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Documents


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**The Challenges of Documenting War Atrocities in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone: A Study of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)**

**Proscovia Svärd**

**Abstract**

This essay examines the challenges posed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) documentation of the war atrocities committed against Sierra Leoneans. It argues for the proper preservation and dissemination of the documents generated by the TRC process in an effort to build a collective memory. Preservation should include the logical arrangement of the records to enhance accessibility by the research community and the Sierra Leonean public. Access to the TRC documentation is one way of educating the Sierra Leonean people and empowering them with the necessary information that will enable them to reconcile with each other at individual and societal levels, thereby facilitate the democratisation of their society.

**Résumé**

Il s'agit ici d'examiner les défis posés par la divulgation documentée par la Commission Vérité et Réconciliation (CRV) sur les atrocités commises contre des Sierra-Léonais pendant la guerre. La préservation et la diffusion appropriées des documents produits dans le cadre des sessions de la CRV y sont proposées dans le but de créer une mémoire collective. Cette préservation doit comprendre la mise à disposition logique d'archives pour renforcer l'accessibilité à l'intention des chercheurs et du public sierra-léonais. L'accès aux documents de la CRV est une manière d'éduquer les Sierra-Léonais et de leur donner les informations...
nécéssaires à la réconciliation les nationale tant individuellement que socialement, facilitant ainsi la démocratisation de leur société.

**Introduction**

This essay examines the challenges of documenting war atrocities and the dissemination of the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) report in post-war Sierra Leone. It has become an accepted norm worldwide for TRCs to be part of post-conflict transitions. Examples where TRCs have been used in the transformation from war to peace include countries such as Germany after the Second World War, Japan, Argentina, the Philippines, Uganda, Bolivia, Uruguay, Rwanda, Chile, Chad, Nigeria and others (Avrukh and Vejarano 2002: 37). One of the most recent cases has been the TRC process in post-apartheid South Africa. The essay deals with the Sierra Leonean TRC within the context of building up a collective memory of war atrocities, as the country makes its transition from war to peace, as a way of healing wounds caused by ten years of a brutal civil war. The role of the international community was to facilitate and support the TRC. Under Article 26 of the Lomé Accord between the government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), provision was made for the establishment of a TRC (Lomé Accord Peace Agreement 1999). The documentation of atrocities committed against the people by the armed militias and conventional armies is one way to transform such societies through truth-telling and reconciliation.

Massive killings, systematic mutilation of civilians, sexual violence, recruitment of children into military forces or militias, destruction of property and plunder are crimes that necessitated the setting up of the TRC (Olonisakin 2004: 250–6). The Sierra Leonean TRC was not punitive, but was established for restorative purposes. There is an agreement with the Special Court of Sierra Leone not to use the TRC documentation in legal processes. The TRC was mandated to establish the truth by delving into every facet of the political, social, economic and moral aspects of the nation in order to create an impartial historical record on the violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in the nation. The truth is very important to the victims of conflicts. Not being able to come to terms with the violent past hinders the transition from conflict to peace.

The documentation of atrocities is an effective way of exposing such deeds to public and international scrutiny (Montgomery 2004: 22).

The documentation also creates the foundation of a system on which compensation and reparations can be based (Masire 2004: 52). Recorded violations are a lasting accountability for the actions of perpetrators in the past where justice was not delivered. Montgomery contends, ‘the historical verdict has often served as the only tribunal for human rights perpetrators’ (Montgomery 2004: 23). Reconstruction processes should include the democratisation of information, which means that the citizenry should have a right to access the records that were generated by the TRC. It is through access to information that people can be made aware of their rights. It is also stated in the TRC report under the rubric of Freedom of Information that ‘Access to information is an important tool for public oversight. If citizens are able to scrutinise government information, they can hold public officials accountable through the ballot box. They can also use the information for legal challenges and the lobbying of decision makers’ (TRC report n.d.: 29).

This essay makes the case for the preservation and dissemination of the original documents that were generated by the Sierra Leonean TRC. It is to the analysis of the challenges of documentation and the building of a collective memory of war atrocities in Sierra Leone that the rest of this essay addresses itself. It covers the theoretical framework and conceptual issues, the challenges of documenting war atrocities in Sierra Leone, the discussion and analysis of the findings and conclusion.

**Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework adopted here is guided by a combination of archival and information science theory, the records continuum model and the media liberal theory of the ‘watchdog’ function of media, given their relevance in demonstrating the connections between documentation, information and democracy. These perspectives highlight the importance of issues of access and empowerment through information as critical aspects of the democratisation process. The records continuum model explores the continuum of responsibilities that relate to record-keeping regimes. Proper record-keeping requires the capturing, maintenance, preservation and representation of records as evidence of business, social and cultural purposes for as long as they are of value. This theory focuses on frameworks for efficient record-keeping/accountability regimes (McKemmish 1998: 2).
Documentation for the purposes of ensuring collective memory has long been an important human activity. About 25,000 years ago, before the invention of writing, record-keeping and the formation of images for memorial purposes were being practiced (Crowley and Heyer 1999: 5). Adami and Hunt, who undertook research on international criminal justice archival theory and practice, discovered that there is not much to refer to other than the International Criminal Tribunal in Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal on Rwanda in The Hague, Netherlands and Arusha, Tanzania, respectively. They address the issue of specialisation within information management and the archival profession (Adami and Hunt 2005: 105). Both further contend that there ought to be a subtle difference regarding legal records but with an overall conformity to theoretical principles (Adami and Hunt 2005: 105). Applying their argument to the Sierra Leonean TRC records raises questions of whether such specialisation should apply to the TRC records. The TRC archives were not to be used in legal proceedings, but for restorative purposes and as a social memory of the Sierra Leonean conflict. Adami and Hunt (2005: 109) further make reference to the Nuremberg and Tokyo war archival records of 1945–8, which are still a valuable research tool. Precedents, as they argue, are important and that is why research on how the findings of the TRCs in general and their utilisation for post-conflict reconstruction is worth undertaking.

The theories of archives and information science and media are essential in establishing a culture of documenting, accessing and disseminating information to the Sierra Leonean public. Effective democracy builds on citizens’ access to information. It is through sufficient information that citizens can actively participate in public debates. The right for any citizen to access public documents enables the scrutiny of the activities of public authorities (Söderman 2001: 19–20).

A free and diverse media is the cornerstone of a democratic society. The media promotes the culture of dissent, which is an important element in a free society. This contributes to the cultural fabric of nations and helps define a sense of identity and purpose. The media is the voice of the people and an independent information system, which is the ‘liberty, which guards our other liberties’ (Christians et al. 2001: 31). The liberal ‘watchdog’ theory of media promotes the view that the electorate can exercise control over their rulers and hold them accountable for their actions. For development to take place, all classes of society have to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. The media has a social responsibility to provide the citizens with adequate information (Mogekwu 1995: 305). Curran states that, according to liberal theory, the media provides a channel of communication between the governed and their governments. This enables society to clarify its objectives, formulate policy, coordinate activity and manage itself. The media should therefore perform a critical surveillance of governments in order to enhance democratic rule (Curran 2000: 122–7). McQuail defines media freedom as ‘the basic principle of any theory of public communications from which other benefits flow’ (McQuail 2000: 166). Since the mission of the TRC was to create an ‘impartial historical record’ that would educate Sierra Leoneans about the causes of conflict, it is important that different media have access to its findings in order to engage in dissemination activities.

Some Conceptual Issues

The Record

A trustworthy record is an accurate statement of facts and a genuine manifestation of those facts. Its two qualitative elements are reliability and authenticity (MacNeil 2000). Recorded transactions create archives that are meant to have a continuing evidential value. The following criteria distinguish archives from other kinds of information:

- Archives are records of transactions.
- Archives document activities or functions reflected in the mission of an organisation, in this context, the Sierra Leonean TRC.
- Archives are retained for their continuing value as evidence.

For justice to be realised and for the past to be understood, records must be legally and historically trustworthy (Bearman 1994: 17–48).

The Truth

The complexity of the truth is central to the demands of justice and hopes for reconciliation. Avruch et al. argue that the truth is ‘the arena in which the parties’ competing versions of history and the politics of memory play themselves out’ (Avruch and Vejarano 2002: 39). Factual findings eliminate political speculations, and their exposure to the public makes it hard for the perpetrators to deny the truth. The truth is the basis of true reconciliation. According to a report by Amnesty Interna-
tional: ‘The right to know the truth is a collective right that ensures society access to information that is essential for the workings of democratic systems, and it is also a private right for relatives of the victims, which affords a form of compensation...’ (Amnesty International Report 2007: 3). Exposing the true nature of massive violations that occurred during the conflict ensures that the past is never forgotten. Verdier argues that a people without a past are a people without a future; and that the past, once forgotten, is bound to be repeated (Verdier 2007: 7).

Lax defines the two notions of truth from which a more concrete record of atrocities committed and the context under which the responsible parties operated can be captured. These are overall truth and individual truth. In order to establish the overall truth, documentation from agencies and NGOs, political parties, combatant organisations, the police and armed forces have to be made available in the reconstruction of what exactly happened. Individual truth is constituted of statements given by the people. Reports from security structures including intelligence agencies, the military, police and militia are also useful sources of information (Lax 2001). It was argued in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission report that unless the truth is exposed, the possibility of reconciliation, reunification and trust remains elusive (South African TRC 1998: 2).

Accountability

Proper record-keeping is a prerequisite for effective accountability. The records are an integral part of the historical memory of the state and society. The creation, maintenance and retention of records of public interest are the responsibility of government and its agencies (McKemmish 1998). Philip defines the narrow construction of accountability as that which deals with systems of control for corruption, fraud, embezzlement, negligence and gross incompetence (Philip 2001: 360). Hurley also argues that government documentation should be used by journalists to hold officials accountable for the decisions they make on behalf of the electorate (Hurley 2005: 224). Proper records management should include laws and regulations to support improved decision-making, policy monitoring, and audit and enquiries into official actions. Records are evidence of decision-making processes (Cain et al., 2002: 415). Government archives provide documentary evidence of larger society concerns. The value of archives, therefore, is cultural and humanistic (Henry 1998: 315). Archives are not only meant for academic research but are a cultural heritage. They also document the fundamental rights of the citizens of a country.

Information Technology

ICTs are used globally to disseminate information in a timely manner and efficiently, but this can only be done with a functioning information communications infrastructure, access to computers and the political will to enable the culture to access information. Even though new ICTs have spread remarkably quickly across Africa and are essential for economic development, political democratisation, social advancement and cultural progress, the digital divide is still pronounced in most parts of Africa. The Internet, for example, could have been an effective tool in the dissemination of the TRC findings but Sierra Leone still lags behind in the utilisation of information and communication technologies, which has also contributed to poor human development (Sierra Leone Vision 2025: 27).

The key challenges hindering the diffusion and utilisation of ICTs in information dissemination include widespread poverty, illiteracy and underutilisation of indigenous technologies (Sierra Leone Vision 2025: 30). This is further exacerbated by lack of a national and an educational ICT policy, inequality in access to education between boys and girls, erratic supply of electricity/high costs of telephone connection and long-distance charges, inadequate supply of skilled ICT labour in Sierra Leone and lack of adequate government resources for education (ICT4Africa/Countryreport Sierra Leone). Bearing in mind the digital divide within nations and between nations, and the challenges posed by the lack of a proper information and communications infrastructure, in Sierra Leone it would require a proper look at the analogue modes of communication to enhance dissemination activities of the TRC findings.

Method

This study relied on a combination of desk, library and Internet-based research, and the collection of data through interviews conducted in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and questions sent by email to members of the TRC.
The Sierra Leone Civil War, 1991–2000

Sierra Leone was a colony of Britain that gained independence in 1961. After independence, the country passed through a succession of leaders. One of these, Sir Milton Margai, managed to bring about a steady development in the country until the long and autocratic rule of Siaka Stevens of the All People's Congress (APC) (1965–85). Siaka’s rule was characterised by authoritarianism, corruption and partrimonialism. This deprived a vast majority of Sierra Leoneans of basic social services (Sesay 2003). The ineffectual leadership of Stevens’s successor, General Joseph Momoh, coupled with mass social disaffection plunged the country into civil war. The insurgency of 23 March 1991 by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Corporal Foday Sankoh, according to Ukeje, was a by-product of the Liberian civil war (Ukeje 2003: 113). The RUF were encouraged and funded largely by the Liberian warlord Charles Taylor. In April 1992, dissatisfied military officers who had been fighting the RUF overthrew President Saidu Momoh’s government. The junta was led by Valentine Strasser under the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). Strasser conducted elections, which also failed to end the civil war.

In May 1997 Major Johnny Paul Koroma overthrew the elected government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. The Koroma-led junta was removed from power in February 1998 through an armed intervention ordered by the then ECOWAS chairman, the late General Sani Abacha of Nigeria (Ukeje 2003: 123–4). On 7 July 1999, the Lomé Peace Agreement was signed, which was to put an end to the war and opened the door to reconciliation (Lord 2000: 10). However, by May 2000 there was a resumption of hostilities (Obita 2000: 9) and a total of between 30,000 and 70,000 people are estimated to have died war-related deaths. There are no reliable figures on the number of people who were wounded or traumatised by the war. The ten-year civil war resulted in violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law (Olonisakin 2004: 250–6; Lord 2000: 13). It was against this background that the Sierra Leone TRC situated its work.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) came into existence by virtue of the TRC Act of 2000 (the Act). The Sierra Leonean Parliament made a provision for the formation of a commis-

sion on the basis of the provisions of Article 26 of the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement between the Government of Sierra Leone and the now defunct Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The commission was modelled on the South African TRC that looked into the atrocities committed by the apartheid regime. The Sierra Leonean TRC Act defined the mission of the TRC as follows:

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 Lomé 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 (Hayner 2004: 2).

The TRC was also to investigate and report on the causes of the conflict, the nature of the human rights violations and abuses, and the context under which these abuses were committed. Furthermore, the investigation was to reveal whether the atrocities committed were planned or authorised by any of the governments, factions or individuals. Since the Sierra Leonean war was greatly influenced by external factors, including the war in Liberia conducted by Charles Taylor and the support he was extending to the RUF faction, the TRC also had to look at the role played by foreign actors. Table 1 indicates that the TRC was constituted of seven commissioners, four of whom were Sierra Leoneans and three international commissioners. In addition, four professional staff were responsible for the programmes and activities of the commission (The Lomé Accord Peace Agreement 1999). The TRC’s mission was to last between a year and eighteen months (Meyerstein 2002).

The TRC in Sierra Leone has been a formal arena in which those violated can confront perpetrators (Malan et al., 2006: 17). Nowrojee, however, contends that even though the TRC created an environment in which war victims could recount their experiences, it, together with the Special Court of Sierra Leone, has remained marginal to the lives of Sierra Leoneans. He argues that their impact on the society has been disproportionate to the sums of money spent on them (Nowrojee 2005: 13). The TRC spent US$4.6 million while the Special Court has spent more than US$80 million (Sawyer 2007: 39). The implication of this is that justice is not served, and in some cases impunity is rewarded, raising the prospect of a future recurrence of violence.
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<th>Name</th>
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**Professional Support Staff**

- Ozonia Ojiel: Chief, Information Management
- Daniel Adekera: Chief, Public Information and Education
- Greg Casey: Chief, Administration and Programming
- Martien Schotmans: Chief, Legal and Reconciliation

*Source: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone, at http://www.sierra-leone.org/trc-trcforssierraleone.html*

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**The Challenges of Documentation in Sierra Leone**

There are several challenges posed by documentation, including dissemination, access, storage and the collection of information on the cases to be documented, information management skills and infrastructure. Lack of funds to establish a proper institution to manage the records of the TRC may jeopardise its mission, which was to educate Sierra Leoneans about the causes of the conflict. Access to information is of great importance during the reconciliation, democratisation and the rebuilding of a post-conflict society such as Sierra Leone. It promotes transparency and accountability. According to respondents in Sierra Leone, the TRC faced financial constraints even though it was being funded by international donors (interviews 2006). How, then, can a post-conflict government with all the challenges of reconstructing the country give priority to the preservation of TRC documentation? The international community together with the Sierra Leonean government will have to work together to see to it that the challenges of archiving and dissemination of the TRC findings are fully addressed.

**Archiving and Dissemination of TRC Findings**

A former employee of the TRC observed that Sierra Leoneans cannot be contracted to do the archiving of the TRC documents. This is because they did not take oaths as the hired staff of the TRC did (interview 18 March 2006). The TRC staff swore oaths of confidentiality and had the mandate to go through records to ensure that confidential documents were separated from public ones. Now that the TRC personnel are dispersed following the conclusion of their assignment, my respondent further argued that new oaths of confidentiality could be administered, but that would mean a new formal process (ibid.). Currently, the evidence suggests that documents are not coded and therefore beyond the reach of the people.

The dissemination of the findings/report of the TRC was meant to sensitise Sierra Leoneans. In this respect, the commission recommended the widest possible dissemination. It also encouraged the production of popular versions and summaries of the report in different local languages. The TRC further recommended the formation of dissemination committees to distribute the report at local and national levels. The report was to be used at workshops to promote dialogue and stimulate debate. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like Witness to Truth were engaged in the dissemination of the TRC report.

Witness to Truth is an NGO that works in over a hundred countries around the world, using video and communications technology to advance human rights causes. Sierra Leone is the first country with a TRC report accompanied by a video version. The video version of the TRC report recorded by Witness has so far been the most effective dissemination strategy. Witness has gone into communities and held video screenings that have delivered the TRC report contents to 20,000 Sierra Leoneans. The Human Rights Section of UNOSIL (formerly known as UNAMSIL) and civil society groups are also disseminating the TRC findings (interview 4 February 2006).

NGOs have done commendable work in undertaking projects like the secondary school version of the TRC report in the form of a slim
textbook, a story-telling project, a cartoon version of the TRC report in a series of seven posters, which have been distributed to communities in Sierra Leone. My respondent was positive that the message to the Sierra Leoneans on the TRC findings is getting through (interview 18 March 2006). There is still much that can be done to reach Sierra Leoneans who are illiterate. Since the TRC archives are not totally in written form, audio recordings of public hearings, for example, could be played over loudspeakers in community settings and the written material could be scripted/dramatised in order to promote the dissemination of the TRC findings (ibid.). Proper mechanisms have to be put in place to enhance countrywide dissemination. The TRC report in printed form has not been made available to everybody, and even though it can be accessed digitally, not everybody has a computer or Internet connectivity. The erratic electricity supply makes access impossible (interview 27 March 2006).

One of my respondents argued that the government and the international community had not done much to promote the dissemination of the TRC report. The government is said to have been inert in supporting the TRC process, and has been accused of obstructing free access to the TRC archives because it has not implemented the recommendations of the TRC regarding the archiving of TRC documents (interview 18 March 2006). Although the international community supported the TRC, its investment could go down the drain if the follow-up project is not supported. The TRC process would have needed a follow-up institution or committee to see to it that important functions such as the archiving of the TRC documentation were implemented (ibid.).

Preservation of the TRC Archives

The TRC documentation includes some 9,000 statements given by individuals. These statements were taken by the NGO Campaign for Good Governance and were incorporated into the TRC database. There were also 450 witnesses’ stories given at public hearings, private hearings and confidential hearings, and an unspecified number of research interviews detailing the role of individuals, factions, groups and the government in the conflict (interview 17 January 2006). The evidence contained in the TRC archives was guaranteed so-called ‘use-immunity’ and should not be used in court proceedings. However, my respondent argued that there is no watertight legal guarantee that a local prosecu-

tor, for example, who desperately wants evidence for a case that he is leading in court would resist seeking it in the now poorly maintained TRC archives (interview 18 March 2006). A post-conflict society like Sierra Leone lacks a functioning archival institution (interviews 17 January 2006, 4 February 2006).

The nature of the documentation of the TRC materials would require a safe building with appropriate conditions recommended for the storage of such different media as video footage, audio recordings and paper records. Currently, according to a telephone interview conducted by the author in January 2006, the archives are located at Fourah Bay College and are not indexed. The documents need to be organised in a way that will keep public and confidential records apart (interview 17 January 2006). Owing to lack of funds the proper preservation of the TRC archives is still posing a challenge. As a safeguard against deterioration, paper documents should be scanned. My respondents expressed fear that some or a substantial number of documents may have already been lost. This could have happened when the TRC was forced out of the secretariat building in Freetown. Documents were reportedly indiscriminately thrown into the back of vehicles, which disorganised the original order of the files. Some boxes containing documents fell apart or were lost in transit and never made it to the temporary National Archives. Some accounts also note that lots of documents were simply ‘scattered all over the place’ (interview 18 March 2006).

Inclusiveness and Underreporting

The TRC report contains the voices of 10,000 Sierra Leoneans. While it is not possible to have every single Sierra Leonean’s narrative, the TRC is said to have succeeded in finding representative voices. Every faction had a voice in the TRC process regardless of the role it played and how long it had existed for. Every government from the time of independence to the present day was represented in the process. Several former heads of state including the current President of Sierra Leone testified to the TRC and ordinary citizens volunteered individual statements (interview 18 March 2006). There are some nine chiefdoms out of 149 that were not reached for interviews for security reasons. The TRC database, for example, represents neither a complete census of human rights violations nor a random sample of the violations even though an attempt was made to locate and record statements from as many victims as possible (Conibere et al. 2004: 7).
Destruction of State Archives

A former member of staff of the TRC argued that information has always been highly centralised in Sierra Leone and that information that has not been in the interests of the government has been routinely destroyed. The government has not been accountable to its people, and therefore citizens are not sufficiently empowered to demand access to government archives. Law reports that are supposed to be an integral part of any national archiving system, for example, were stopped in the early 1970s. There is no culture of recording information in writing or any other form (interviews 18 March 2006, 27 March 2006).

Issues of Ownership

My respondents were all in agreement that the TRC archives are the property of the Sierra Leonean people (interviews 17 January 2006). However, in a society where only half a million people out of a population of 5 million are literate, issues of who the beneficiaries of the documentation processes are cannot go unnoticed. For example, the TRC database of atrocities was reportedly handed over to the National Archives on a CD Rom. When a respondent was asked if the CD Rom was currently being used, his response was that he did not think so because of a shortage of qualified staff at the National Archives. However, an American company is overseeing the ongoing work to produce projected totals, for example, of the number of people who were killed during the conflict. The database contains about 6,000–7,000 statements containing names, demographics, age, ethnicity and institutions responsible for the crimes committed. The Sierra Leonean who had been trained in the administration of the TRC database moved on to greener pastures. The TRC database with the identifiers removed is available at <http://www.hrdoc.org/about.sierra_leone.shtml> (interview 17 January 2006). Even though the documentation of war atrocities is becoming increasingly important to the processes of reconciliation and reconstruction, the victims of the violence lack ownership or access to the records.

Analysis of the Impact of the TRC Documentation for Reconciliation and Peace-building in Sierra Leone

Peace and reconciliation can only be achieved through respect of human rights. The reconstruction of post-conflict societies requires enormous resources to put in place institutions that would cater for the different social and psychological needs of the victims. In a country like Sierra Leone that has from colonial times to the post-independent period suffered misrule, oppression and endemic corruption, the management of the TRC archives is crucial to the understanding of the causes of the conflict. The TRC impartial historical record should be nationally disseminated and also preserved as a collective memory of the country. The reconstruction agenda should include improved access to government information. The creation of an impartial historical record by the TRC was to enable people to come to terms with the horrors of the past and move on with their lives. It is therefore important that the TRC records are made available to the citizens of Sierra Leone. The culture of information access builds on good governance, accountability, good record-keeping routines, national reconciliation and development.

If the TRC archives are to be preserved for posterity and for their continuing evidential value, they need to be organised in a manner that will enable the larger community to access them. The TRC archives should be taken care of in a better way in order to justify the US$4.6 million that was invested in the work of the TRC. Since the government was party to the conflict, the institution put in place to take care of the TRC archives should be autonomous.

Genuine efforts to educate Sierra Leoneans and to make them the owners of the TRC process and the generated information should include capacity-building whereby computer information skills are part of the training programmes of information professionals. The investment required to resolve the documentation challenges is enormous and with other pressing challenges like the reconstruction of health institutions, the education system, restoration of social and law-reinforcing institutions, the Sierra Leonean government will need help from the international community. For proper development to take place, the government needs to invest in its people through education and to empower them through information.

Conclusion

This essay has identified the challenges regarding the documentation of war atrocities in the dissemination and preservation of the TRC findings. The challenges will require technological, financial and human resource solutions. Though some dissemination of the TRC report has been done by non-governmental organisations, more efforts have to be put in place to actualise the ‘impartial historical record’ that will be
widely available to the citizens of post-war Sierra Leone. The challenge before the Sierra Leonean government and the international community is the setting up of an institution that will take care of the proper preservation and dissemination of the TRC findings. Information in this regard becomes a necessary part of the empowerment of citizens, and enables them to play a more active role in the democratisation and development of their society.

Related to the foregoing is the issue of weak political will on the part of the Sierra Leonean authorities to implement the recommendations of the TRC, and disseminate its findings. There is a clear need for the government to be more pro-active. It is also the responsibility of civil society organisations, citizens’ forums in Sierra Leone and the international community to persuade the government to respect the right of Sierra Leoneans to access information.

Finally, the contributions of the TRC in documenting war atrocities as well as acting as a forum and catalyst for reconciliation in Sierra Leone are numerous. But for a fragile post-conflict society to move from its traumatic past to a peaceful and prosperous future requires considerable investment in the building up of a collective memory in ways that not only document the past but open up possibilities for access to information by citizens as a critical step towards democratic consolidation, peace and development. Access to state archives helps to keep in check those voted into power in check and allows the news media to play their role as watchdogs.

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Post-Conflict Elections in Africa: Liberia and Guinea-Bissau in Comparative Perspective

John Akokpari and Elisabete Azevedo*

Abstract

Liberia and Guinea-Bissau, two countries in West Africa, have experienced political turbulence in the forms of conflicts and coups d’État. These countries both held elections in 2005. The essay argues that elections are vital for post-conflict stability and development. Long-term stability in turn depends on the adoption of a more inclusive political framework such as proportional representation as opposed to the exclusive, first-past-the-post system that Liberia currently uses. While there is ground for optimism about the prospects for post-conflict democratic consolidation and stability, this will very much depend on a set of critical factors not least among which are the nurturing of the fragile democratic institutions, decentralisation of power to local authorities, the de-concentration of power in the executive branch of government, the total regulation of campaign financing, support from the international community, and above all the commitment of Liberians and Guineans to move their respective countries forward.

Résumé


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