

Diasporas, Peacebuilding, & Reconciliation:  
A Case Study of the Liberian Diaspora

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## **I. Introduction**

In 2005 Liberia formed a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC), declaring that “national healing and reconciliation will be greatly enhanced by a process which seeks to establish the truth through a public dialogue which engages the nation about the nature, causes and effects of the civil conflicts and the impact it has had on the Liberian nation in order to make recommendations which will promote peace, justice, and reconciliation.”<sup>1</sup> Liberia is among a myriad of nations, such as South Africa and Guatemala, that have formed commissions as a medium between war crimes tribunals and blanket amnesty.<sup>2</sup> Unlike past commissions, Liberia is the first to include statements from its diaspora in the U.S., U.K., and Ghana.

This research paper serves as a preliminary investigation into the relationship of the Liberian diaspora and the Liberian TRC to better understand the engagement of diasporas in the reconciliation process. Although the focus of this paper is on reconciliation, it will also look at the larger role of diasporas in conflict and

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<sup>1</sup> “TRC Mandate,” <http://www.trcofliberia.org/mandate.htm>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> The United States Institute of Peace lists the following countries as having formed some sort of truth and reconciliation commission and details their specific commission as part of its Truth Commissions Digital Collection: Argentina, Bolivia, Chad, Chile, East Timor, Ecuador, El Salvador, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti, Nepal, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Serbia and Montenegro, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Uruguay, Zimbabwe, <<http://www.usip.org/library/truth.html>, (accessed October 24, 2007).

peacebuilding, highlighting cases from the Liberian diaspora experience. Through a content analysis of online Liberian newspapers, the websites of Liberian diaspora organizations, and three interviews with Liberians living in the U.S., this research profiles the Liberian diaspora in peacebuilding and raises new questions concerning TRCs and diasporic reconciliation that deserve greater attention.

## **II. Background and Historical Information**

The 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed among Liberia's warring factions called for the formation of a TRC. Article XIII states that the commission shall deal with impunity, allow victims and perpetrators to share their experiences, examine root causes, and recommend rehabilitation for victims. The Agreement furthermore states that the National Transitional Government shall "give consideration to a recommendation for general amnesty to all persons and parties engaged or involved in military activities during the Liberian civil conflict."<sup>3</sup>

On May 12, 2005, the Liberian National Transitional Legislative Assembly passed the Act to Establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia. The mandate of the TRC permits it to collect information regarding events that occurred from January 1979, a time of social unrest with riots over the inflation of rice prices, until October 14, 2003, or the date of the inauguration of Liberia's interim government. It aims to investigate human rights violations, identify the individuals, institutions, and organizations involved in such abuses, and recommend amnesty for individuals who disclose their acts with remorse.<sup>4</sup> However, it specifically states that "amnesty or

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<sup>3</sup> "Peace Agreements Digital Collection: Liberia," United States Institute of Peace, Aug. 20, 2007, [http://www.usip.org/library/pa/liberia/liberia\\_08182003\\_cpa.html](http://www.usip.org/library/pa/liberia/liberia_08182003_cpa.html), (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> "The Truth and Reconciliation Act of Liberia: Summary of Key Provisions." [http://liberiatrnc.mnadvocates.org/sites/cc8c0ee4-1ad1-49b7-9c2a-0a632726e1c3/Uploads/b.\\_Summary\\_of\\_Key\\_Provisions\\_of\\_TRC\\_Act.pdf](http://liberiatrnc.mnadvocates.org/sites/cc8c0ee4-1ad1-49b7-9c2a-0a632726e1c3/Uploads/b._Summary_of_Key_Provisions_of_TRC_Act.pdf), 2.

exoneration shall not apply to violations of international humanitarian law and crimes against humanity in conformity with international laws and standards.”<sup>5</sup> It also seeks to provide a forum for victims, witnesses, and perpetrators to share their experiences with the goal being to promote reconciliation and must prepare a report based on the information collected including recommendations for reparations, reforms, and further investigation.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, the TRC in Liberia is winding down its efforts on statement taking and is preparing to initiate public hearings on January 8, 2008.<sup>7</sup> The hearings have three different dimensions. The first consists of individuals, victims and perpetrators sharing their experiences. The second examines themes such as root causes and trends of the conflict. Lastly, the hearings study institutions in order to learn what reforms are necessary in the judiciary, education, economic sector, civil society, and the legislature, among others, to move the country forward. The TRC hopes that “. . . the hearings will catalyze public wide debate and embed issues of the conflict into the public consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> There are plans to also hold hearings in the U.S. later in 2008.

The conflict in Liberia ended in 2003 after 14 years of civil war. In 1980 Samuel Doe led a coup de tat overthrowing then President William Tolbert, an Americo-Liberian, and formed a government dominated by his Krahn ethnic group. After an attempted coup, Doe’s government retaliated against the conspirators’ ethnic group in Nimba County, largely targeting the Gio and Mano tribes. In 1989, Charles Taylor and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia led an attack against the government. A splinter group

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<sup>5</sup> “TRC Mandate”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “Public Statement on the Commencement of Public Hearings,” November 21, 2007, <https://www.trc.ofliberia.org/news-1/press-releases/public-statement-on-the-commencement-of-public-hearings-11-21-2007>, (accessed December, 14, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

formed called the Independent National Patriotic Front led by Prince Johnson.

Meanwhile, Krahn and Mandingo groups organized the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia in 1991 which later divided into separate ethnic movements against Taylor's forces. By 1995, there were seven fighting factions that came together to create the Liberian Council of State as a result of the Abuja Peace Accord. Taylor then became president in a 1997 election and a civil war later ensued in 1999 with fighting between the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy and the government's Armed Forces of Liberia. In 2003, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in Accra, Ghana, leading to the formation of a transitional government. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1497 (2003) established a multinational UN force known as UNMIL to assist in disarmament, elections, security sector reform, and reconstruction. In the 2005 elections, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became Africa's first female president.

Liberia is an ethnically diverse country with 16 different tribes making up 95% of Liberia's population.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the aforementioned groups, there are the Kpelle, Bassa, Kru, Grebo, Mano, Gola Bgandi, Loma, Kissi, Vai, Dei, Bella, and Mende.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these indigenous populations, there are the descendents of Americo-Liberians, freed African American slaves who founded the nation-state of Liberia in 1847, and the Congo People, descendents of freed slaves of the Caribbean, each of these groups make up 2.5% of the population respectively.<sup>11</sup> In terms of religion, 40% of the population identifies itself as Christian, 20% as Muslim, and 40% with indigenous beliefs.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Libiera," CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/li.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The conflict that consumed Liberia is notorious for its human rights abuses, such as the flagrant use of child soldiers, dismemberment, and rape as a tool of war. In the 14 years of conflict, an estimated 250,000 people were killed and 1.5 million displaced.<sup>13</sup> Currently, former Liberian President Charles Taylor faces trial at The Hague for charges of war crimes in the Sierra Leonean conflict via support for a rebel group called the Revolutionary United Front.<sup>14</sup> He was arrested in March of 2006 after spending three years of exile in Nigeria.

Hundreds of thousands of Liberians fled the violence, some to safer parts of the country, some to neighboring countries such as Ghana, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Cote d'Ivoire, and also to the United States and the United Kingdom. According to Refugees International, as of 2005, an estimated 133,000 Liberian refugees lived in Guinea, 72,000 in Cote d'Ivoire, 67,000 in Sierra Leone, and 43,000 in Ghana.<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to find comprehensive statistics on the numbers of Liberians living in the United States. One report indicated that there were an estimated 39,000 Liberians living in the United States as of 2005.<sup>16</sup> It is estimated that 25,000 Liberians live in Minnesota alone.<sup>17</sup> One report indicates that in 2005, 4,880 Liberians were legal permanent residents and that 1,500 became U.S. citizens.<sup>18</sup> Another report stated that the U.S. Refugee Program resettled

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<sup>13</sup> "Project Description," The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Diaspora Project, Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, [http://liberiatrc.mnadvocates.org/I\\_General\\_Volunteer\\_Information2.html](http://liberiatrc.mnadvocates.org/I_General_Volunteer_Information2.html), (accessed Dec. 14, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> "Charles Taylor—Preacher, Warlord, and President," BBC News, June 4, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2963086.stm>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> "Liberia," Refugees International, 2005, <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/country/detail/2921/>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Robin Dunn-Marcos, Konia T. Kollehlon, and Bernard Ngoyo, "Liberians: An Introduction to their History and Culture," *Culture Profile* No. 19. (Apr. 2005), Donald A. Ranard, Ed. Center for Applied Linguistics, 51.

<sup>17</sup> "Liberian Diaspora Overview," Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, [http://liberiatrc.mnadvocates.org/Country\\_Conditions\\_Human\\_Rights\\_Climate.html](http://liberiatrc.mnadvocates.org/Country_Conditions_Human_Rights_Climate.html). (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

more than 8,000 refugees from Liberia between 2003 and 2005.<sup>19</sup> In addition to refugees, there are middle-class Liberians who fled the country on their own and either remained in the U.S. legally or illegally.

In the mandate of Liberia's TRC, under "Other Powers" Section 27 A., it grants the commissioners the ability to gather "any information it considers relevant, including the ability to request reports, assistance of foreign governments, nonresident Liberians, records, documents or any information from any source. . ." <sup>20</sup> Within the TRC's mandate, nonresident Liberians are mentioned only in this subsection, yet the TRC commissioners decided to include the diaspora to an extent unlike any TRC before. Including the diaspora aims to allow the diaspora to participate in the promotion of international justice and human rights as well as create a better understanding of Liberia's transitional justice mechanisms.<sup>21</sup> In a media advisory from the Center for Transnational Justice, an organization that has assisted the Liberian TRC in its establishment and carrying out its mandate, it states that "Given that an estimated 25 percent of the Liberian population fled the country during its 14-year civil war, the Commissioners strongly believe that refugees and repatriated Liberians should be an integral part of the truth-seeking process."<sup>22</sup>

Working with the Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, a nonprofit organization with the specific aim to assist immigrants and refugees, the TRC launched a pilot project in Minnesota in 2006 working with a national advisory committee consisting

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<sup>19</sup> Susan Schmidt, "Liberian Refugees: Cultural Considerations for Social Service Providers," Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services, June 20, 2005, 1.

<sup>20</sup> "TRC Mandate."

<sup>21</sup> "Project Description."

<sup>22</sup> "Media Advisory: Liberian Truth Commission Reaches Out to Diaspora in the United States, International Center for Transitional Justice, September 28, 2006, <http://www.ictj.org/en/news/press/release/1018.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).



of Liberian leaders in the U.S. The project has since expanded to Atlanta, Chicago, New York/Staten Island, Newark, Philadelphia, Providence, and Washington, D.C./Maryland.<sup>23</sup> Commissioners have toured different sites in the U.S. hosting town-hall meetings and kick-off events to educate the diaspora about the TRC and to encourage its participation. The effort to collect statements in the Staten Island area was even profiled by the *New York Times* on two occasions.<sup>24</sup>

The engagement of a diaspora in a reconciliation process is another step forward in the involvement of diasporas in conflict resolution. An understanding of diasporas in terms of peacebuilding will set the context for this newest contribution of diasporas through reconciliation.

### III. Methodology

A content analysis of three interviews with Liberians in the diaspora, online Liberian newspapers, and the websites of Liberian diaspora organizations provides a medium to explore the relationship of the Liberian diaspora community with Liberia in terms of peacebuilding and the TRC.

All of the individuals interviewed are in their twenties and are students. Because the interviews were confidential and anonymous, the participants shall be distinguished by the letters A, B, and C. Participant A spent five years in a refugee camp in Ghana before coming to the U.S. in 2001. He is active in a Liberian students' organization and is an advocate for dual citizenship. He plans to return to Liberia temporarily before the

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<sup>23</sup> "Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Project," Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, <http://liberiatrct.mnadvocates.org/Home.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Ellen Barry, "From Staten Island Haven, Liberians Reveal War's Secrets," *The New York Times*, September 18, 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/18/nyregion/18liberians.html?pagewanted=1&n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/Subjects/I/Immigration%20and%20Refugees&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/18/nyregion/18liberians.html?pagewanted=1&n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/Subjects/I/Immigration%20and%20Refugees&_r=1), (accessed December 14, 2007); Ellen Barry, "Seeking Hidden Accounts of Atrocity," *The New York Times*, October 31, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/31/nyregion/31reconcile.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

end of the year. He is originally from what is now Garpolu County. Participant B left Liberia in 1990, first living in Guinea before going to a refugee camp in Ghana before moving to the U.S. in 1994. She plans to return to Liberia for several months in 2008 to work for an organization after having graduated from college. Her family is originally from Nimba County, but currently resides in Monrovia. Participant C left Liberia in 2004 and has no plans to return to Liberia in the near future. He is originally from Nimba County. None of the participants will be giving a statement to the TRC and nor do they know of someone in the U.S. or in Liberia participating.

The two online newspapers are *The Perspective* and *The Analyst*. These two sites are popular in the Liberian diaspora, frequently linked to the homepages of U.S. diaspora organizations. *The Perspective* is based in Georgia and was formed by The Liberian Democratic Future, a group of Liberians from various ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds.<sup>25</sup> Its mission statement describes its purpose as being a medium for dialogue in order to examine the root causes, class divisions, and social ills facing Liberia. *The Analyst* is based in Liberia and was established in 1998 with the recognition that the press has the responsibility to “help identify the problems of society, set the pace for positive change by sensitizing policymakers and the public.”<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, a review of U.S.-based Liberian organizations suggests the nature and extent of formal dialogue among Liberians concerning peacebuilding and reconciliation. An analysis of organizations’ mission statements, events/activities calendars, news, or any other direct references to these themes indicates a preliminary measure of the degree to which Liberians in the diaspora are active in the reconciliation and peacebuilding

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<sup>25</sup> “The Perspective,” 2006, <http://www.theperspective.org/editorial.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> “Liberian Analyst Corporation,” 2007, <http://www.analystliberia.com/aboutus.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

process. There are a myriad of Liberian organizations in the U.S. Many of these associations are based upon county or tribe of origin. The organizations included in this analysis are the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas, United Bassa Organizations of the Americas, the United Bong County Association in the Americas, various associations of Mandingos (in Wisconsin, New York, and Pennsylvania), the United Nimba Citizens' Council, the National Krao Association, the National Association of the Cape Mountainians in the Americas, and the Grand Gedeh Association in the Americas, Inc. Many of the organizations' websites are a means to share the latest community news, such as about deaths, marriages, and births and therefore serve as a focal point of their particular diaspora communities.

By using various sources in the diaspora community, this preliminary investigation hopes to highlight cases of the Liberian diaspora experience and serves to generate further hypotheses about diasporas and conflict in need of further study.

#### **IV. The Liberian Diaspora and Peacebuilding**

##### *A. Literature Review*

This first section explores the experience of the Liberian diaspora in peacebuilding. Peacebuilding “seeks to identify and address comprehensively the many levels at which peace needs to be built in societies torn by violent internal conflict.”<sup>27</sup> These levels include government and constitutional reform, economic reconstruction, psychosocial trauma, and social relations.<sup>28</sup> Much of the literature focusing on diasporas looks at the importance of economic contributions and the ability of organized diaspora groups to mitigate or aggravate ethnic conflict.

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<sup>27</sup> Rama Mani, *Beyond Retribution: Seeking Justice in the Shadows of War*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002), 17.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

Remittances or donations contribute to peacebuilding directly and indirectly. Donations to specific reconstruction projects or civil society organizations by the diaspora contribute to peacebuilding efforts at the grassroots level. Moreover, remittances contribute indirectly to peacebuilding by improving the livelihood of specific individuals, mainly the family of diaspora members. By helping to improve these individuals' economic status, remittances provide a temporary relief from poor economic conditions resulting from structural violence.

The economic contributions of a diaspora can help its home country during times of conflict. For instance, in a policy paper for the International Peace Academy, Fagen and Bump examine the role that remittances play in transitions from conflict to peace. They write that remittances can help reduce poverty, provide investment when international investment is lacking, and may help reduce further displacement by providing sustenance.<sup>29</sup> In order to address some of the challenges of sending remittances, the authors recommend that countries review any immigration or labor laws hindering remittances and to ensure that money transfer systems still can easily facilitate remittances with anti-crime and anti-terror legislation. Both host and home countries must ensure that their policies enable diasporas to provide economic assistance.

In a case study of the role of the Jamaican diaspora in peacebuilding and development, Cunningham in a survey of 30 Jamaicans living in the U.S., the U.K., and Canada and a focus group of 50 participants in Canada found that all participants maintain ties with Jamaica, but most did not contribute to peacebuilding although nearly

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<sup>29</sup> Patricia Weiss Fagen and Micah N. Bump, "Remittances in Conflict and Crises: How Remittances Sustain Livelihoods in War, Crises, and Transitions to Peace," The Security-Development Nexus Program, International Peace Academy (Feb. 2006).

90% believed that the diaspora should do more.<sup>30</sup> Many of his study participants cited ‘economic barriers’ as the reason for being unable to contribute more. Cunningham’s study reinforces the notion that diasporas have a sense of duty to contribute to their home country.

Beyond sending remittances to family and friends, diaspora members in a more privileged position can contribute to their nation through a variety of means. In a study of Colombian diasporic philanthropy, Aysa-Lastra classifies the ways in which diasporas make donations. Her seven categories consist of direct contributions to a community of origin, online non-governmental organizations, hometown associations, civic organizations, religious institutions, nonprofits focusing on the engagement of the diaspora, and transitional enterprises sponsoring projects in the home country.<sup>31</sup> Aysa-Lastra writes that “. . . understanding diaspora giving, providing incentives to engage diaspora populations with their homeland development, and establishing trustworthy and effective conduits for this giving are all essential to ensure reliable and continuous flow of resources to the countries of origin.”<sup>32</sup> Recognizing the potential of the diaspora, the Colombian government created a program called *Colombia Nos Une*, or Colombia Unites Us, through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs to create a stronger social network among members of the Colombian diaspora.<sup>33</sup> Colombia also grants dual citizenship and provides an official diaspora representative in its Congress. These initiatives further engage the diaspora population in the affairs of its country of origin, particularly important in a war-torn country such as Colombia.

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<sup>30</sup> Ron Cunningham, “Impacting Peace-building and Development in Jamaica: Addressing Challenges and Opportunities Encountered by the Jamaican Diaspora,” Univ. for Peace. , 32.

<sup>31</sup> Maria Aysa-Lastra, “Diaspora Philanthropy: The Colombia Experience,” Colombia Studies Institute, Florida International Univ. May 2007, 7-8.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 13.

Although diasporas may contribute to peacebuilding economically, diasporas may intensify conflict in their home countries using their privileged position abroad and by other means. In analyzing how diasporas can intensify conflict in their home countries, Demmers in an analysis of diasporas, conflict, and nationalism identifies four primary reasons why diasporas have played an increasing role in conflict dynamics.<sup>34</sup> The first is the rise of conflicts based on identity. Second, the increase of internal wars means a greater number of civilians impacted and therefore more refugees. Third, technological advancements in communication and mobility have enabled diasporas to maintain relations with their home country. Fourth, Demmers cites the “increased production of cultural and political boundaries” that create a heightened sense of the ‘other.’<sup>35</sup> More specifically, Shain analyzes how diasporas have complicated peace processes by expanding negotiations beyond the traditional interaction of two states.<sup>36</sup> In his case studies of the Armenian-American and Jewish-American diasporas in the conflicts over Nagorno-Karabakh and the West Bank, he finds how diasporas have an increasingly powerful role in conflict situations:

The diaspora’s role in homeland conflict perpetuation and conflict resolution can be so powerful that homeland leaders ignore diaspora preferences at their own peril. Indeed, diasporas are endemic to the international system, having a capacity for independent and assertive political action. In confronting the kin state’s conflict, the diaspora attempts to promote its own view of the ethnic community’s identity and

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<sup>34</sup> Jolle Demmers, “Diaspora and Conflict: Locality, Long-Distance Nationalism, and Delocalisation of Conflict Dynamics,” *The Public* 9 (2002).

<sup>35</sup> Demmers, 85.

<sup>36</sup> Yossi Shain, “The Role of Diasporas in Conflict Perpetuation or Resolution,” *SAIS Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer-Fall 2002), 120.

interests, a view which is not always congruent with the view of the homeland authorities.<sup>37</sup>

Because of the role of identity and the threat to their homelands by outsiders, the Armenian and Jewish diasporas have provided funding and weapons to their homeland conflicts as well as lobbied their host governments to even act contrary to what their homeland governments may desire. Shain identifies four main factors that determine whether a diaspora may resist to efforts to resolve the conflict. They include the extent to which a group wants to maintain its identity even if it means continuing a conflict, the degree to which the diaspora competes with the homeland leadership to lead the transnational ethnic community, the stake that the diaspora has in the conflict in terms of political interests in continuing the conflict, and how the diaspora values maintaining good relations with its host state versus its homeland when differences arise. In the case of Liberia, because it is an established state and there is not an outside force threatening Liberians' identity or state, the Liberian diaspora is more apt to facilitate conflict resolution in Liberia.

In spite of the evidence of diasporas' manipulation of conflict, several authors have begun to examine how diasporas can in fact contribute to conflict resolution in their home countries. In a study of the potential of diaspora communities to transform conflicts in their home societies, Zunzer looks at the diasporas from Sri Lanka, Cyprus, and Afghanistan residing in Europe. He suggests that diasporas can play a greater role in conflict transformation:

A question which seems to be of critical importance is how qualified and politically pro-active members of diaspora communities living in Western

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 116.

democracies could be integrated to a far greater extent into foreign policy initiatives. Functional elites, especially those living in Western countries and who have an interest in finding non-violent or violent-reducing solutions to social and political problems in conflict or post-conflict situations in their home countries, are one important diaspora potential which has been tapped in the past, albeit inadequately so far.<sup>38</sup>

Zunzer suggests that the expertise of diaspora communities has not been adequately utilized by host governments and organizations to stimulate a “bridge-building role.”<sup>39</sup> In his research, Zunzer identifies five factors that determine a diaspora’s potential to be peacebuilders. The first of which is the diaspora’s physical distribution and organizational structure in the host country. Next, the legal status and the living standards affect whether a diaspora will have the means to contribute. Third, the perspective of the diaspora toward the conflict and the degree of shared identity among the diaspora in taking a side or standing for peace influences a diaspora’s potential. Fourth and fifth, the ability to constructively engage the diaspora in dialogue and projects as well as the access that members of the diaspora have to political actors and resources in the host and home countries helps determine the influence that the diaspora may have in changing the conflict situation. Considering these factors within the context of the U.S. Liberian diaspora will help elucidate its potential for peacebuilding.

### *B. Observations*

The Liberian diaspora in the U.S. has contributed to post-conflict Liberia in a number of ways. First and foremost, the diaspora assists Liberia through economic

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<sup>38</sup> Wolfram Zunzer, “Diaspora Communities and Civil Conflict Transformation,” Berghof Occasional Paper Nr. 26, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management (Sep. 2004), 44.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 42.



remittances and hometown projects. Secondly, members of the diaspora contribute through business investment. Lastly, the absence of the conditions to create a conflict perpetuating diaspora means that the diaspora is more apt to contribute to peacebuilding. Yet, there is some indication of how the Liberian diaspora may cause tensions with the peace process as will be discussed later.

According to a study cited in an article posted on *The Perspective's* website, Liberian households in Minneapolis on average send \$3,500 dollars every year to relatives in Liberia.<sup>40</sup> Over 60% of those remittances assist 10 or more relatives. The study also indicated that about 40% of the surveyed households were interested in starting a business in Liberia. The Liberian diaspora and Liberian government have made greater efforts recently to cooperate. The Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas wrote a report called "Leveraging the Potential of the Liberian Diaspora—Proposing a 'Diaspora Commission.'" In this report, it expresses its interest in forming a formal commission by presidential decree or legislation that consists of resident and non-resident Liberians to create, for example, a database of diaspora skills and talents, to express diaspora-specific economic, social, and political concerns, and find innovative ways to encourage diaspora investment.<sup>41</sup> The Liberian Embassy also hosted a private investment symposium called "Liberia: 'Open for Business.'" Members of the diaspora, Liberian government, and Americans from the private sector discussed issues such as agriculture and forestry, mining, health and education, infrastructure development, and small and

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<sup>40</sup> Siahyonkron Nyanseor, "Liberia: 'Open for Business,'" *The Perspective*, October 9, 2007, <http://www.liberiaitech.com/theperspective/2007/1009200701.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Saah Charles N'Tow, "Leveraging the Potential of the Liberian Diaspora," ULAA Research and Development Committee, <http://www.talkaboutculture.com/group/soc.culture.liberia/messages/5819.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

medium businesses. Increased cooperation between the diaspora and the Government of Liberia will enable both parties to hasten Liberia's economic recovery.

In speaking with members of the diaspora, all three said that when they have worked, they have sent remittances back to their family members remaining in Liberia. They have not however made donations to an organization. Participant B noted that the Liberian community is discussing how they can contribute: "Some of my family members want to go back. They have plans, though they have children in high school, middle school, elementary school, are making plans to have one parent stay here and raise the family while the other goes back and sees what business opportunities they can start there." Participant B has her own plans to go to Liberia for up to three months next year because she believes that now she has a college degree that she is a resource to Liberia and can help with its peacebuilding efforts. Likewise, Participant A changed his major from engineering to human services with the intention of using the skills he develops to assist individuals traumatized by the war. All of the participants expressed that it was the duty of the diaspora to assist Liberia.

Diaspora organizations are also critical in peacebuilding efforts through sponsoring large projects. Of the ten organizations analyzed online in this study, three detailed development projects and philanthropy efforts on their websites. The United Bong Association of the Americas, for instance, describes its purpose in its mission statement as creating "a unified and strong Bong County community. . .[that] shall become an active partner in the reconstruction of our country."<sup>42</sup> One of the ongoing projects of this organization is an educational resource center to be located in the Bong

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<sup>42</sup> "Our Mission," United Bong Association in the Americas, Inc., <http://www.unitedbong.org/html/mission.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

County capital of Gbarnga. The project that began in February of 2006 will have a library with 50,000 books, a computer center, conference facility, copy center, and office spaces.

The United Bassa Organizations of the America acknowledges that “the dynamics of our power and privileges afforded us in America to advocate [a] conducive learning environment for the younger generation of our counties and country as a whole.”<sup>43</sup> Some of the projects working to enhancing education in Liberia are a collection drive for textbooks, school supplies, personal computers, and copy machines. The organization also collects medical supplies, such as bandages, antibiotics, surgical supplies, and wheel chairs, to donate to the John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Monrovia. This organization also is helping to rebuild infrastructure by building rural schools and developing water infrastructure.

The National Association of Cape Mountainians in the Americas, Inc. of the Grande Cape Mount County in Liberia also works to improve the conditions in Liberia. Article II of the organization’s mission statement reads that one of its objectives is to provide assistance to small farmers and send aid to schools and medical centers.<sup>44</sup> One of its projects consists of a \$15,000 pledge to the Konjah Bridge Project. It furthermore supported the outpatient unit of a hospital by paying the monthly salaries of the staff and providing supplies. It also donated \$2,000 to train 28 women to become mid wives and \$2,500 for sports equipment, football and kickball jerseys for the National County meet.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Our Vision,” <http://www.uniboa.org/ourvision.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> “Constitution and By-Laws of the National Association of Cape Mounainians in the Americas, Incorporated,” <http://davie.textdrive.com/~beatniqe/naca/constitution.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007)

<sup>45</sup> “NACA Commits \$15,000 for Bridge Construction in Camp Mount,” <http://davie.textdrive.com/~beatniqe/naca/NACACommitsUS15000forBridgeConstructioninCapeMount.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

The projects of these diaspora organizations play an important part in addressing the needs of resident Liberians. Because the government may be unable to meet their needs, may be unaware of specific needs, or has different priorities, the diaspora through its social ties can identify specific projects for their hometowns and counties. In turn, through their diaspora networks, they can help fundraise to complete the projects.

Zunzer, as previously mentioned, identifies factors that contribute to a diaspora's ability to be peacebuilders. These factors are helpful in delineating the potential of the Liberian diaspora to contribute to peacebuilding. The physical distribution of the Liberian diaspora in the U.S. is something to take into consideration. The TRC is taking statements in Minnesota, Atlanta, Chicago, New York/Staten Island, Newark, Philadelphia, Providence, and Washington, D.C./Maryland. In addition to these areas, there are Liberian organizations in Southern California, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, and Oklahoma. Although dispersed throughout the U.S., in some of these areas as is the case of Minnesota, there is a high concentration of Liberians. Another factor would be how homogenous or not these communities are in terms of tribe or county or origin. Because diasporas tend to favor donating to their hometown or home county, greater homogeneity or close-knit networks could enable greater mobilization and fundraising.

In terms of legal status and living standards, the Liberian diaspora also varies greatly. As mentioned earlier, elite Liberians were able to leave during the conflict and some have remained in the U.S. legally or illegally. There are also refugees and asylees with permanent or temporary protection status. Their most pressing need may be to send remittances home to family instead of contributing to larger projects. Furthermore, the

Liberian diaspora, although consisting of various tribal groups, for the most part stands as one Liberia and therefore can more effectively work towards peace. In terms of engagement, because there are many identifiable Liberian diaspora groups already organized, it is easy to reach out to them with the right contacts. Lastly, it is not clear the type of access that the Liberian diaspora has in terms of political actors and resources, but as aforementioned it is strengthening its ties with the Liberian government.

Although for the most part the Liberian diaspora may contribute positively to Liberia's post-conflict society, an article from *The Analyst* cites some tensions between resident and nonresident Liberians with the peace process. It describes how the Grand Gedeh Association in the U.S. had expressed concerns over the arrests of General Charles Juju, believing that the allegations against him were mere propaganda and manipulation.<sup>46</sup> The insistence of the Grand Gedeh Association led Grand Gedeh leaders in Liberia to "caution all Grand Gedeans in the Diaspora to remain calm and desist from making statements that have the propensity to inflame emotions and thus undermine the ongoing peace process."<sup>47</sup> More accounts are needed to determine to what extent and frequency such tensions occur and to what degree the diaspora interferes with negatively with the peace process.

Another concern that arises in regard to the relationship between nonresident Liberians and Liberians is the cultural or knowledge gap and the tensions it may create. In discussing peacebuilding, Participant B stated, ". . .the people who have careers in America are a great resource to the country, but again whenever you have people going back, you always have discontent. You have to be very careful in peacemaking, make

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<sup>46</sup> "Grand Gedeans Differ with US-Kinsmen," *The Analyst*, July 25, 2007, [http://www.analystliberia.com/grand\\_gedeans\\_differ\\_with\\_usa\\_kinsmen\\_july25\\_07.html](http://www.analystliberia.com/grand_gedeans_differ_with_usa_kinsmen_july25_07.html), (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

sure you don't have animosity being created." Because the members of diaspora who return to Liberia may have adopted a new culture or may think that they know more, it is important to be wary of how attitudes of superiority may create tensions. Given the history of Liberia with the dominance of Americo-Liberians, returning Liberians must instead engage their fellow Liberians on the best way to rebuild Liberia. *The Perspective* further cites the cleavages between the homeland and the diaspora in which some Liberians have the attitude that "I have greater entitlements because you ran away and I stayed and endured the war." Or, "I provided remittances."<sup>48</sup> These possible attitudes reflect the hostility that may exist towards people who were able to escape from the war or towards those who may seem ungrateful for the remittances that the diaspora has provided. It underscores the importance of moving beyond such differences to focus upon how to best utilize resources to contribute to Liberia's development.

## **V. The Liberian Diaspora, Reconciliation, and the TRC**

### *A. Literature Review*

As described in the previous section, diaspora communities are seen as increasingly important in economic development in developing nations and in peacebuilding in post-conflict societies. The Liberian diaspora has contributed to the rebuilding of its nation not only through remittances and specific "home county" projects, but also now through reconciliation. Reconciliation is a new paradigm from which to explore the role of diasporas in relation to their home country's social development.

The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance describes reconciliation as a "means of finding a way to live alongside former enemies—not necessarily to love them,

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<sup>48</sup> D. Elwood Dunn, "Liberia and New Beginnings," *The Perspective*, September 5, 2006, <http://www.theperspective.org/speeches/090420061.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

or forgive them, or forget the past in any way, but to coexist with them, to develop the degree of cooperation necessary to share our society with them, so that we all have better lives together than we have had separately.”<sup>49</sup> It is the hope that reconciliation enables a polarized society to move beyond antagonism and resentment towards cooperation and compromise concerned with the welfare of all. Reconciliation principally occurs at the individual level. Each individual, victim, perpetrator, or bystander, must look inside him or herself in order to reconcile. Assefa describes the reconciliation process as consisting of seven central elements.<sup>50</sup> These elements, as listed below, enable the possibility for coexistence:

- a) Honest acknowledgement of the harm/injury each party has inflicted on the other; b) Sincere regrets and remorse for the injury done; c) Readiness to apologize for one’s role in inflicting the injury; d) Readiness of the conflicting parties to ‘let go’ of the anger and bitterness caused by the conflict and the injury; e) Commitment by the offender to not repeat the injury; f) Sincere efforts to redress past grievances that cause the conflict and compensate the damage caused to the extent possible; g) Entering into a new mutually enriching relationship.<sup>51</sup>

Although an individual’s reconciliation may not follow these elements exactly, reconciliation primarily entails the formation of a new relationship with the individual or group that was once one’s enemy. In Assefa’s description of reconciliation, it is possible to see reflections of the TRC’s purposes and methods. TRCs serve as a means for not

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<sup>49</sup> Ed. David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes, Luc Huyse. “Reconciliation after Violent Conflict: A Handbook.” Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2003, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Hizkias Assefa, “The Meaning of Reconciliation,” European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation, [http://www.gppac.net/documents/pbp/part1/2\\_reconc.htm](http://www.gppac.net/documents/pbp/part1/2_reconc.htm), (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Idib.

only the victims to share their stories, but also for perpetrators to come forward and ask for forgiveness. The South African TRC model is well known for the fact that it encouraged low-profile perpetrators to receive amnesty if they acknowledged their wrongdoing fully and with remorse, often before the victims' families. The 'letting go' element in the reconciliation process is achieved in part through the cathartic process of telling one's story aloud and sharing it with society. Chapman and Ball write that "the idea that public acknowledgement of suffering—the truth about injustice—will begin to restore victims' dignity is perhaps the central premise on which truth commissions are founded."<sup>52</sup> Governments through TRCs furthermore aim to address grievances by reforming institutions, making reparations, and publicly acknowledging the past through the TRC's report, public statements, and public memorials.

TRCs have become the way to facilitate a reconciliation process at the national level. They seek a medium between prosecutions and blanket amnesty. They are often the result of a political compromise emerging from war or a political regime that abused human rights at a massive level. For a number of reasons prosecutions are not feasible or favorable to the political climate. Perpetrators, as the rebel groups in Liberia, may only agree to a settlement if given some assurance against prosecution. Furthermore, Amstutz writes that "... criminal prosecution may not always be a viable strategy, especially if the constitutional structures are weak, the society is deeply divided over the truth of past crimes, or criminal culpability is widespread."<sup>53</sup> The sheer number of perpetrators makes it at times unfeasible to prosecute and could create greater animosity. The society is often unclear of what did and did not happen and the culmination of accounts through a

<sup>52</sup> Audrey R. Chapman and Patrick Ball, "The Truth of Truth Commissions: Comparative Lessons from Haiti, South Africa, and Guatemala," *Human Rights Quarterly* 23 (2001), 12.

<sup>53</sup> Mark R. Amstutz, *The Healing of Nations: The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 42.



TRC brings clarity to the past. Also, the growing blur between perpetrator and victim, as in the case of child soldiers, indicates that prosecution is not the most ideal method in a case where rehabilitation may be more important. Blanket amnesty, on the other hand, results in impunity and leaves victims without any sort of justice. It furthermore risks a denial of the past and therefore a return of atrocities in the future. TRCs therefore seek to “. . . unsilence a topic that might otherwise only be spoken of in hushed tones, long considered too dangerous for general conversation, rarely reported honestly in the press, and certainly out of the bounds of the official history taught in schools.”<sup>54</sup>

There have been a number of criticisms of TRCs. Authors have criticized its nearly universal application, examined its cultural limitations, and questioned the correlation between truth and justice. Even in the widely acclaimed successful TRC of South Africa, doubt has been cast. Gibson in interviews with 3,700 South Africans found that it is true that individuals who accept the “truth” are more likely to have reconciled attitudes, yet racial reconciliation still depended upon the amount of racial interaction.<sup>55</sup> Black Africans tended to have less reconciled attitudes towards whites. Gibson’s research contributes to the questioning that a TRC’s creation of a collective memory will lead to acceptance, tolerance, and reconciliation.

The transitional justice process of Sierra Leone raises a variety of questions concerning the benefits of TRCs and is particularly relevant because of its proximity to Liberia and its role in the prosecution of former Liberian president Charles Taylor. The Lomé Peace Agreement that ended Sierra Leone’s civil war initially granted amnesty and

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<sup>54</sup> Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Facing the Challenge of Truth Commissions*, (Routledge, 2002), 25.

<sup>55</sup> James L. Gibson, “Does Truth Lead to Reconciliation? Testing the Casual Assumptions of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Process,” *American Journal of Political Sciences* 48.2 (Apr. 2004), 209.

called for a TRC; however, due to renewed violence, a special tribunal was formed to end impunity.<sup>56</sup> In an analysis of the relationship between managing a tribunal and a TRC simultaneously, Schabas finds that a major concern was a lack of information about the relationship of the two bodies. Some individuals were unwilling to come forward to the TRC because of the fear that information admitted to the TRC could in turn be used against them for criminal prosecution.<sup>57</sup>

Liberia did not create a tribunal and has not initiated prosecutions, waiting for the recommendations and findings of the TRC to decide the next step. Amnesty International has criticized this decision to wait, writing that “Although the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has an important role to play in establishing the truth of many of the horrific incidents that took place during the years of conflict in Liberia, it is not a substitute for a court of law. It cannot establish individual criminal responsibility or provide full reparations to victims.”<sup>58</sup> Its report *Truth, justice and reparation for Liberia’s victims* cites that Liberia’s failure to not hold perpetrators accountable after the 1989-1996 conflict led to further human rights abuses and to the second war from 1999-2003.<sup>59</sup>

There are Liberians who are advocating for a tribunal. There is a group called the Forum for the Establishment of a War Crimes Court that in 2006 planned a rally and gathered 10,000 signatures to submit to the Liberian legislature.<sup>60</sup> A member of the Forum stated that “A number of our elite may have some apprehensions about a war

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<sup>56</sup> Schabas, 1037.

<sup>57</sup> Schabas, 1050.

<sup>58</sup> “Liberia: Government Doing Little to Ease Pain of Haunted Past,” Amnesty International, February 15, 2007, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGAFR340032007>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>59</sup> Idib.

<sup>60</sup> “Liberians Call for Own War Crimes Court,” *Voice of America*, April 12, 2006, <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2006-04/Liberians-Call-for-Own-War-Crimes-Court.cfm?CFID=237400783&CFTOKEN=20565894>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

crimes court in Liberia, because throughout the 15 years of conflict, a number of them had their hands tainted and entangled in the war process, so to tell them that look we want to have a war crimes court in Liberia is like a man shooting his own toe.” There are a number of individuals who were elected to parliament with questionable records. Among those individuals are Prince Johnson, a former rebel leader of the Independent National Patriotic Front, Jewel Taylor, the former wife of Charles Taylor, Adolpho Dolo, a former general of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, Kai Farley, former general of Movement for Democracy in Liberia, and Edward Slinger, a former general of the armed forces from the Doe administration, among others.<sup>61</sup> In response to the lobbying efforts of the Forum, TRC Chairman Jerome Verdier stated that the court is not necessary and that “What is happening in our view is an emotional outburst brought on by the recent arrest of former president Charles Taylor. . . I think, it grows out of a disregard or lack of knowledge of the Liberian peace process.”<sup>62</sup> How to address the past human rights abuses remains a divisive issue in Liberia. People may be impatient with the TRC process because it does not have immediate results.

The TRC in Sierra Leone also serves as an example for acknowledging the cultural limitations of the TRC model for reconciliation. In an ethnographic study, Shaw studied four of the twelve TRC district hearings in Sierra Leone over the course of four years to determine the TRC’s impact. She concluded that telling the truth does not necessarily lead to healing at the personal level and that people tended to favor a “forgive and forget” approach.<sup>63</sup> She writes that “. . . speaking of the violence—especially in public was (and

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<sup>61</sup> Dennis, 6.

<sup>62</sup> Idib.

<sup>63</sup> Rosalind Shaw, “Rethinking the Truth & Truth Commissions: Lessons from Sierra Leone,” United States Institute of Peace (Feb. 2005), 7.

is) viewed as encouraging its return.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, in an ethnographic study of the Tonkolili district in Sierra Leone, Kelsall found that rituals played a critical role in reconciliation. Kelsall found that alleged perpetrators were not sincere during the formal TRC public hearings, creating much frustration among the audience; however, he witnessed greater sincerity at the concluding religious ceremony that incorporated rituals and practices of both Christianity and Islam.<sup>65</sup> These reconciliation experiences in Sierra Leone highlight concerns about imposing western models of conflict resolution and the need to explore different cultural meanings and values of forgiveness and reconciliation.

### *B. Observations*

Engaging the Liberian diaspora in the TRC recognizes the importance of all Liberians undergoing the reconciliation process and contributing to the rebirth of Liberia. Members of the Liberian diaspora who fled from their war-torn country are some of the individuals most directly affected by the conflict and are therefore some of the individuals with the most critical stories to tell. These narratives, as those of Liberians in Liberia, should be included among the formation of the historical record exploring the root causes of the war and in the consideration of recommendations for the future. In discussions about reparations, although still undecided in the case of the Liberian TRC, the diaspora deserves a share in some sort of compensation for its suffering. The mandate of the Liberian TRC states that its purpose is to stimulate “national healing and reconciliation.”<sup>66</sup> For the Liberian diaspora community, a key question is to what extent does the diaspora participate in this national process abroad and how does that create unique challenges and circumstances.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Tim Kelsall, “Truth, Lies, Rituals: Preliminary Reflections on the Truth & Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 27 (2005).

<sup>66</sup> “TRC Mandate”

As of yet, the number or the content of statements given in the U.S. has not been released because of the project's ongoing nature. Based on the interviews, online newspapers, and diaspora organizations' websites, this analysis seeks to identify further hypotheses about the role of diasporas in reconciliation by examining the Liberian diaspora's relation to the TRC project.

The online Liberian newspapers provide further insight into the criticism of TRCs in the Liberian context. For example, in an article from *The Perspective*, the author describes the TRC as something between "national psychotherapy and political carnival," and that it would have been more worthwhile for the government to use the money towards more tangible reconstruction projects.<sup>67</sup> He first criticizes the origins of the TRC, writing that "the two groups who negotiated to insert the institution of a TRC in the peace agreement should have never been allowed to discuss the issue," and that instead that matter should have been decided after elections.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, in an article in *The Analyst*, the author seeks to explore why the TRC is dying slowly because of lack of support. He criticizes that the TRC mandate does not "mention of where and how such people should be prosecuted [for major war crimes]."<sup>69</sup> He furthermore criticizes the dates of jurisdiction of the TRC, in particular the decision to collect statements from 1979 on. The author writes that the TRC cannot solve the problems of Liberia by going so far into the past "to dig out old wounds which have no connection to the civil war" and claims that "every Liberian knows that it was the events following the 1985 elections that led to the 14-year civil war."<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, the previous author worries that the

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<sup>67</sup> Abdoulaye W. Dukulé, "Can the TRC Bring True Reconciliation?" *The Perspective*, June 30, 2006, [www.theperspective.org/articles/0630200601.html](http://www.theperspective.org/articles/0630200601.html), (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Idib.

<sup>69</sup> Arthur B. Dennis, "Why the TRC Dying Slowly For Lack of Support," *The Analyst*, 2007, [http://www.analystliberia.com/featurearticle\\_jan2\\_07.html](http://www.analystliberia.com/featurearticle_jan2_07.html), (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>70</sup> Idib.

TRC does not go back far enough, writing that “the massive killings, looting and destruction that occurred during those years of national madness were simply the effects of what occurred between 1824 and 1979. . . If the TRC cannot go to the sources of these outbursts, it will simply be reduced to fighting the smoke while ignoring the fire still burning.”<sup>71</sup> The perspectives of these two authors illustrate the divisions that may exist in society about the causes of the war. They also demonstrate further reasons why people are in favor of prosecutions versus a truth commission.

The newspapers did not raise any particular issues concerning diasporas and reconciliation other than what was mentioned earlier about the arrest of General Julu and the outraged reaction of the Grand Gedah Association in the U.S. Such a reaction by a diaspora group raises questions about how members of the diaspora may react against one another if members of their respective groups are prosecuted and how inflammatory reactions by diaspora groups may destabilize the peace process.

According to Sandra Babcock of the Center for International Human Rights at Northwestern University, a partner organization of the TRC in the U.S., “What we are finding is that many Liberians. . . are eager for criminal prosecutions against those that are most culpable of committing atrocities during the civil war.”<sup>72</sup> In discussing the TRC with members of the diaspora, they indicated that the TRC is not enough. Participant A stated that if the TRC is going to identify people who committed crimes, it should also then identify the punishment. He said he had analyzed its mandate and could not see anything positive coming from the TRC because it mainly consists of story-telling. He

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<sup>71</sup> Dukulé

<sup>72</sup> Jackson Muneza Myunganyi, “Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission to Get Boost from Northwestern University in Chicago,” *Voice of America*, March 8, 2007, <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2007-03/2007-03-08-voa43.cfm?CFID=2424194&CFTOKEN=69174339>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

was concerned about the message that the TRC sends to youth in particular in a culture in which someone who steals is considered smart.

Likewise, participant C said that he is sure that TRC has good intentions in creating a public record, but that it should not stop there. Participant B also said that there should be punishment, but also admitted that she is coming from a westernized point of view:

People should be forgiven but I think people should be prosecuted. They should set examples that when you commit crimes, you should be prosecuted for them. If you destroy lives and property, you should be prosecuted for them. There are rules and laws that govern society about how one should behave like. If you behave outside the code of ethics, you must be punished for it. But that's me and my western ideas, this is me talking from being in America for over ten years, this is not a Liberian person who's lived there.

These interviews with members of the Liberian diaspora raise questions about how a diaspora may understand transitional justice differently. As Participant B suggests, a diaspora population may be more in favor of prosecution due to the adaptation of western culture. Through witnessing another legal system, they may have a different conception of justice. This factor may depend on the number of years spent in another society. Another possible reason is that because a diaspora population may consist of many refugees and asylees, they may feel a greater desire for prosecution. These individuals may feel particularly uneasy about returning to a country where they may see perpetrators on the streets or in public office. Lastly, because diasporas are removed from their homeland and with that their homeland's political and social atmosphere, they do not face

the consequences that a tribunal or court might bring. Whereas in Liberia the announcement of prosecution might bring retaliation or animosity, among other problems in daily relations, in the U.S., the diaspora does not face repercussions. Liberians in Liberia must weigh more carefully any possible disturbances to Liberia's fragile peace.

The individuals interviewed in the diaspora did not plan to give a statement themselves nor did they know of anyone in the U.S. or Liberia who would give one. The participants gave various reasons why they think that people are not coming forward. Participant A said, hypothetically speaking, that he would prefer not to know who killed his father. Because the TRC seeks the truth and may bring clarity as to what happened at certain massacres and who they were committed by, some people may not want to know the details of the past. He also said that people may fear that if they give testimony against someone and return to Liberia that that individual may try to take revenge. For that reason, they remain silent. Participant B said that she thinks that people do not want to talk about it and would rather move on. She said that Liberians have a tendency to forgive even after the unthinkable, mentioning the campaign slogan of Charles Taylor that went something like "You killed my father, my brother, but I will still vote for you." Participant C made comments similar to Participant A that people are afraid because of the fact that there are perpetrators also living in the U.S. Participant A mentioned that in places like Minnesota it is not uncommon to see perpetrators at the supermarket. One of the *New York Times* articles also indicated that victims and perpetrators live side by side on Staten Island although no one speaks of the past.<sup>73</sup> Participant C also said that Liberians must be convinced of how their statements will impact the process and make a difference. If individuals are to go through the pain of reliving their traumatic

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<sup>73</sup> Barry, "From Staten Island Haven, Liberians Reveal War's Secrets."



experiences, then they should receive something more from it than a mention in a report. These expressed concerns are not particularly different than what may be expected by resident Liberians. It does, however, present the possibility that in some other diaspora populations where there are not also perpetrators or a fear of revenge that the TRC could be more successful in receiving statements.

Another observation that emerges with the study of diasporas and reconciliation is confronting prejudice among different identity groups within the diaspora. In the case of Liberia, specific tribal groups were more involved in the rebel groups and conflicts than others. Interview participants indicated that there is some stigma towards those groups, but that ethnicity is not a major concern in Liberia. Participant A, for instance, said that people who are not of the Krahn, Mandingo, or Gio tribes might have stigma against them because of their involvement in the war even if not directly. Participant C also said that there are tensions among Krahns and Gios and that it is unlikely to find one living in the other's county, or at least not willing to admit it. He said that people do not ask people what tribe they are from. Participant B mentioned that there is an expression that goes 'a native man never learns,' referring to the inferiority of the indigenous people. She also said that the word 'Congo' for non-indigenous Liberians is a derogatory word.

Although the interview participants did not seem to emphasize or worry about prejudice among the tribes, Liberian online literature suggests that it must be confronted directly. In an article from *The Perspective*, the author writes that "Today many Liberians are fearful, resentful; even hateful of people from certain ethnic groups—sometimes suspicious of their motives."<sup>74</sup> The author goes on to write that there is

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<sup>74</sup> Dunn

“limited or no infrastructure for countering ethnic bigotry and/or discrimination at large.”<sup>75</sup> Further study is necessary to determine the nature of social relations in Liberia and in the diaspora. Yet, it nonetheless raises questions about reconciliation among different groups within diaspora populations. As Gibson’s analysis of reconciliation in South Africa indicates that racial reconciliation depended upon the degree of racial interaction, the interaction among conflicting groups residing abroad deserves greater attention. Although depending on the nature of the conflict, reconciliation mechanisms, formal and informal, may be more possible in the diaspora. Because groups are removed from their homelands, the expectations of how to act or think toward the ‘other’ may be less intense and therefore such groups may be more open to dialogue groups or cultural exchanges to potentially serve as an example of reconciliation to the home country. In regards to the Liberian diaspora, it is not clear as to the degree of interaction among various ethnic groups. There are soccer games, independence day celebrations, and also a Miss Liberia beauty pageant that may draw the participation of all Liberians. Yet, it is not clear as to whether there are groups specifically focused on fostering dialogue and cooperation among the Liberian diaspora and how they are specifically doing that.

In terms of analyzing the TRC through the Liberian diaspora organizations in the U.S., there is very little evidence of any engagement in the reconciliation process upon examining their websites. Out of the ten diaspora organizations websites analyzed, only the National Krao Association has a link to the TRC’s website. The website of the Liberian Mandingo Association of New York has a speech posted by Sam Mohamed Kromah, a former president of the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas and former 2005 presidential candidate. In the March 2007 speech, Kromah tells his

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<sup>75</sup> Idib.

audience that “Let us realize that reconciliation begins with admission of guilt or wrong doing and it ends with restoration of justice” and “Let us realistically engage the three affected parties in a conflict: victim, perpetrator, and the community in which the act took place.”<sup>76</sup> Although Kromah makes references to reconciliation, nowhere in his speech is the TRC mentioned or discussed. In none of the websites is reconciliation or the TRC further discussed or mentioned. This is not a holistic picture of the diaspora community’s awareness of the TRC. For example, the Liberian-owned Kendejah Restaurant and Lounge in Washington, D.C. co-sponsored a kick-off event for statement-taking in the D.C. area with the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas and the Liberian Community Association of the Washington Metropolitan Area.<sup>77</sup> The restaurant has a link to the TRC on its website. The diaspora project is engaging with diaspora organizations and their leaders. Nonetheless, because the websites are a focal point for community news it is surprising to see that there is not more advertising of the TRC diaspora project.

## **Conclusion**

As a preliminary investigation of the role of the Liberian diaspora in peacebuilding and reconciliation, this paper has profiled the role of the Liberian diaspora in the context of the literature on diasporas and conflict and also has considered the distinct role of diasporas in reconciliation processes. The Liberian diaspora has largely played an economic role in Liberia’s peacebuilding. The Liberian diaspora like other diasporas sends economic remittances and provides funding for specific hometown

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<sup>76</sup> Sidiki Trawally, “Social Injustice, Other Vices Impending Reconciliation in Liberia,” The Liberian Mandingo Association of New York, March 20, 2007, [http://limany.org/article\\_2007\\_03\\_20\\_2445.html](http://limany.org/article_2007_03_20_2445.html), (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Kendejah Restaurant and Lounge, <http://www.kendejah.com/>

projects. It is also beginning to look into business opportunities and investment. The diaspora also seeks closer ties with the new Liberian government in order to better transfer human and economic capital. Because of the nature of the Liberian diaspora, it does not perpetuate conflict in Liberia as other diaspora populations are known to do. As a stable and largely unified diaspora, it helps foster an environment more conducive to peacebuilding. Moreover, the Liberian diaspora is the first diaspora at large to participate in a TRC, taking the role of diasporas and conflict resolution to a new level. Diasporas consisting of refugees and asylees may need to reconcile at a personal level in order to face the past. Even though they may be far from the physical reminders of the war, the traumatic memories are not so distant.

Yet, because of the distinct nature of a diaspora and its distance from the nation itself, it may see the transitional justice and reconciliation processes differently. As described beforehand, for example, diasporas may favor prosecution because the diaspora consists of members who are the most affected and because it is removed from the political atmosphere of the conflict. Diasporas may or may not feel more secure giving a statement. This may depend in their confidence in the TRC and the extent to which they might feel threatened if they return to the home country or in the host country itself. Moreover, because reconciliation can develop in a variety of ways, other means of reconciliation in diaspora groups should be pursued. These include formal reconciliation methods such as dialogue groups and also informal methods such as shared cultural events among polarized diaspora groups in particular. Such activities may help to create empathy and humanize the 'other.'

Suggestions for a more substantive analysis include a survey of thousands or interviews of hundreds in the diaspora, an ethnographic study of a Liberian diaspora group, and/or focus groups. A parallel study could also be done with resident Liberians. For instance, Search for Common Ground in June 2007 conducted a household survey of 1,600 adults in eight counties in Liberia.<sup>78</sup> It found that 71% of individuals aware of the TRC would feel 'secure' in giving a statement. In regard to prosecution, 43% of respondents said trials should take place during the TRC, 26% after, and the remainder was unsure. A parallel survey in the Liberian diaspora would help evaluate where the diaspora stands on the same issues. Furthermore, reconciliation in the Liberian diaspora can at some point be studied in comparison to other diaspora groups, such as members of the Sierra Leonean diaspora who did participate in their TRC.

The inclusion of diasporas in reconciliation processes is important for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, at the personal level it may enable an individual to heal and confront the past. Although the TRC model may not work for every individual or society, some sort of reconciliation process, such as through a spiritual ritual for example, is considered necessary for the individual's well-being. A diaspora should not be left out a reconciliation process because it is no longer the midst of a post-conflict society. Secondly, because members of a diaspora may return to their home country or can greatly influence the affairs of their home country, reconciled attitudes will help in the peacebuilding process. With some diaspora groups harboring deep grievances, working with diaspora groups through workshops and dialogue groups may help to foster cooperative behavior and a greater commitment to the peace process. Finally, a

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<sup>78</sup> BBC World Service Trust, "Press Release: Survey Finds Liberians Aware of Truth Commissions, but not its Powers," International Center for Transitional Justice, July 31, 2007, <http://www.ictj.org/en/news/coverage/article/1284.html>, (accessed December 14, 2007).

reconciliation process is another means to engage the diaspora and give them a stake in the future of their homeland. Voting rights, dual citizenship, and representation in legislative bodies all engage the diaspora in the politics and the future of its home country. These measures as well as reconciliation may also deepen the diaspora's commitment to the development of their homeland.

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