PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP

Diaspora 'leadership' in post-conflict societies: Understanding diaspora influence through remittances in Liberia

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1. INTRODUCTION

While they are often considered as 'outsiders' or 'far removed' from their contexts, the reality is diaspora populations are, in fact, often intertwined in and significant to what happens in their home countries – this is especially true in many post-conflict contexts. Existing studies of the diaspora often narrowly put them as playing two distinct roles in their homelands, either as: promoters of peace; or contributors to the perpetuation of conflict. Meanwhile studies (and practice) of peacebuilding and the traditional liberal approach all but exclude them in the narrative. There is, therefore, a gap between these narratives. Additionally, thinking in terms of leadership and leadership studies, the role of the diaspora is usually not automatically thought of as that of a 'leader', as leadership in the traditional sense has often focused on those occupying positions of hierarchal power or indeed the individual themselves (this approach and understanding of their (lack of leadership) role is again also seen in the study of the practice of peacebuilding). However, taking leadership from a relational theory perspective and adopting a leadership as process approach to leadership offers a fuller understanding of how diaspora interacts with, build and sustain (or not) relationships with their

homeland contexts in the quest for peace. This commentary adopts a leadership-as-process approach. It looks at the relationship between the Liberian diaspora and their homeland context to highlight how the diaspora attempt to influence local developmental and peacebuilding processes through the use of remittances, and the dynamics of this relationship therein.

2. THE LIBERIAN DIASPORA

Across many contexts, diaspora groups have been playing increasing roles in their homelands. Within the context of peacebuilding, in particular, there is a growing emergence and recognition of these roles. This notwithstanding, there is a gap in truly understanding what this relationship with their homelands is, in addition to the extent to which diaspora are able to assert influence around pertinent issues and what this means for these contexts. One key example of the ways in which the diaspora is known to contribute to their homelands is through remittances. Across many contexts, these remittances have been significant to furthering development and sustaining individual family livelihoods. In post-conflict and fragile states in particular, the remittances of the diaspora can be vital

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for reconstruction efforts; in this sense, they are also noted to be 'an invaluable stabilising influence'.[1] In Liberia, the diaspora has been a vital source of support through the remittances they send back home. From 2013-2015 the remittance flow to Liberia was between $414 million and $645 million, while in 2021 it was $338.07 million (a notable drop as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic).[2] Moreover, they have been instrumental to mobilising funding to address wider crises such as the Ebola outbreak. However, this financial contribution is not 'free'. Elements of the diaspora can and have used this financial support as a way to assert influence around controversial issues such as elections, thus testing and straining these existing relationships, with potential consequential impacts for attaining peace.

The relationship between the Liberian diaspora and Liberia goes back to the history and creation of the state of Liberia itself, as the two are tightly intertwined. Created by the American Colonisation Society in 1822, Liberia became home to many freed and repatriated slaves from the Americas who in themselves can be considered a form of classical diaspora, in that they would have returned to a 'real or imagined home'.[3] These settlers (also known as Americo-Liberians), as they were also known, became the 'owners' of the land. The move by European powers to grab land across the continent in the 'Scramble for Africa' then led these settlers to go further into the hinterland and extend the reach of their power over the indigenes who were already there. Up until the early 1980's, Liberia functioned as a one-party state. The manner in which they structured their governance system in those formative years had serious consequences, as it widened the existing issues of marginalization and inequality between these settlers and members of the existing indigenous groups. This resulted in tensions that subsequently played out a century later, where the political and economic monopoly of the country by this settler class led to frustrations from the other groups (who represented a larger proportion of the population). It eventually resulted in the coup d'état that toppled the ruling oligarchy in the form of the True Whig Party (TWP) and the ensuing civil war that erupted in 1989 lasting for a period of 14 years.

Through all of this, at varying time periods, different groups of diaspora emerged, each playing particular roles in the country not least during the conflict where many were responsible for financially fuelling some of the rebel groups. While the conflict can be attributed to the largest wave of migration from Liberia, it is not the only factor, as other individuals at different times also left for reasons such as work or further education (albeit ending up also being affected by the conflict). As with many other examples, the Liberian diaspora have been central to, and have engaged in many aspects of Liberia's affairs including the conflict and now post-conflict context, and for decades the relationship between Liberia and its diaspora has been very dynamic.[4]

In post-conflict Liberia and in the efforts towards peacebuilding, the diaspora has been engaged in many ways including through their broad financial support, taking up roles in the government, and contributing to or leading development projects amongst other things. Noting the importance of the diaspora within the conversations of peacebuilding, Brinkerhoff, maintains that diaspora interests should be taken into account for sustainable peace as they may represent or reflect the factions that led to conflict in the first instance.[5] These varying roles of the diaspora leads to asking questions around their influence and indeed their leadership roles in Liberia.

3. UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP AND ASSERTIONS OF INFLUENCE

[1] Democratic Progress Institute. Makers or Breakers of Peace, The Role of Diasporas in Conflict Resolution 2014, p16

[2] Norrestad F (2023), Value of remittance inflows to Liberia from 2010 to 2019, Statista [online]

[3] Safran, William (1991), Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return, Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies,1(1); Brubaker, Rogers (2006), the 'diaspora' diaspora. Ethnic and Racial Studies 28(1) pp1-19

[4] See for instance Antwi-Boateng Osman (2011), The Political Participation of the U.S. -Based Liberian Diaspora and its implication for Peace Building. Africa Today, 58(1) pp. 3-26; Antwi-Boateng Osman (2012), After War the Peace: The US-based Liberian Diaspora as Peacebuilding Norm Entrepreneurs. Journal of Refugee Studies, 25(1), pp. 93-112

[5] Brinkerhoff, J. (2011), Diasporas and Conflict Societies: Conflict Entrepreneurs, Competing Interests or Contributors to Stability and Development, Conflict, Security and Development, 11(2)

Leadership is beyond the realm of the position you occupy only, but instead it is the process through which an individual or group is able to sustain relationships as they seek to assert influence within them. Leadership as defined by Rost is 'an influential relationship between leaders and followers with the intention to bring about real change that reflects a mutual purpose'.[6] Mahmoud captures leadership as being horizontal as opposed to vertical, thus making it more inclusive and drawing in a wider range of people into the process.[7] Thus, understanding leadership away from the notion of a specific leader or leaders makes it possible to draw the diaspora into the conversation. It is especially pertinent to do so, as the diaspora play an influential role in home contexts even though they do not represent the preconceived idea of leaders, which in many of these developing world and post-conflict settings is usually reserved for the political elite.

Several elements are key to leadership effectiveness, including: an understanding of the situation; the sustainability or not of mutuality between leader(s) and follower(s); and the nature of influence within dynamic relationships. Mutuality is central to the leadership process as it is what forms the basis of the relationship between the leader(s) and the followers. According to Northouse, 'influence is the sine qua non of leadership.[8] In trying to understand the relationship between the leader and the follower, influence becomes key. This two-way exchange is framed by the manner in which the leader offers solutions acceptable to the followers and which is subsequently reciprocated with acceptance and acknowledgment of the leader's legitimacy in that situation. Also key to this, is the social bases of power through which this influence is asserted, this could be either through their referent, expert, legitimate, reward or coercive based power.[9]

Turning back to the Liberian diaspora and their engagement in Liberia through remittances, is to also look at the nature of that relationship with their homeland which can either end up being transactional or transformational.[10] It is evident when looking at the relationship between Liberia and her diaspora, that there is a mutual understanding of the diaspora's financial importance to and role in supporting families and meeting broader development needs. What is also clear, is that the gap in the relationship arises from the fact the diaspora is able to leverage this authority to influence decision making around pertinent issues in Liberia, which could either result in beneficial or harming effects. Two examples below help explain the dynamism of the relationship between Liberia and its diaspora and their attempts to assert influence through their financial support.

4. THE (UN)SUSTAINABILITY OF MUTUALITY

The first example looks at how the diaspora attempted to assert influence through their support to Charles Taylor. In the early years of the conflict, there was a rallied support through the Association for Constitutional Democracy in Liberia (ACDL) for Charles Taylor by many in the diaspora (who had fled at the onset of the coup and were of a different background to the coup leader). This financial support came from the initial mutual desire for the removal of Major Samuel Doe from the seat of power. Moreover, there was also an assumption that through Taylor, they would find a way back to accessing their otherwise lost power. However, this support would become fractured as Taylor was noted for his role in furthering the conflict though the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and more so, would follow similar patterns of monopolising power and limiting access to others.[11] Examining this from a leadership lens, it is clear that the diaspora's influence here was rejected by Taylor, in spite of the money collected and used. This was because there was no mutuality in the long run between them and Taylor as it was evident that he had his own plans outside of the assumption that power would be shared.

[6] Rost, Joseph (1993), Leadership for the Twenty-First Century. ABC-CLIO, p. 102

[7] Mahmoud, Y., & Albert, M. (2021), Whose Peace are We Building: Leadership for Peace in Africa. Bloomsbury Publishing

[8] Northouse Peter (2016), Leadership: Theory and Practice (5ed). SAGE Publications, Inc 7th ed,

[9] French, John R. and Raven, Bertram 1959, The Bases of Social Power, in D. Cartwright (ed), Studies in Social Power, Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan

[10] Burns, James M. (2012), Leadership Open Road media

[11] See Adebajo, Adekeye (2002), Liberia's Civil War: Nigeria, ECOMOG and Regional Security in West Africa. Lynne Rienner Publishers

In this regard, they discontinued their financial support which can be further explained as an assertion of their coercive power (i.e., they sought to punish Taylor for not accepting their influence through the withdrawal of funding). This would have a mixed impact for Taylor: one, it meant losing the financial backing he had been receiving and having to find other ways to fund his efforts; and two, losing vital support from this group during his time as President (1997-2003) where there was disinterest from the international community in him holding this position.

The second example looks at the Liberian diaspora's efforts to assert influence over the first democratic elections held in 2005. Within this situation, a different interaction is notable between the diaspora and the homeland. A small subset of the diaspora community had the desire for Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to become the President as opposed to George Weah. This desire was mutually held by elements of the international community and by a subset of the homeland community (who mostly represented the ethnic and class make-up of this diaspora group) and several opposition leaders. As such, this diaspora was able to leverage their financial capacity and position (being in the United States of America) to influence the results of the 2005 elections. This assertion of influence can be explained by the reward power they yielded, where they funded Sirleaf's campaign but also distributed resources on the ground to support the efforts that would ensure the desired outcome. The outcome of this was Johnson Sirleaf becoming president (although the results would be considered by many as being manipulated). However, turning to the relationship with the wider subset of the population, the diaspora was unable to sustain the same mutuality as they did with the opposition leaders and members of the homeland community who had a desire to see Sirleaf emerge as president. Instead, it was clear that George Weah had strong bases of referent power, having represented Liberia professionally on the football field, being well liked, and having widespread popular appeal; and legitimate power where he had financially supported and elevated the Liberian football team to the global stage, in addition to his continued interaction with those in the grassroots. This sustained a stronger mutuality with the wider population who had widespread belief that he would emerge as the President, as large numbers

had rallied to support him (he would also later win the Presidential election outright in 2017).

From the examples above, it is clear that the diaspora is able to sustain at different times and with differing subsets of the population a thin level of mutuality. Moreover, in line with what Burns argues, 'the nature of this exchange can be understood as transactional wherein this exchange is shaped on the benefits at stake for both the diaspora and those in the homeland'.[12] Turning back to peacebuilding, it is evident that there are implications for this sort of dynamic: it highlights how an (un)sustained mutuality could challenge the processes and ideals of peace, especially if the degrees of mutuality continue to be tested around a site that is vital toward peace and security.

5. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This commentary has served to emphasize how taking leadership away from the person or position perspective is key for understanding complex contexts and relationships. The above discussion highlights that without leadership as a process and understanding at what points mutuality is formed, it is difficult to understand the exchange of influence that occurs and subsequently the nature of the relationship between the diaspora and their homeland. Additionally, while it is clear that the financial support of the diaspora is fundamental in Liberia not least towards supporting livelihoods and for post conflict reconstruction; the diaspora is also able to leverage this role to assert influence around contentious issues - in this case elections – in a manner that shifts dynamics of the relationship in potentially problematic ways. This commentary is necessarily brief, and further work is both welcome and needed in terms of understanding the leadership role of the diaspora in Liberia as well as other post-conflict and developing world contexts.

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