プロジェクト報告

Ex-Fighters - Society Relationship in Post-Conflict State： A Case from Bong County, Liberia

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Abstract

This project is an attempt to track the lives of participants in Liberia's Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration（DDR）process based on the perceptions of their status and quality of life 20 years after the end of the civil war in 2003. We conducted a survey of 93 respondents made of a mix of ex-fighters and ordinary community dwellers who had never fought in the civil war in Bong County. The tranquil, at a glance but likely ambivalent relationship between ex-fighters and civilians highlights a way of structuring social interactions in the post-conflict Liberian context.

Introduction - Survey purpose and background

The narrative around reintegration in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration（DDR）is often presented as a long-term and transformative phenomenon targeting the resettlement and restoration of civil life to ex-combatants. However, as a programme, reintegration is often not monitored to track its efficacy

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primarily due to limited funding and the tenure-based model of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) that often lead in the implementation of DDR programs. That creates a gap arising from the tenure of PKOs who often launch reintegration programmes as part of DDR that require more time to mature than the tenure of the PKOs that drive it in the first place. As UN (2010) reflects, challenges lie in fostering reintegration or development opportunities that complement and reinforce the overall DDR process[3].

Reintegration in concept is a long-stretched phase of the DDR program where the participants were expected to re-develop and re-launch their lives over time and in communities of their choice. Specifically, a social aspect of reintegration denotes beyond whether the community accepts ex-combatants, but is affected by post-conflict politics and power arrangements[4]. The Liberian government has not extended much support, particularly to ex-combatants after 2009. Scholars have pointed out the ambiguity of the DDR process in that it only brings ex-combatants "remarginalized", or mixed results[5].

This survey explores the current socio-economic and political status of ex-combatants and ex-commanders who participated in the disarmament and demobilization (DD) activities in Liberia in 2003 and 2004 and subsequently took part in the reintegration process after the two civil wars in Liberia from 1989 to 2003. In this survey, three clusters of respondents are targeted, namely, ex-commanders, ex-combatants, and civilians. Presented in no special order, an "ex-commander" refers to an individual who belonged to any of the warring factions in the Liberia civil war who fought as a leader of a battlefield fighting group (i.e., the equivalent of a platoon or battalion commander) of their respective factions. Such individuals are still known and recognized by their war friends as such in their various communities in Liberia

3) United Nations. (2010). Second Generation Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Practices in Peace Operations. A Contribution to the New Horizion discussion on challenges and opportunities for UN Peacekeeping.

4) McMullin, Jaremey R. (2013). Ex-combatants and the Post-Conflict State: Challenges of Reintegration. Palgrave MacMillan.

5) Utas, Mats. (2005). "Building a Future? The Reintegration and Remargilization of Youth in Liberia," In No Peace No War. An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts. Ed. Paul Richard. Ohio University Press.; Jennings, K. M. (2008). Unclear Ends, Unclear Means: Reintegration in Postwar Societies—The Case of Liberia. Global Governance, 14(3), 327-345.

and they may be women or men. On the other hand, an "Ex-combatant" refers to all other former fighters including men, women and children who fought under the leadership of ex-commanders. These are also recognized as such by their war friends in their respective communities. Last but not least, a "Civilian" refers to all other adults in a particular community who never fought for any of the warring factions or were too young to fight but live with the ex-commanders and ex-combatants and, for that matter, capable of providing a credible account of the conduct of ex-combatants and ex-commanders whom they live within their respective communities.

The distinction between ex-combatants and ex-commanders is vital because in Liberia, 48 ex-commanders were recruited to strengthen the management of the DD process in the middle of the DDR programme in 2003 and 2004[6]. These 48 ex-commanders became senior facilitators noted for strengthening the public sensitization aspects of the program. Others among them went on to manage part of the reinsertion and reintegration (RR) process of the DDRR (Disarmament, Demobilization, Reinsertion and Reintegration) program. The reintegration process had two consecutive programs. Among them, the second-generation program targeted both ex-combatants and non-combatant community members, led by Reintegration, Rehabilitation and Recovery (RRR) section of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), with the National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR) as well as international donors. The reintegration program was officially completed in 2009, by the announcement of President Johnson-Sirleaf. Indeed some ex-commanders entered RR processes, still serve as senior officials in the post-conflict governments. They are often called upon to use their experiences to mitigate protests in various parts of the country in which ex-combatants are suspected to be involved.

The survey has been setup to include the "civilians" who are also community dwellers to deepen the understanding of the societal relationship between ex-commanders and ex-combatants on the one hand, and the society represented by them, on the other. Such an understanding constitutes one of the ultimate goals of

6) Sahel and West Africa Club, OECD. (2006). Regional working group on DDR and post-conflict management in West Africa, December. https://www.oecd.org/swac/about/events/38520347.pdf (accessed: 20 August 2023)

social reintegration. Moreover, the above classification reflects the purpose of the survey, which also seeks to analyze the relationship between ex-combatants (in this case, all the ex-fighters including commanders) and society.

1. Methodology

The survey was conducted between 8-20 October 2022. The specific locations where data was collected are Gbarnga, the capital city of Bong County and in the adjoining towns of Wensue, and Gbarmue, some 5 and 15 kilometers, respectively from Gbarnga. Liberia's administrative structure revolves around counties – the equivalent of regions and provinces. There are 15 counties including Montserrado, where Monrovia, the national capital city, is located. Several reasons underlie the selection of Bong County for the survey. For example, Bong County is in the north-central part of the country, bordering Nimba County, where the conflict in Liberia in the 1990s began. Furthermore, Bong County shares borders with five other counties and Sierra Leone to the extreme north. The five other Counties that share the border with Bong County are Gbarpolu, Bomi, Montserrado, Margibi and Grand-Bassa (the country's second port city). Thus, the location of Bong County facilitates access to ex-commanders and ex-combatants affiliated with different factions during the war and, therefore, offers potential diversity to the experiences that inform the responses. Additionally, Gbarnga is among the seven locations where disarmament took place during the DD activities in Liberia[7].

Furthermore, Bong County has developed into a strategic commercial center and commercial agricultural hub that attracts non-indigens from elsewhere in the country including ex-combatants and ex-commanders. As a result, ex-combatants and ex-commanders from multiple warring factions are found in Bong County.

7) The other six places where cantonment sites were set up to receive surrendered weapons and their ex-combatant owners are Tubmanburg in Bomi County, Kakata in Margibi County, Buchanan in Grand Bassa County, Tapeta in Nimba County, Zwedru in Grand Gedeh County and in Camp Schieffelin near Monrovia. Amnesty International. (2004). Liberia One year after Accra –immense human rights challenges remain. https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4129e5f64.pdf (Accessed: 20 August 2023)

Use of questionnaire and data collection

In Bong County, data collection took place in three separate locations. In Gbarnga, the capital, Wensue, and Gbarmue. The last two locations are communities that serve as residential towns for gold miners and for that matter, areas where most ex-fighters who depend on gold mining and farming are based.

In terms of the data collection, the authors developed a questionnaire structured under five thematic areas: demography, reintegration and social support, access to public services, participation in governance and decision-making processes, and issues of concern (positive or negative). The respondents in all three locations were purposively selected and questionnaire were administered directly by a co-author and one local assistant between 8th and 20th October, 2022. Interviewing ex-combatants in Liberia is a sensitive issue because there is an ongoing national debate to set up a war crimes court to identify and prosecute perpetrators of the war. For that reason, ex-combatants are often concerned that their responses during research interviews could be used against them, which subsequently the war crimes prosecution idea go ahead. Again, interrogation of their roles during the war also brings back memories of their dark past, which many of them dread discussing. Thus, most of them hesitate to participate in research-related interviews, especially concerning persons they do not know. To overcome the above concerns, the researchers engaged the services of a local research assistant to address the question of familiarity. Also, they approached national and local authorities for clearance before engaging with the ex-commanders and ex-combatants. The local research assistant helped identify and introduced the co-researcher to the relevant national and local authorities. Indeed, while in the field, one the ex-soldiers of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), a faction in the war, was tasked to help identify more ex-combatants and the places where they often congregate. Prior to this, in Gbarnga, our team made contact with the office of the Superintendent of Bong County, who directed the team to the Gbarnga City Mayor's Office, where clearance was obtained to conduct the research. Similar procedures were followed in the other two towns where data was collected. It took an average of 18.5 minutes for each interview.

The qualitative data

Some of the questions on the questionnaire were open-ended. The strategy sought

to grant limitless options to the respondents to answer some of the questions in their own ways and from their own lived experiences. However, such open-ended responses were collated, coded and analyzed together with the closed-ended questions. Last but not least, one more in-depth interview was conducted with the head of the Liberia Peace Council at the time, to bring some government view to the data collected. The responses from the individual in-depth interview, served as helpful background information mainly from the policy perspective to the status of life of the ex-combatants, but more importantly, the contribution of the DDR program in Liberia to peacebuilding efforts in the country. The results of the data collection are presented below.

2. Demography of respondents

The last DD program in Liberia took place in April 2004. Participants included boy-soldiers who were from six years upwards[8]. As of 2023, those child soldiers are 24 years or older. Therefore, the age distribution in Figure 1 below shows that the majority of the personnel interviewed can be said to have experienced the war years. But it doesn't end there; those who were already adults during the war are also in their sixties and seventies and are active and move about unaided.

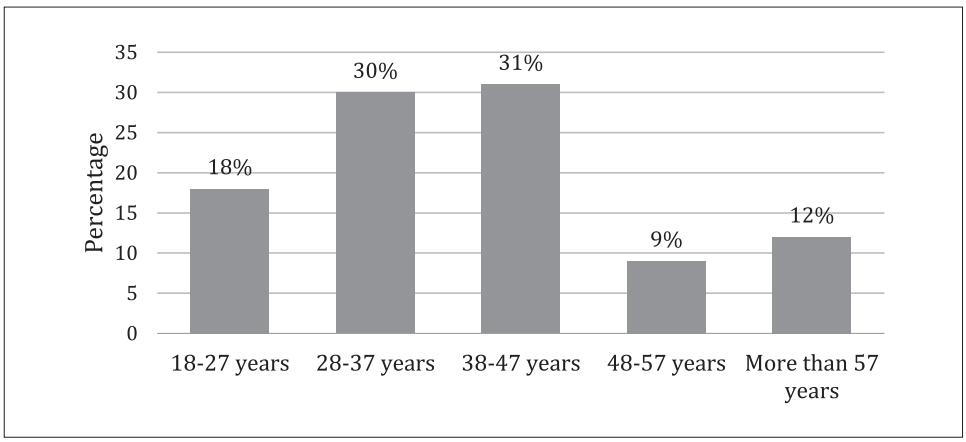


Figure 1 Age distribution

8) Reliefweb. (2001). Child Soldiers Global Report. https://www.refworld.org/docid/498805e813.html#:~:text=The%20UN%20has%20estimated%20that,Liberia's%20seven%2Dyear%20civil%20war (Accessed: 10 August 2023)

Gender distribution

Sixteen females (representing 17%) and 77 males (representing 83%) were interviewed. The sharp imbalance reflects the patriarchal arrangements that continue to define gender-based relations even at the informal level among the ex-combatants (Table 1). The social relations reflect the role and status of each individual in the war. In other words, Commanders in combat are still seen as leaders in their communities by the colleagues they fought with. So, once you enter a community, if you want to interview an ex-combatant, you are introduced to a man and through him, you are likely to see as many people who took part in the war (including women) as possible. Indeed, some of the women interviewed are self-employed or working with their husbands as entrepreneurs and in most cases, the marriage dates back to the war years. However, the researchers must first interview the man to be informed that the woman also played a role in the war. In terms of their positions during the war, women mainly provided shelter for retreating "men" soldiers. They cooked for the men and provided all sorts of social roles. Others served as wives and queens of commanders. A lot more suffered dehumanizing fates, including rape. But there were yet others who became community leaders.

	Female	Male	Total
Ex-combatants	4	40	44
Ex-commanders	1	15	16
Civilians	11	22	33
Total	16	77	93

Table 1 Gender distribution

County of origin

Liberia has 15 counties, and persons from all counties were drawn into the conflict. It does not follow that people remained in their respective counties of origin. Liberians move about within their country, especially Monrovia (the capital) and its environs. During the war, people were either conscripted forcefully or voluntarily joined various fighting forces. Table 2 provides a distribution of the county of origin of respondents. It shows that 38% of the respondents are from other counties but living in Bong County, while a majority of the respondents are indigens of Bong County (i.e., 68%). This is significant because it reflects the notion that DDR

participants often prefer to relocate outside the places where they fought in a war. However, in the case of Liberia, the conflict-related settlement patterns have even affected property rights and continue to underscore land-based disputes that form part of the issues being addressed by the post-conflict reconstruction[9]. In many places in the country, civilians flee from the war and abandoned their properties. On their return after the war, squatters and fighters had taken over their lands. Fleeing without appropriate documentation proving ownership of lands have been difficult, and the land issue remains a national concern to date[10].

County of origin	Current county	Frequency	Percent
Bong	Bong	63	68
Grand Bassa	Bong	2	2
Grand Kru	Bong	2	2
Lofa	Bong	22	24
Montserrado	Bong	2	2
Nimba	Bong	1	1
Sinoe	Bong	1	1
Total		93	100

Table 2 County of Origin

Education levels attained

Thirty-nine per cent (39%) of the respondents hold senior high school degrees, while 20% do not have formal education. The rest have a range of elementary and primary education and associate degrees. In this background, in the formative years of most of them, the war truncated the education system, and they could not attend school. Figure 2 below presents the distribution of education levels obtained by the respondents.

9) Munive, J. (2010). Ex-combatants, returnees, land and conflict in Liberia. *Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, Working Paper.*

10) Munive (2010).

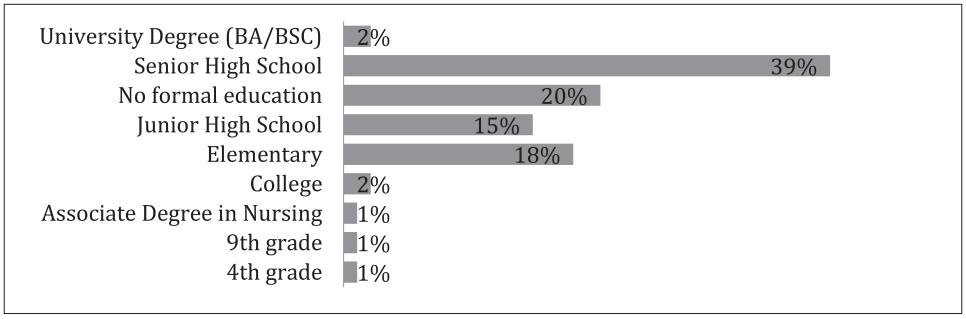


Figure 2　Educational levels（unit：%）

Language distribution

The languages spoken by the respondents associate them with particular ethnic groups in Liberia, but it also provides insights into one of the pathways by which the war was internationalized. For example, the Kisi language spoken by the Kisi people are on the border with Sierra Leone, where the conflict later spread to. The Mende and Mandinka are spoken in Guinea, while the Loma language spoken by the people in the Lofa County also share border with Sierra Leone. But the research managed to identify and administer questionnaires to a broad and diverse collection of individuals who participated in the Liberian civil war.

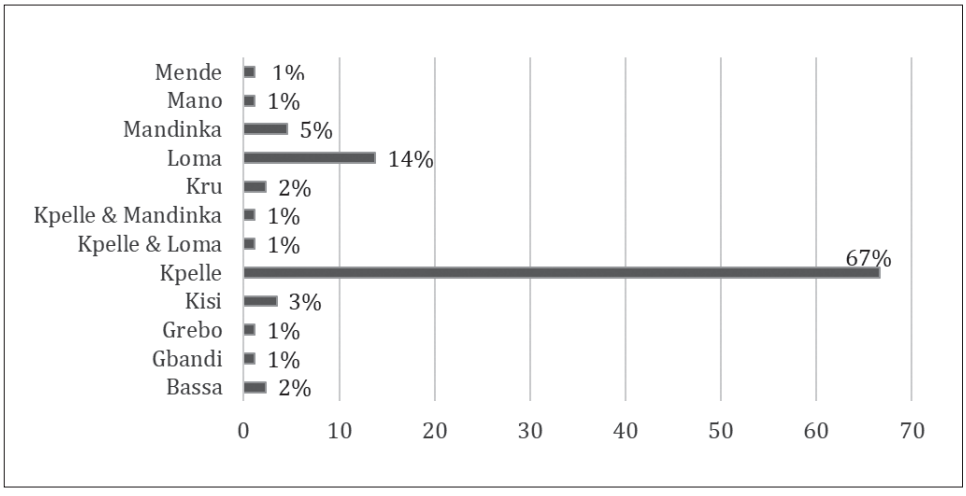


Figure 3　Languages spoken by respondents（unit：%）

Employment status

The official unemployment rate in Liberia is 3.6% in 2021[11]. On the other hand, 76% of the respondents are considered self-employed (Figure 4). One-third of respondents engage in the business, more likely in small-scale enterprises as cleaners, traders, and kiosk managers. A note should be taken that the government still employs 13% of the respondents – the highest among the sectors in which respondents have found jobs. Next is agriculture, and this explains the cosmopolitan nature of Bong County, which combines agriculture economy with commerce where rich natural sources could attract investment[12].

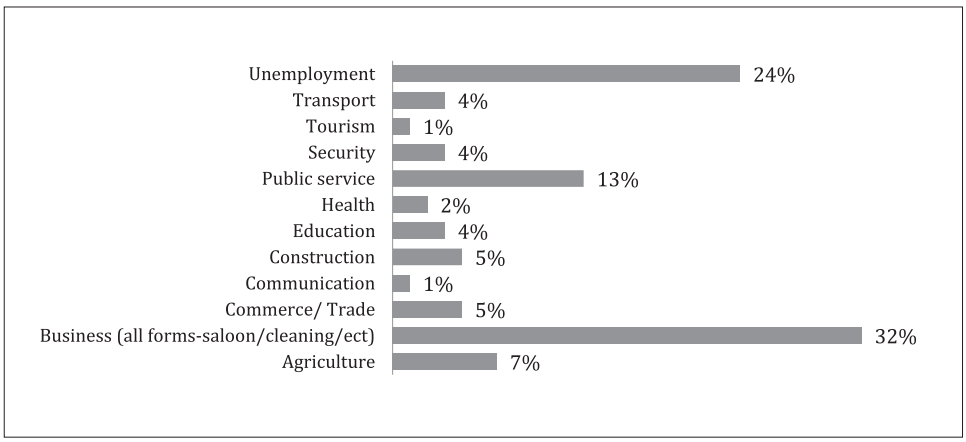


Figure 4 Sectoral employment distribution of respondents (unit : %)

Affiliated armed groups

Before ending the section, Figure 5 shows the distribution of affiliated armed groups of 44 ex-combatants and 16 ex-commanders among survey respondents. The National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor, was the most dominant fighting group in the Liberia civil war. The NPFL even governed the country between 1990 and 1992. Therefore, it had and continues to have its fighters nationwide. Accordingly, a majority of the respondents (58%) were former fighters of

11) World Bank. (2023). Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate) -Liberia. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=LR (accessed August 26, 2023)

12) Republic of Liberia. (2008). Bong County Development Agenda. 2008-2012. https://www.mia.gov.lr/CDA/Bong%20CDA_web.pdf (accessed August 26, 2023)

the NPFL. Other factions whose members were interviewed include the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), Liberia Peace Council (LPC), Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO)-J faction.

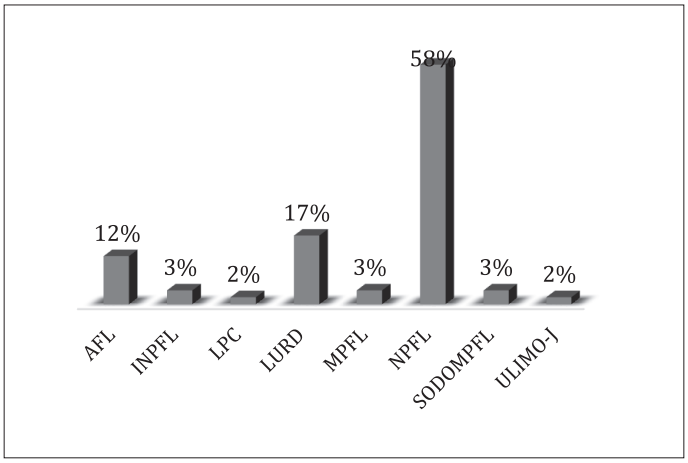


Figure 5 Factional affiliations of respondents

3. Ex-fighters and society relationship

This section highlights findings in the survey from the perspective of reintegration. The first aspect is the level of interaction among respondents. The research team particularly asked ex-combatants and ex-commanders "who do you consult when in difficulty?" Respondents mostly confide in their relatives rather than other persons around them. Figure 6 indicates the picture of closed communities for the ex-combatants still unsure whether to trust people in their communities who are not their relatives.

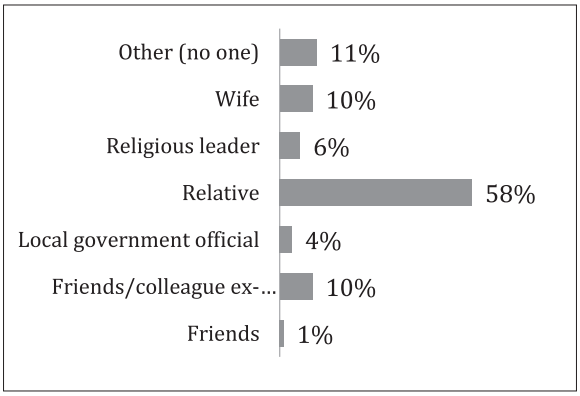


Figure 6 Responses to "Who do you consult when in difficulty?" (unit : %)

On the other, the frequency of interacting with community members by ex-fighters is extensive. Over 70% of the respondents answered "yes" to "do you attend community meetings?". Table 3 demonstrates that ex-combatants and ex-commanders are active in community meetings as much as civilians do. Participation in community activities is likely an everyday activity for ex-fighters and civilians, not having particular barriers for ex-fighters.

	No	Yes	Total
Ex-combatants	13	31	44
Ex-commanders	2	14	16
Civilians	11	20	31
Total	26	65	91

Table 3 Tabulation by type of respondents on attendance to community meetings[13)]

The second aspect is about crime. In 2004, allegedly ex-combatants were the source of instability due to inter-group contestation, the flow of uncontrolled arms, and harassment against civilians, which kept communities in fear[14)]. During a public consultation in Bong County as of 2008, residents' security concerns were sexual violence, drug abuse and theft of livestock and rubbers[15)]. Some combatants are considered to be involved in incidences of crime, and others are involved in the

13) The total number of respondents is less than the total number of interviewees (93) due to the decline in the responses.

14) Amnesty International, 2004.

15) Republic of Liberia, 2008. pg.14.

conflict in neighboring countries such as Cote d'Ivoire[16].

On contrary, in our survey, over 80% of the respondents do not ordinarily associate ex-combatants with a crime. The proportion of such responses was equally distributed among ex-combatants, ex-commanders, and civilians. This infers residents in Bong County have a growing perception that ex-fighters are not the main spoilers of their local security.

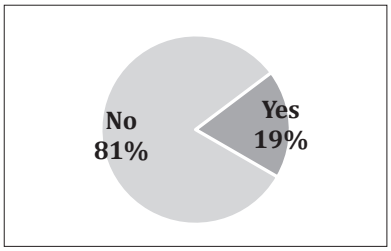


Figure 7　Responses to the question"Is it fair to associate crimes with ex-combatants?"

	No	Yes	Total
Ex-combatants	28	9	37
Ex-commanders	14	2	16
Civilians	27	5	32
Total	69	16	85

Table 4　Tabulation by type of respondents about "Is it fair to associate crime with ex-combatants?

Nonetheless, the security situation in their neighbors is considered fragile. Thirteen out of 93 respondents raised violence, including armed robbery, rape, and mysterious death and killings, as the most dangerous concerns around them. Further, more than ten respondents raised drug abuse and addiction as their most acute concerns for dangerous situations.

Being asked whether they feel protected by the state in the last two decades, 55% of the respondents were positive, while the rest consider otherwise. Given the Liberian context, the state is barely filling the security role that UNMIL used to play. Far fewer security personnel, including police and the military, are deployed outside Monrovia. As a result, the ex-combatants' combative experiences serve as a repertoire when protecting physically in their communities. In the survey, those who are concerned local security suggested enhancing the professionalism of security sector authorities through increasing the salaries of the security personnel, training,

16)　Alexandre, M., N. Verjee, and S. Mogaka. (2015). The Challenge of Stability and Security in West Africa.Washington D.C.: Agence Française de Développement and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

and equipment. Storing security presence and rebuilding the trust between the authorities and civilians are a challenge that lies within the Liberian society.

Conclusion

The survey explored ex-fighters' status following the two decades of the post-civil war period by collecting the voices of parties concerned and their recipients in society. A way of reintegration in the Liberian context is a revival of interactions between ex-fighters and civilians in communities to some extent, including those who cause atrocities, children from the same neighborhoods, and family members of people they victimized. At the same time, the survey reveals such interactions may not inevitably foster confidence and trust among them.

Their lives are equally in challenge. Over 77% of the respondents answered they do not feel having better access to food compared to 20 years ago due to shortage and price inflation. The rate of the response distribution is mostly equal between ex-combatants and civilians, indicating that they carry common concerns in their livelihood. Not only the security provision but access to public services is limited, where portable water in the community is primarily provided by non-government actors such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), self-help actions by community groups, and mostly private companies, according to survey respondents in Bong County. A further investigation of ex-fighters and civilians' relationships as well as those with authorities, could be discussed, where Liberians confront emerging social interactions in the post-reintegration phase.

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