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## Abundant in policy, absent in practice? Rethinking 'local ownership'

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## Abstract

Local ownership of international statebuilding processes tends to be understood as a quality which is 'supported', 'fostered', 'granted' or 'stifled' by foreigners rather than something which is simply taken by the hosts of such interventions. Drawing on the literature on extraversion and examples from recent post-conflict reconstruction in Sierra Leone, this article challenges the view that local ownership is 'abundant in policy but absent in practice'. Sierra Leonean authorities actively worked to deepen and prolong the post-conflict intervention by drawing their former colonizer into the security sector. This contradicts two common assumptions about local ownership: (i) it is aimed at reducing international influence and (ii) it will be scarcer and more difficult to achieve the weaker the host state. If we are to arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of local ownership, international statebuilding should not be understood as discrete processes with defined goals, but instead as opportunities and constraints that expand or contract the political arena in which local actors operate.

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## Introduction

It is widely agreed that international statebuilding consistently falls short of 'local ownership' – a division of labor where foreign donors allow “domestic actors [to] control both the design and implementation of political processes” (Donais 2009: 3). Local ownership, donors admit, is “abundant in policy but absent in practice” (USIP 2010). According to the OECD, “a major problem in the area of security system reform [SSR] in some regions, particularly in Africa, has been a lack of local input to and ownership of the emerging reform agenda” (OECD 2005). One prominent scholar has questioned whether the concept has “either consistency or substance” at all (Chesterman 2007). Gordon Peake and Erik Scheye (2005: 240) argue that it has been “much more a rhetorical device than an actual guide for implementers” (see also Nathan 2007). Indeed, a common critique is that the commitment to local ownership serves to “cover up a ‘business as usual’ approach” that legitimates rather than mitigates foreign control (Reich 2006: 4).

These sobering findings have not dampened beliefs in the importance of local ownership. It is widely agreed that the results of international statebuilding will be minimal unless the process is embraced by local actors. According to Jens Narten, the failure to achieve local ownership could lead to “a never-ending and, thus, a quasi-colonial external rule” and produces the risk that a country could fall “back into violence and chaos” (2009: 252).

Focusing on the British-led reform of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) after 1998, this working paper argues that existing understandings of local ownership are a poor guide to the ways in which local actors *actually* shape international statebuilding processes. Because the quality and degree of local ownership is overwhelmingly seen as a function of how the international community behaves, we know little about the forms of ownership which is not handed over or offered up by foreigners. Yet the kind of ownership which is simply *taken* is likely to be just as important, if not more, than the 'nurtured' one. It is less affected by the inconsistencies of liberal interventionism that occupy most discussions, and it is often motivated by wider political considerations than the international reform agenda. It therefore tends to be misrecognized or overlooked altogether.

In order to identify the character and significance of such 'under the radar' local ownership, it is necessary to move beyond the rather narrow confines within which the concept is usually discussed. Drawing on the literature on 'extraversion', a concept developed by Jean-François Bayart (2000; 2009) to capture how African states use their weakness to derive benefits from the outside world, this article challenges two common assumptions about local ownership: (i) it is aimed at reducing international presence or influence, and (ii) it will be scarcer and more difficult to achieve the weaker the host state.

This paper starts by reviewing recent scholarship on local ownership, which often has a strong policy orientation. It is argued that otherwise persuasive critiques of dilemmas and contradictions inherent in the concept have done little to enhance our understanding of how local ownership is actually exercised. The paper goes on to critique how 'owners' tends to be separated from 'spoilers' in the literature. This distinction is unhelpful because it reinforces ideal representations of how interventions should play out instead of directing attention towards the complexity of local responses to foreign interventions. The concept of extraversion, on the other hand, suggests that a position of weakness may in fact *expand* opportunities to exert local ownership. The final part of the paper analyzes how the Sierra Leonean executive actively recruited British consultants into key positions in the security architecture and relates the exercise of ownership to the two countries' shared colonial history. The conclusion discusses the implications for how local ownership should be conceptualized.

## The absence of 'local' in local ownership

The literature on local ownership to date has been described as “underdeveloped” and “surprisingly shallow” (Donais 2009). The lack of analytical depth is in large part a result of the concept’s strong policy orientation – emanating as it does from the idea of ‘participatory development’ in the 1980s (Narten 2009). However, as local ownership became increasingly central to international statebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction doctrines, it has received some critical attention. Simon Chesterman (2007) has distinguished six senses of ownership, ranging from passive involvement (where policies are designed by foreigners so as to be responsive to local circumstances) to active exercise of sovereignty, such as the eviction of international staff by local governments. Timothy Donais has argued that the character and space for local ownership will depend on whether peacebuilding is conceived of as liberal commitment to principles of good governance or as a bottom-up negotiation heeding tradition and culture. Gordon Peake and Eric Scheye have provided (2005) a perceptive discussion of a series of problematic aspects, focusing specifically on the failure to properly address who the “customers” or “owners” of security sector reform (SSR) are. Scheye (2008) argues that ownership must be conceptualized across “four component types”: national elites, local elites, justice and security service providers and the customers of such services.

While these contributions have raised analytical precision and highlighted problems, one trait remains particularly striking: the literature is almost completely focused on the doings of external donors and reformers. The debate is squarely focused on how foreigners either *encourage* or *stifle* local agency – not on what such agency actually looks like. According to Michael Barnett and Christoph Zürcher, existing studies of peacebuilding have “focus[ed] on the international actors, treating domestic politics as ‘constraints’, and thus fail[ed] to incorporate fully the preference and strategies of local actors” (2009: 25). Donais concurs, arguing that “analysis of the specific identity of the relevant locals remains surprisingly thin” (2009: 11). As a consequence, discussions of local ownership bypass the perspective that is supposed to count – the local.

Very little has been done to correct this weakness, even by those who have criticized it. Chesterman claims that local ownership “reflects a desire on the part of external actors to *avoid undermining* pre-existing local processes that may be the most effective response to local political questions” (2007: 9, my emphasis). Of course, Chesterman is acutely aware of the irony of this roundabout way of thinking about local agency. “The rhetoric of ownership”, he has argued elsewhere, is characterized by the problematic assumption that “a political vacuum exists prior to the arrival of international staff” (Chesterman 2004: 5).<sup>1</sup> Yet, instead of investigating what fills this false vacuum, he prefers to focus on a dilemma facing foreigners: “how does one help a population prepare for democratic governance and the rule of law by imposing a form of benevolent autocracy?” (Chesterman 2007: 11). Similarly, Donais argues that “those engaging in capacity-building initiatives must decide whether authority structures based on clientilism represent a vital source of social capital or an obstacle to the establishment of modern political institutions” (Donais 2009: 17). Instead of considering how the key players in a clientilistic system respond to reform, Donais reduces those players to options on the menu of possible ‘local partners’. Since he admits that “one of the most important lessons of the past decade of peacebuilding practices relates [...] to the *limits* of international influence”, this focus is unhelpful. In the same vein, Annika Hansen and Sharon Wiharta (2007: xvi) argue that “the key to implementing local ownership lies in being transparent, allocating significant effort and resources to communication, and meeting local counterparts and their concerns with respect and an open mind”. Even those who insist that “peace, security and stability cannot be imposed from the outside” fail to investigate how local actors receive such efforts, but rather advocate that such goals be “*nurtured* internally through patient, flexible and responsive strategies that are in tune with domestic political

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<sup>1</sup> Annika Hansen illustrates this assumption when she claims that “In the wake of conflict, the realisation of local ownership is hindered by shortfalls in local capacity, willingness and legitimacy” (2008: 41).



realities” (Tschirgi 2004: ii, my emphasis). In other words, the local ownership which figures in the existing literature is (successfully or unsuccessfully) ‘fostered’, ‘supported’ or ‘implemented’ by external actors rather than simply *taken* by local hosts.

Given this focus, it is unsurprising that the literature on local ownership is littered with examples of dilemmas and contradictions confronting the international community. Peake and Scheye (2005) describe local ownership of security sector reform (SSR) in terms of a “Gordian knot”: how can foreigners trust the “local owners” of SSR if the abusive behavior of the latter was the very reason why SSR was needed in the first place? Hannah Reich (2006) critiques the “impossible goal of literal ‘local ownership’ of a foreign funded project”. Jens Narten (2009) elaborates on three dilemmas connected to local ownership: the need for intrusive action vs. the wish to create responsible self-government; the pressure on international actors to complete their mandates quickly vs. the concern with long-term capacity-building; and the risk that empowering local partners may turn out to be empowering potential ‘spoilors’.

No doubt, the idea that reforms and reconstruction efforts which are initiated and funded by external actors could ever become “designed, managed and implemented by local actors” (Nathan 2007) is deeply problematic. According to Keith Krause and Oliver Jutersonke, most statebuilding interventions “follow a donor-driven, bureaucratic-institutional logic that conjures into existence a social field on which policies can be imposed by experts defined not by their local knowledge but by their grasp of institutional imperatives and pseudo-scientific models of society and social change” (2005: 459). While this is a powerful critique, the raft of dilemmas, paradoxes, contradictions and Gordian knots said to hamper local ownership says as much about the overwhelming focus on what international actors think and do as about actual degrees of local influence and control. Instead of evidence that local ownership is scarce in supply, it is testimony of an unhelpful way of thinking about such processes in terms of either foreign or local control; what Jane Chanaa (2002) has called the “imposition-ownership divide”.

Influence and control of political processes seldom pit ‘foreigners’ against ‘locals’ in clear-cut ways. According to Donais, local ownership should be understood as a “delicate, complex, and often shifting balancing act, in which the division of responsibilities between outsider and insider is constantly calibrated and adjusted” (2009: 21). This is a promising framing, but it begs further questions about the political logic of these complex negotiations. Our understanding of such negotiations remains limited because of a tendency to focus on *who* are suitable owners rather than on *how* ownership is exercised according to shifting political considerations.

## ‘Owners’ vs. ‘spoilors’

Donor descriptions of local ownership are frequently and correctly criticized for a fundamental vagueness about who the ‘owners’ actually are (Peake and Scheye 2005). According to Chesterman, this lack of specificity leads to a problematic assumption that “larger groups in what are typically deeply divided societies can be regarded as a single ‘partner’ in anything more than an aspirational sense” (2007: 19). This ambiguity has no doubt contributed to neglect of actual forms of local influence and control over international statebuilding processes. However, a more important reason why actual local influence has gone unnoticed is a tendency to adopt a highly problematic dichotomy where ‘genuine’ owners are defined in opposition to ‘spoilors.’ On the one hand, there is a tendency to presume “beneficence and selflessness on the part of ‘local owners’” (Peake and Scheye 2005: 241). Even if ownership implies the ability to confront and resist foreign initiatives, it is often described as little more than implementation of ideas that foreigners introduce. The idea that “champions for reform” can be “empowered to help spearhead change” is an expression of this tendency (Oosterveld and Galand 2012). On the other hand, there are frequent warnings against spoilors – “leaders and parties who believe that peace emerging from negotiations threatens their power, worldview, and

interests, and use violence to undermine it” (Stedman 1997: 5).<sup>2</sup> In fact, the spoiler problem looms large over the idea of ownership, threatening its very existence: “the idea that the key role of outsiders in peacebuilding contexts is to create space for locally driven peacebuilding rests on an implicit – and perhaps dangerous – assumption that local actors will actually make use of such space to make peace” (Donais 2009: 12). Eric Scheye warns that “those wielding power may well have gained ascendancy because of the war; their continued enjoyment of the prerogatives of power may be dependent on the unsavoury and often illegal methods by which they acquired it, and the legitimacy of their exercise of political authority may be at best tentative” (cited in Hansen 2008: 44).

The dichotomy between owners and spoilers reveals that the form of local influence that is recognized as ownership is actually subject to strict normative constraints. Rather than register influence in a sociological sense, the concept of ownership is often used to designate moral entitlement to responsibility. For instance, Hansen and Wiharta (2007: 6) indicate where the line is drawn between legitimate and illegitimate owners:

True local ownership means accepting solutions and processes that may not conform to Western models of governance. In most cases, however, international resources, such as donor funding, will not be forthcoming unless minimum standards of good governance and respect for human rights are upheld.

Notice again how the international community is implicitly made the *agent* of local ownership (“true local ownership means accepting”). However, this statement tells us more about the donors’ “minimum standards” of human rights and good governance than about who is likely to support them and how. Despite the importance it attaches to local agency, the discourse on local ownership reifies ideal representations of how interventions play out instead of helping us identify the complexity of local responses to foreign interventions.

The few contributions that theorize local responses to international interventions do not support a neat distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘disingenuous’ owners. Based on a close study of peace operations in six countries, Beatrice Pouligny (2006) argues that the ‘local’ recipients of peace operations are in fact made up of complex networks that try to harness the international presence towards their own goals; often shifting strategy to exploit divisions and conflicts within international missions. Pouligny (2006: 217f.) convincingly criticizes the utility of the term ‘spoiler’ based on the observation that most host governments rely upon a “skilful mix of cooperation and opposition” to foreign authority. This suggests that one and the same actor can be both ‘genuine’ and ‘disingenuous’; support some aspects of the process but undermine others. The brittleness of the distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘disingenuous’ owners is supported by Barnett and Zürcher’s modeling of peacebuilding as a game between peacebuilders, state elites and subnational elites. The most likely outcome of such processes, they find, is “compromised peacebuilding”; an outcome where “both peacebuilders and local elites have altered policies and strategies in order to accommodate the preferences of the other” (Barnett and Zürcher 2009: 33).

These accounts challenge the conventional way of thinking about ownership. For it is hard to label local elites as either ‘genuine’ or ‘disingenuous’ if they simultaneously endorse the presence of international statebuilders and actively try to exploit tensions among them to strengthen their own hand. Indeed, in so far as reforms are deeply political – a claim donors readily make – this stance should be expected. In this light, Hansen and Wiharta’s (2007: 11) claim that the distinction “between those who can be won over and those who cannot ... becomes even clearer when promoting local ownership in corrupt and criminal environments” does not appear to be justified. The tendency to

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<sup>2</sup> Particularly damning from a donor perspective are so-called “inside spoilers”: an actor that “signs a peace agreement, signals a willingness to implement a settlement, and yet fails to fulfill key obligations to the settlement” (Stedman 1997: 8).

define benign 'owners' in contrast to 'spoilers' or 'disingenuous' actors obscures more subtle forms of influence which amounts neither to explicit acceptance nor to violent rejection of the reform agenda.

In sum, even if the ownership literature suggests that the range of local owners spans from 'civil society' to heads of government, it says surprisingly little about how the players within this range actually exert ownership. Especially notable is the failure to consider the implications for ownership of the fact that an actor may undermine a reform process in one regard and support it in others. This failure is due to inadequate consideration of the political opportunities such interventions offer to the hosts. Instead of thinking about interventions as discrete processes with defined goals, it is necessary to understand them as opportunities and constraints that expand or contract the political arena in which local actors operate. Once we do this, it becomes clear that a high degree of foreign control – rather than stifle local ownership – may in fact be wanted. It also reveals that the stylized sequence in which progressively more responsibility is handed over from international to local actors may be resisted locally. I will illustrate these points by analyzing the negotiation about foreign influence in the security sector in post-conflict in Sierra Leone. Firstly, it will be helpful to briefly introduce the concept of extraversion.

## Extraversion and local ownership as dependence management

It will be recalled that one of the basic assumptions about local ownership is that it will be scarcer and more difficult to achieve the weaker the host state. "In collapsed states or fragile societies, the presence of local capacity for assuming ownership of reforms cannot be taken as a given", argue Oosterveld and Galand (2012: 207). This claim appears straightforward, but is challenged by existing literature on weak statehood. The key contention in the literature on extraversion is that leaders of African states have succeeded in mobilizing a position of international weakness to achieve (primarily financial) benefits. In Bayart's words, "the leading actors in sub-Saharan societies have tended to compensate for their difficulties in the autonomization of their power and in intensifying the exploitation of their dependants by deliberate recourse to strategies of extraversion, mobilizing resources derived from their (possibly unequal) relationship with the external environment" (Bayart 2000: 216; 2009). Frederick Cooper has employed the term "gatekeeper-states" to refer to a similar dynamic where African elites sit "astride an interface between a territory and the rest of the world, collecting and distributing resources" (Cooper 2002: 157).<sup>3</sup>

The international statebuilding interventions of the 1990s and 2000s were particularly fertile opportunities for extraversion because they set up some local leaders as indispensable intermediaries and brought large-scale investment along with political and often military support. For weak and war-ridden states such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, such interventions greatly expanded "extraversion portfolios" – the sum of "specific linkages with the international system that [a] regime can exploit to extract abroad the resources it needs for domestic domination" (Peiffer and Englebert 2012: 7; see also Krogstad 2012a).

Because weakness and dependence is precisely what makes extraversion work, it does not follow that a high degree of dependence translates into a weak hand in relation to outsiders. On the contrary, the more aspects of weakness that can be instrumentalized to secure assistance and benefits from outside,

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Clapham (1994) criticized this view for reducing politics in Africa to a static game of rent-seeking and for glossing over the vast differences between states and politics across the continent. However, Clapham also praised the concept for transcending an image of Africa's leaders as "neocolonial puppets" and for capturing their skillful manipulation of foreign states and aid agencies.

the greater the scope for extraversion. Indeed, the political opportunities available to the leaders of states like Liberia and Sierra Leone increased greatly just at the time when these states *collapsed* and became subject of foreign intervention. This has an important implication for our understanding of local ownership. In so far as multi-pronged reconstruction processes increase available avenues of extraversion, the opportunities for ownership expand correspondingly. It follows that we cannot take for granted that ownership will be more readily available to strong local partners than to weak ones (cf. Nathan 2006). Rather, the extent of local ownership should be seen as a function of the skill with which those at the receiving end succeed in harnessing foreign reform initiatives to their own advantage.

This is an understanding of local ownership which is likely to be met with some skepticism. Extraversion is typically understood as a way for elites to benefit at the expense of the population and foreign donors, and is often described in terms of 'trickery'. It portrays African leaders at the helm of states which are grafted onto society rather than rooted in it, something which forces them to look abroad for resources that can secure their rule (Chabal and Daloz 1999). African elites, argues Ian Taylor, "have generally proven themselves excellent arch-manipulators of the international system" (Taylor 2010: 6). Bayart claims that "democracy, or more precisely the discourse of democracy [in Africa], is no more than yet another source of economic rents, comparable to earlier discourses such as the denunciation of communism or imperialism in the time of the Cold War, but better adapted to the spirit of the age" (Bayart 2000: 226, see also Reno 2001).

In this light, it is unsurprising that elites are viewed with suspicion in the literature on local ownership. "Criminalized" elites, argues Donais, are "the most problematic set of local owners" because they are "at least as likely to see the post-conflict period as an opportunity to consolidate wartime economic gains as an opportunity to work towards reconciliation and sustainable peace" (2009: 12). Yet the observation that "in practice, local interlocutors happen to be government officials most of the time" (Oosterveld and Galand 2012: 202) illustrates the danger associated with this suspicion. To emphasize the potential of more suitable local owners such as "civil society" does not help us understand better the strategies of the most important local intermediaries in international interventions – which remain elites. Furthermore, the skepticism of elites as appropriate owners takes us back to the problem discussed above: If local ownership is effectively reduced to selfless cooperation in accordance with the goals set up by foreign donors, then we will inevitably misrecognize or neglect important forms of local influence.

Having now given a basic description of the political opportunities that may offer themselves to states at the receiving end of international interventions, the final part of this paper analyzes the nature of the relations between Sierra Leonean elites and their British counterparts in the early stages of post-conflict reconstruction.

## Recruiting foreigners into the security sector

Sierra Leone has been widely regarded as an example of successful post-conflict reconstruction, particularly in the area of SSR (Jackson and Albrecht, 2011; Baker, 2008; Meek, 2003). The reform of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) is commonly identified as a success story and a "test bed" for present donor thinking on police reform policy and practice in other post-conflict countries (Baker 2008; Jackson and Albrecht 2011; Denney 2011; Stone 2005). Following a decade of war, elections were held in 2002 and 2007, and widespread praise was showered on the role of the police in keeping them largely peaceful. (Denney 2011; ICG 2008). Between 2002 and 2005, the UK government spent just over £27 million on the SLP (Ball et. al. 2007), restoring a decimated force to some 9,500 officers.

The success in this area is notable because elites in the security sector are "in the main, skeptical and resistant to reform" (Peake and Scheye 2007: 236). "Even more than most institutions", argue Peake

and Marenin, “the police are characterized as distrustful of outsiders and prone to traditions and conventionality (Peake and Marenin 2008: 64)” In other words, we should expect that local cooperation is particularly hard to achieve for foreign statebuilders in this sector.

In Sierra Leone, the opposite appears to have been the case. In their thorough analysis of SSR in Sierra Leone, Jackson and Albrecht found that “it is incorrect to conclude that the [...] process was simply ‘externally driven’”. One of the “key reasons” for its success, they argue, “was that citizens as well as leaders bought into the overall idea of UK engagement in the country” (2011: 184f.). Most importantly, Jackson and Albrecht found, there was a “core group of [Sierra Leonean] individuals who have exercised ownership in the transformation process”. There was also “powerful and consistent buy-in to the overarching principle of security system transformation by the President and senior civil servants” (ibid: 184).

In fact, both the SLP and the Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) were happy to accept long-term British involvement and even operational control. From the outset, President Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) clearly wished to see foreigners take leadership of the country’s main security institutions: “[I]t is striking how welcoming the Sierra Leonean executive was of its former colonial masters” (Jackson and Albrecht 2011: 16). Keith Biddle, a British national, directed the police reform as Inspector General of the SLP between 1999 and 2003. He was by all accounts a very strong leader, and was described by his successor (a Sierra Leonean) as a man you did not want as an enemy: “He ... pushed [a lot of people] out of the organization before he left. A lot of them”.<sup>4</sup> Despite his forceful style at the helm of a national security institution, Biddle was very popular in the SLP and in the country in general (Krogstad 2012b). What is more, there is evidence that Kabbah wanted a deeper British involvement in the security sector than the British government was prepared to go along with. Against Kabbah’s request of a British Chief of Defence Staff, British authorities considered “important in terms of presentation” that the British commander in charge of restructuring the armed forces was to be designated ‘Military Adviser to the Government of Sierra Leone’” (Jackson and Albrecht 2011: 16). In other words, Kabbah did not resist British dominance in the country’s security sector, he actively promoted it. In the realm of policing, Biddle remembered how he had to convince Kabbah that a *less* interventionist model was the way to go: “I thought the original idea, which Kabbah wanted, which was that we virtually took it [the SLP] over – we didn’t fancy it. Once we got on the ground and we realized what the dynamics were, it wasn’t the thing to do. And we convinced everybody, including Kabbah, that it wasn’t”.<sup>5</sup>

The example of a foreigner in charge of one of the core institutions of national sovereignty appears like the opposite of local ownership. In the literature on statebuilding and intervention this degree of foreign control is usually dubbed “proxy governance; a situation where foreigners “are temporary stand-ins for local authorities who are unable or unwilling to perform the needed administrative tasks themselves”. This phenomenon is well known from other international interventions in places such as Namibia, Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor (Hampson 1997: 708). Proxy governance, however, is assumed to be a “mechanism that peacebuilders have used to promote liberal norms” (Paris 2002: 645). It is also presented as directly inimical to local ownership. “It goes without saying”, goes one typical argument, “that local ownership in designing and implementing [statebuilding] programmes is a *sine qua non* for success” (Oosterveld and Galand 2012: 204).

The view of proxy governance as anathema to local ownership forecloses a possibility that is borne out by the Sierra Leonean case: host governments may draw their own benefits from initiating proxy

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<sup>4</sup> Brima Acha Kamara, personal interview, Freetown 7.4.2010.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Biddle, personal interview, Crewe, 27.10.09. Former British High Commissioner in Sierra Leone, Peter Penfold, who was also firmly of the opinion that Britain needed “executive authority to push advice through”, recalled that Kabbah “had meetings with Clare Short, [where] he made the point that he wanted a British person to head the police force”. Penfold, personal interview, Oxford 19.10.2010

governance. Firstly, it was reasonable for the Sierra Leonean executive to expect that senior British consultants appealing directly to their employer would be able to raise more funds than domestic candidates with little experience in fundraising and liaising with foreigners. This concern is likely to have reinforced President Kabbah's personal opinion that there were few domestic candidates suitable for the position as Inspector General of the SLP.<sup>6</sup> However, a second and even more important reason for initiating such proxy governance stemmed from Sierra Leone's politics, and was exacerbated by the volatile situation at the time. In April 1999 President Kabbah lamented how the country's development had been hampered by "four major military coups, two counter coups, at least five attempted coups, and four 'palace coups'" in just three decades.<sup>7</sup> Outsourcing control of institutions with a history of staging coups, a history only too familiar to a president who had been ousted from power just months earlier, was therefore a way of shoring up the government's fragile hold on the country. If this was a powerful renouncement of sovereignty, it could therefore be interpreted – at least from the government's point of view – as a way of safeguarding it. By actively initiating proxy governance of the country's security institutions, Kabbah deftly helped secure British support in an extremely volatile context.

## Local ownership inside-out?

The tug-of-war about the extent of direct involvement described above flies in the face of the common criticism that international statebuilding stifles the sovereignty and local ownership of the states which became subject to it (see Ayoob, 2002; Chandler 2006; Bickerton et. al. 2007).<sup>8</sup> At first glance, the governance structure that crystallized in Sierra Leone seems close to Stephen Krasner's controversial proposal for "shared sovereignty"; an institutional arrangement that involves precisely proxy governance: "[T]he engagement of external actors in some of the domestic authority structures of the target state for an indefinite period of time" (Krasner 2004). In such arrangements, "one core element of sovereignty – voluntary agreements – would be preserved, while another core element – the principle of autonomy – would be violated" (Krasner 2004: 108; see also Keohane 2003). However, Krasner's idea of "sharing" contains very little scope for understanding how weaker parties may use the same institutional arrangements to further their own autonomy. Our case reveals that the Sierra Leonean government was not a passive recipient of British military and police aid, but exercised a political will extending far beyond cooperation and consent on the terms offered to it. In fact, its accommodating attitude included a veritable recruitment policy of British advisers-cum-commanders. Since this agency was aimed at *increasing* direct foreign influence in the country's security sector, it challenged internationally recognized notions of sovereignty and thereby placed the British government in an awkward position. In fact, the British delegation seemed much more anxious to comply with notions of sovereignty than its Sierra Leonean host. Curiously, the image of sovereignty as a shield protecting the weak from the interference of the strong seemed reversed; it was the British who had to invoke sovereignty in order to establish limits on what they could and could not do. Fearing a "dependency culture", the British government therefore limited its initial plans for military assistance to three years" (Jackson and Albrecht 2011: 66).

We can make sense of these negotiations about sovereignty by recalling the concept of extraversion. If strategies of extraversion work precisely by turning the government's survival into something which internationals have a shared stake in, it is clear that leaders may see the infringement of the *principle*

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<sup>6</sup> This position of Kabbah's was referred to by Peter Penfold. Penfold, personal interview, Oxford 19.10.2010.

<sup>7</sup> Address by President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah to the Nation, 27.4.1999. <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Speeches/kabbah-042799.html> (accessed 1.11.2011).

<sup>8</sup> Those who think it is necessary to suspend the sovereignty of 'weak' or 'rogue' states in neo-imperial fashion in order to solve global problems emanating from them also pay little attention to the agency of such states. See for example Ferguson (2004).

of autonomy as an acceptable way of enhancing *de facto* autonomy. Wendt and Friedheim (1995: 702f.) argue that international security assistance helped clients reap benefits by embracing the identity as “weak” or “subordinate”:

Weak states are not naturally given [but] created and sustained by providing an external base to certain actors that enables them to seize power and avoid difficult policies necessary to create domestic legitimacy. By enabling regimes to survive that otherwise might not, in other words, security assistance creates identities that have an ‘investment in subordination’.

Similarly, Wendt and Barnett theorize that “dependency on security assistance in geopolitical structures of informal empire tends to create elites whose definitions of security are those of external patrons rather than the masses” (1993: 322). However, like Krasner’s focus on how strong states must rethink their approaches to essentially passive “collapsed and failing states”, this conception endows the leaders of those states with little real agency. Anticipating instead the local reactions that violations of domestic autonomy would provoke, Krasner gives an exceptionally blunt piece of advice to internationals: “For policy purposes, it would be best to refer to shared sovereignty as ‘partnerships’. This would more easily let policymakers engage in organized hypocrisy, that is, saying one thing and doing another” (Krasner 2004: 108). In Sierra Leone, exactly who engaged in organized hypocrisy is not so straightforward. “Saying one thing and doing another” was not only the domain of internationals but a key characteristic of extraversion.

Besides showing that local ownership is not necessarily aimed at taking over control from foreign hands, the Sierra Leonean case also challenges the conventional understanding that ownership will be in short supply the weaker the host state. The expectation that host states will be passive recipients is why donors argue that local ownership in the first period may be limited to ‘buy in’ or endorsement of initiatives that international staff design and set in motion. Even such limited ownership is taken to be “a critical component of sustainability”, meaning that it will lead to a situation where the “host nation takes on responsibility for [security] forces and reform programs” (USIP 2010).

President Kabbah’s activism may be seen as an example of such ‘buy-in’ and participation early in the reform process. In this case, however, Kabbah’s exercise of ownership was not directed at a rapid take-over, but at keeping the international presence for as long as possible. This form of local ownership fundamentally challenges the linear assumption that reforms will move from heavy international involvement in the early phase to increasing local responsibility in the later stages. What obstructs this sequence from playing out might not be the common problems identified by donors, such as the predominance of donor priorities and timelines over local involvement or lack of local political will, but that ‘locals’ cognizant of the benefits of keeping internationals in charge work actively to keep it that way. This may explain why a 2004 evaluation of UK-led post-conflict reconstruction attributed difficulties in fostering local ownership partly “to a lack of energy, expertise, will, and resources on the part of the Sierra Leone government” (Ginifer 2004: 2). What the authors perceived as lack of energy and will was just as likely the result of a political calculation that the government had much to gain from keeping the British in charge. To claim that “local ownership is abundant in policy but absent in practice” (USIP 2010) is therefore to neglect forms of ownership which does not fit the stylized image of the donor discourse.

## Conclusion

This paper has challenged the tendency to understand local ownership chiefly as a product of how international donors plan and implement reforms rather than of how such efforts are appropriated by those at the receiving end. The disproportionate attention to the actions of foreigners is explained by an assumption that weak states are unable to further their own interests. This gives rise to the view that local ownership is a quality foreign donors have to 'nurture' and 'allow'. The example of post-conflict reconstruction in Sierra Leone illustrates that weak states may also actively attract and shape foreign presence. Instead of a British nurturing of autonomy among weak Sierra Leonean elites, the latter strongly encouraged British influence in the country – to the point where British authorities felt they had to draw a line in the sand. Paradoxically, the British did so precisely because they were loath to be perceived as violating local ownership.

This illustrates two points that contradicts typical understandings of local ownership. Firstly, contrary to the view that local ownership will be more difficult to achieve the weaker the state, ownership was abundant in the 'collapsed' state of Sierra Leone. Moreover, it was exercised most vigorously at the point when local ownership is assumed to be weakest: in the midst of a devastating civil war. Secondly, rather than being exercised to *reduce* foreign influence, active steps were taken by Sierra Leonean authorities to *increase* and maintain strong British influence in the country. This was a strategy that made sense both in terms of securing a steady flow of donor resources and as a means to keep domestic rivals weak.

These findings suggest that the dichotomy between "imposition" and "ownership" is unhelpful. It is unhelpful in policy terms because it conceals difficult political questions that confront donors. If the ultimate aim of ownership is for local actors to shape internationally assisted statebuilding as much as possible, how should donors respond to strategies designed to 'lock in' the international presence? Such strategies are typically peaceful and cannot easily be written off as a way to 'spoil' a reconstruction process. Moreover, the risk that domestic conflict may reignite in the wake of heavy foreign presence means that local elites may credibly justify 'lock-in' strategies with reference to the very same liberal-democratic principles that donors use to justify why they must leave.

Finally, scholarly critiques of the concept of ownership have made too much of the conflict between imposition and ownership, neglecting the ways in which the 'recipients' of international take advantage of foreign 'imposition' to pursue their interests. If we are to arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of local ownership, international interventions should not be understood as discrete processes with defined goals, but instead as opportunities and constraints that expand or contract the political arena in which local actors operate.



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**INDEXING TERMS**

Post-conflict reconstruction

State-building

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Sierra Leone

Local ownership of international statebuilding processes tends to be understood as a quality which is 'supported', 'fostered', 'granted' or 'stifled' by foreigners rather than something which is simply taken by the hosts of such interventions. Drawing on the literature on extraversion and examples from recent post-conflict reconstruction in Sierra Leone, this article challenges the view that local ownership is 'abundant in policy but absent in practice'. Sierra Leonean authorities actively worked to deepen and prolong the post-conflict intervention by drawing their former colonizer into the security sector. This contradicts two common assumptions about local ownership: (i) it is aimed at reducing international influence and (ii) it will be scarcer and more difficult to achieve the weaker the host state. If we are to arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of local ownership, international statebuilding should not be understood as discrete processes with defined goals, but instead as opportunities and constraints that expand or contract the political arena in which local actors operate.