. This engagement has become virtually unlimited in scope, certainly not confined to particular sectors or legal codes and the changes it is designed to bring about are overwhelmingly funded by outside agencies which have often provided key personnel as well. Sierra Leone received foreign assistance amounting to US$ 466 million in 2007 and on average US$ 344 million per year between 2003 and 2007. External aid accounts for over 50% of the national budget. These resources are provided by a relatively small number of major donors notably Dfid, the EU, the World Bank and some 17 UN agencies are involved in various kinds of activities as are some 100 or so international NGOs.

Such circumstances increasingly get labelled and thought about under the heading of 'peacebuilding', a combination of terminating conflict, re-establishing order and
creating the conditions that will prevent a return to conflict. In post-conflict situations, the immediate imperatives are the restoration of some kind of public order of which a key component is ensuring that the armed forces come under civilian control, the creation of a government and the restoration of basic infrastructure and at least minimal services. In the ten-year period since the end of the conflict much outside effort has been devoted to these tasks with some success. The armed forces have been reduced in size and brought under civilian control, there have been two elections the second of which saw a change of government, and there has been some infrastructure investment and restoration of services e.g. the electricity supply to Freetown. But the peacebuilding agenda both signifies greater ambition on the part of outside agencies and also commits them, in a sense, both to deeper analytic engagement with, and to deeper intrusions into, target societies. One should note also, to be fair, that some of these agencies, or at least elements within them, have not been immune to or ignorant of criticism.

In these circumstances concerns about ‘civil society’ might seem to be something of an indulgence and the efforts devoted to it in Sierra Leone have not been all that substantial. Nevertheless even the rather circumscribed aim of restoring some degree of public order and the perceived necessity to engage, not merely with the termination, but also with the explanation of conflict, have elicited a continuing concern with certain features of Sierra Leone society, including an at times quite sophisticated debate which has both commissioned, and engaged with, social science knowledge. One of the main issues has been the question of chieftaincy in the rural areas. Although frequently indicted as a major cause of the war in the first place, the imperative of restoring order led DFID to fund a Paramount Chiefs Restoration Programme to reestablish basic administration and to signal to the population that it was safe to return to their villages. At the same time DFID was mindful of the dangers of abuse of powers by chiefs (there was after all a long colonial history of this) and organised consultation meetings for local people as well as issuing a revised code of conduct for chiefs and their employees. Since then the debate has rumbled on, both in academic publications, and to an extent in policy circles, about the legitimacy and utility of chieftaincy, pitching on the one side those like Paul Richards who have argued that the roots of the conflict lay in a broken patron-

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41 For a useful recent account see R. Paris, Saving Liberal Peacebuilding, Review of International Studies, 36(2), 2010, pp.337-365
clientelist system in which chiefs increasingly used their 'traditional' power illegitimately to extort labour and other resources from young men, and interpreting the conflict as 'a long deferred revolt of the rural under-class welled up, led by intransigent youth.' 42 On this analysis if the conflict is not to recur, the old chieftaincy system must ultimately disappear. On the other side a number of scholars, notably Richard Fanthorpe, questioned this analysis, and have suggested that not only have social conditions in the countryside changed, such that much of the oppressive picture is no longer plausible, but that the institution of chieftaincy remains rooted in daily life and still retains considerable popular approval. On this account 'the fundamental challenge,' would then be, 'to make chieftaincy relevant in Sierra Leone in the 21st Century.' 43

Paralleling this concern with chieftaincy has however been an alternative model of local governance rooted in the idea of the decentralisation of government powers to Local Councils. Under strong donor pressure and with support from the UNDP and the World Bank a new Local Government Act created a structure of district councils responsible for providing a wide range of services, devolved from central government, while the chiefdoms continued to perform other essential local functions, notably the administration of customary land rights, revenue collection and the maintenance of local law and order. The councils were dependent for their revenues either on transfers from the centre or on taxes collected by the chiefdoms. The Local Government legislation was ambiguous about the relationship between the Councils and the Chiefs and for reformers this presented the danger that the Councils would become dependent on either the central state or the chiefs. There is of course a political context here in that both the major political parties with continuous histories since independence, the SLPP and the APC, have regarded the chiefs as a key part of their control of the rural hinterland and, with the advent of multi-party democracy, as part of their vote-gathering machines. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the SLPP in particular (in government from

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42 P. Richards, ‘To Fight or To Farm? Agrarian Dimensions of the Mano River Conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone)’, African Affairs, 104(417), pp.571-90 p. 588
2002 to 2007) was was less than enthusiastic about major reform of the chieftaincy system.

It might be suggested that the engagement with Sierra Leone, in the particular circumstances of the country and especially with the overwhelming need to restore basic state functions, has generated not one but two sets of discourses and policies about civil society. On the one hand there is a (reluctant) acceptance of the existence of traditional groups and attendant modes of administration and forms of law enforcement. This can be seen in tolerance of the chieftaincy system but also in a much more analytically open stance to what actually exists on the ground. World Bank studies, for example, openly acknowledge the conceptual difficulties in applying notions like civil society to much of Sierra Leone, and deploy such labels as 'traditional' civil society and 'formal' civil society and are not unaware that these categories are not water tight. In the same vein the Bank has placed considerable emphasis on investigating what modes of rule and dispute resolution people actually use.

A second stream of debate has focussed on civil society more conventionally understood. Here the main overarching effort has been a programme called ENCISS (rather bizarrely, Enhancing Interaction and Interface between Civil Society and the State to improve poor people’s lives), contracted out, in the current fashion, to various agencies (initially to CARE International). Additionally virtually all donors have put resources into mainstream civil society groups, women, youth, advocacy and so on. Here again there is a considerable degree of realism. Report after report suggests that, 'it is clear from interviews carried out that local CSOs tend to be weak. Many will only participate in activities for which they are sponsored or paid. Lack of an organised community oversight role could weaken transparency and accountability within Councils or that, 'while it [ENCISS] has had some success conducting public opinion surveys, producing databases on local development activity, hosting workshops and radio discussion programs and resolving local disputes between citizen groups, it has yet to develop a broader strategy for state-

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44 World Bank Africa Region External Affairs Unit, The Civil Society Landscape in Sierra Leone Understanding Context, Motives and Challenges, 2007
45 World Bank, Justice for the Poor & Understanding Processes of Change in Local Governance Sierra Leone CONCEPT NOTE, 2006
46 Making Aid More Effective Through Gender, Rights And Inclusion: Evidence From Implementing The Paris Declaration Sierra Leone Case Study
society engagement’, indeed that ENCISS' own staff concede that, 'there is little organised civil society that is not donor driven'.

These two streams suggest some tensions but also some interesting developments in the way that donors react to such situations. There is increasing acknowledgment that however donors calibrate their conditionalities, it is exceedingly difficult to force political elites to do things they do not want to do. In Sierra Leone the SLPP government was not only reluctant to see chieftaincy greatly modified but was less than enthusiastic about the ENCISS programme for example, and the current government may well be less than enthusiastic about the decentralisation policy. What mechanisms remain available to outside forces to bring about 'change'? Two clusters of suggestions seem to appear, the one rather more discreet than the other. The first is the idea that donors must actually engage in further manipulation of the institutional architectures they have set up. In the Sierra Leone case one example of this would be the relations between central and local government. As one of the leading advocates of this approach has it,'the World Bank should re-focus its activities in a way to direct far more resources directly to the L[ocal] C[ouncil]s. The basic aim of this is not just to make LCs better resourced and to allow them to provide services properly, but also to empower them'.

The thinking here is that strengthening local government may provide a counter balance to central government and particularly the tendency towards the centralisation of resources. This would also connect with a development of 'modern' civil society strategy at the local level. Elsewhere the same author has suggested that beyond resources, outside agencies need to take account of political realities, of the interests of elites and individual politicians, and seek to create 'incentives' for such individuals to continue to support reform processes.

However one strategy not found in donor manuals but which appears in responses from expatriate advisers and officials 'on the ground' is the support of 'key individuals' to drive through reforms, policies and directives. Successes in the
Ministries of Finance and Health were attributed to having a small number of committed individuals, perhaps as few as five, in key positions. Often, but not always, the individuals concerned were returning highly qualified and experienced Sierra Leoneans from the Diaspora on augmented salaries or seconded international staff and most often a combination of the two. More than one respondent suggested that the ultimate key individual is President Koroma himself. The situation was sometimes characterised as 'lighthouse politics'- when the president shone his light on a policy, it began to work. The job of the donors was to regulate the light. Alternatively when Sierra Leonean politics is actively focussed on elections, for example, it was widely conceded, that the reform process would tread water as other factors, regional, ethnic, party political come into play.

Do these two sets of considerations suggest the following as a plausible speculation about the 'liberal project' and civil society in a country like Sierra Leone. In relatively small countries (Sierra Leone is about the size of Scotland) where there is no (articulated) political opposition to extensive foreign involvement in domestic politics, attempts will be made by means of a combination of projects, funding and tactical alliances vis-a-vis both institutions and individuals, to create both a modern state but also the individuals to man that state as well as the kind of modern civil society organisations that such states of course need. But is conceded that this is a very long-term process (one senior official suggested it would not be possible to tell if there had been 'progress' until after the 2016 elections) which is also extremely difficult to assess in any clear set of 'results'. This finally raises the question as to whether Western states and agencies can sustain the political determination to commit to such long-term involvement.

Conclusion: Civil Society and the Liberal Project in Africa

These rather general arguments would clearly benefit from further elaboration in a number of directions. One we have already explored a little ourselves namely the obvious historical parallels between the contemporary and the colonial periods.\(^5\) The study of the latter has tended to be dominated by perspectives that see

\(^5\) D. Williams & T. Young, The International Politics of Social Transformation Trusteeship & Intervention in Historical Perspective in M. Duffield & V. Hewitt (eds.), Empire, Development and Colonialism, Currey, 2009
colonialism as almost entirely deviant from the Liberal tradition and which have endlessly obscured the degree to which colonial rule was committed to projects of social change that are not reducible to oppression and exploitation. The crucial difference is of course that colonial rulers, however constrained by the limits of ‘hegemony on a shoestring’ (S. Berry), did have local means of enforcement whereas the modern armies of progress and development are perforce constrained to promote social change ‘at a distance’. This difference acknowledged however one aspect of colonial rule, the divisions between officials of different types and backgrounds, as well as the tensions between them and missionary endeavour and capitalist enterprise, points in another direction as yet poorly understood with a strong contemporary resonance. This would involve exploring not only the agendas of modernisation (the high politics as it were) but the gaps between organisations, between policy and outcomes, between politics and ‘development’, between states and NGOs as a way towards a more nuanced understanding of the ‘liberal project’ in the twenty-first century.