

Violent conflicts and governance challenges in West Africa: the case of the Mano River basin area¹

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ABSTRACT

The Mano River basin area has become a conflict zone, in which state failure and violence in Liberia has spread to Sierra Leone and the forest region of Guinea. This article traces the origins of the conflicts to governance failures in all three states, and analyses their incorporation into a single conflict system, orchestrated especially through the entrepreneurial abilities and ambitions of Charles Taylor. Peace settlements negotiated to end the violence in Liberia and Sierra Leone failed, both because of the misconceived power-sharing formula that they embodied, and because they failed to take account of the complex linkages between conflicts across the basin area. The way forward lies in a multilevel basin-wide approach, which seeks to move beyond the failed formula of attempting to re-constitute state power, in favour of constructing institutions of accountable democratic governance at multiple levels from the local level to the regional level and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Even though at independence national parliaments were set up and judiciaries were supposed to be independent, these did not lead to the establishment of democratic governance in post-colonial Africa. Claude Ake (1996) correctly argued that after independence African leaders became preoccupied with a false sense of development which demanded a false sense of unity and the postponement of the quest for democracy. To date, neither development nor unity has been achieved; instead, in many parts of Africa there has been breakdown of governance arrangements and resulting violence. In Liberia, state failure engendered violent conflicts that, in turn, ignited a combustible Sierra Leone and, for more than a decade, set ablaze the Mano basin area of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and parts of the forest region of Guinea. How do we understand this violence, and how can

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that understanding help us address the conflict resolution and subsequent governance challenges it presents? This article seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the Mano basin conflicts by explaining how state failure and conflict in Liberia made that country the epicenter of a Mano basin-wide conflict system. It examines the intersection between the breakdown of the coercive powers of the state, and opportunities for perverse entrepreneurship in a post-Cold War Mano basin environment made flammable by a legacy of marginalisation and injustice, due to years of predatory and repressive rule. In view of the scale and complexity of the conflict, the article argues not only for a basin-wide approach to peace-building, but also for a new constitutional paradigm and appropriate institutions of democratic self-governance as foundations for lasting peace in the basin area. It argues that if the cycle of violence is to be broken, governing orders in the basin area will have to be reconstituted in ways that depart from autocracy.

There are five parts to this article. The first part provides a statement of the analytic perspective framing my arguments. As background, the second part briefly discusses critical aspects of governance breakdowns in each country's path to conflict, placing greatest emphasis on Liberia, the source that triggered the conflicts. The third part examines the nature and origins of the armed group that ignited the conflagration in the basin area, and discusses Charles Taylor's perverse entrepreneurship and the larger environment within which he operated. In the fourth part, I show why previous peace settlements were unable to ensure peace; and in the fifth part, I suggest an appropriate approach for peace-building and post-conflict governance in the basin area.

ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE ON GOVERNANCE FAILURE
AND CONFLICT IN THE MANO BASIN AREA

I follow those who argue that sustained marginalisation and state-supported injustice have created conditions for the crisis and collapse that have become commonplace in post-colonial Africa (Berkeley 2001; Mkandawire 2002; Schwab 2001). I also share the perspective that this situation of government failure stems in large part from the nature of the governing orders established in Africa at independence: African governments evolved processes and practices that centralised power (Wunsch & Olowu 1990; Zolberg 1966). Overcentralisation has tended to breed predatory and personalised rule;² and despite varying capabilities, many overcentralised regimes became repressive in responding to the challenges they faced (Jackson & Rosberg 1982). Thus, understanding the nature of state predation and

repression is critical to comprehending the deeper issues that undergird conflicts, as well as the governance challenges that must be addressed in the constitution of post-conflict governing orders.

Two sets of issues resonate through much of the literature on intrastate conflict: one relates to the sources of conflicts, and the other to the nature of conflict resolution mechanisms and processes. Intrastate conflicts are typically classified as identity conflicts, driven by questions of ethnicity, religion, and space, among others (Gurr 2000a); resource conflicts (Collier 2000, 2003); conflicts linked to superpower rivalry and its aftermath (Copson 1991; Hampson 1996); and as conflicts associated more broadly with governance failure (Zartman 1995b). Studies of mechanisms and processes of conflict resolution often focus on the nature of peace settlements and their prospects of holding (Hartzell 1999; Rothchild 1997; Walter 1999). As illuminating as are the classification of conflicts and analyses of peace settlements, such studies do not always relate a deep understanding of the conflicts to the nature of the peace settlements reached.

African intrastate conflicts typically reveal complex patterns in which issues of identity, greed and the consequences of a changed global order may all be interlinked in contexts laden with injustice, predation and repression. The challenge is to sort out these elements and understand their salience in each conflict situation and at any given time. Gurr (2000b) observed that where identity issues are at the heart of conflicts, greater world-wide acceptance of respect for minority rights has turned the tide in favour of negotiated settlements. In many African conflicts, however, identity may not always be the most salient in the bundle of issues that are at the source. Conflicts also undergo metamorphosis. This is why African conflict resolution initiatives must reflect a deep understanding of conflict contexts, sources and processes, going beyond simply working out agreements between belligerent parties, important as this is (Busumtwi-Sam 2002). Experience has shown that the critical challenge is not simply to provide incentives to ensure cooperation among antagonistic armed groups and to hold elections. Angola and Liberia provide evidence to the contrary. More deeply, the challenge includes understanding the conflict, and creating and implementing appropriate peace settlements that have the potential to support processes of democratic peace-building and the constitution of post-conflict governance arrangements, on principles and along patterns that depart from approaches that have failed.

Serious analysis of the conflicts in the Mano basin area of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea reveals the existence of a single system of conflict made possible by conditions of injustice and repression perpetrated by predatory and repressive rule, fuelled by resource greed, but triggered

by the perverse entrepreneurial talents of Charles Taylor who operated in an enabling national, West African sub-regional and global environment. In order for peace-making and peace-building initiatives in the basin area to go beyond bringing belligerent parties into power-sharing arrangements in country-specific peace settlements, there needs to be a focus on generating tractable processes of democratisation. Long-term peace and stability in the basin area can be best achieved through an emphasis on the importance of internal self-determination of local peoples in processes of post-conflict peace-building (Stedman 1991).

The legacy of injustice and repressive government can only be redressed in the Mano basin area by a departure from the practice of reconstituting political order largely through national elections. What is needed is the establishment of new governance arrangements in which governing institutions are rooted in and accountable to citizens and communities at local, provincial, national and, where necessary, supranational levels. This would depart fundamentally from principles of unitary governance, and the overcentralised governments and predatory and personal rules they have produced. Processes of democratisation must fundamentally entail enhancing citizens' control through the establishment of democratic local governance, and an array of governance institutions appropriate for the production of public goods and services at all levels, including in cross-border situations. The creation of such arrangements is the challenge that confronts initiatives for conflict resolution and the constitution of post-conflict governing orders in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, if conflict is to be transformed into productive outcomes.

Understanding aspects of the political history of the three countries helps us understand the nature of state repression that made for a combustible basin area environment within which the system of conflicts was ignited.

A LEGACY OF PREDATORY AND REPRESSIVE RULE

Strongman rule and repression in Guinea

Guinea's legacy of injustice and repression was constructed at the historical intersection of French colonialism, and Fulbe and Malinke social orders; hierarchical control was characteristic of all three orders, and was strengthened by the anti-colonial resistance of the nineteenth century and at the hour of independence (Azarya 1978; Derman 1973). The Malinke–Fulbe leadership divide remained a permanent feature of Guinean social order even after the angry disengagement of the French, when in 1958 the

people of Guinea led by Sekou Touré and the Democratic Party of Guinea (PDG) opted for independence outside the French community. Although alignments within the PDG reflected a broad coalition of Guinean leaders from most ethnic groups, fewer came from the Fulbe, the largest group (Morgenthau 1964). Fears of French machinations and Fulbe disruption were among factors that induced an intense preoccupation with regime security, and made for wider exclusion and repression (Groelsema 1998). Stories of Guinean prison camps have been widespread since the death of Sekou Touré in 1984 (Alata 1976; Camp Boiro website). Hundreds of thousands of Guineas lived in exile. Touré established a plebiscitary regime, and strengthened its legitimacy by using mass mobilisation and constant appeals to a sense of cultural pride, in the face of meagre Western cooperation during the Cold War. He maintained a highly politicised and disciplined military and a ubiquitous security force (Camara 2000). These organisations were a significant part of the security architecture of the wider Mano Basin area. Guinean military and security forces intervened on several occasions to maintain or restore stability in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In twenty-six years of control, Touré did not develop political governance institutions that could survive him. The military replaced the PDG and its leader, Lansana Conte, who took over the reins of government, has dominated the Guinean political order for two decades. Pressured by international donors, he dissolved the military junta and embarked on a programme of political and economic reforms in 1991. A new constitution, promulgated as part of the reform, has been amended to remove presidential term limits. Despite reforms, Conte routinely ignores Guinea's multiparty parliament and occasionally publicly ridicules and intimidates its officials. Amid serious human rights abuses, Guinea's judiciary is resoundingly silent and its civil society organisations are either beholden to President Conte or are thoroughly intimidated by his wrath (*Economist* 8.3.2003; ICG 2003b). The flight of renegade soldiers into the forest region after an attempted coup in 1998 added to a sense of combustibility in the tri-country border region of the Mano basin area. These soldiers were said to have linked up with Charles Taylor and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) against Liberia United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), in the hope of gaining Taylor's support for their cause against the Guinean government.³

Conteh's victory in low turnout elections held in December 2003 and boycotted by the major opposition parties raised the level of political tension. Added to his poor health, this fuelled apprehensions about Guinea's future and the already precarious security environment of the basin area.

Some have speculated that Conte's personal rule is likely to be followed by a military takeover reminiscent of his own ascendancy following the collapse of the PDG government after the death of Sekou Touré (ICG 2003b). This looming political crisis is paralleled by an emerging social crisis signalled by falling per capita income and severe deprivation among ordinary Guineans. For example, as a result of severe malnutrition, 12% of Guinean children under five suffer stunted growth, and 30% of rural women are seriously underweight. Urban poverty has become so extensive that the country has recorded its lowest level of energy intake ever (FAO 1999). The inflow of refugees from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau has exacerbated these social dilemmas. Thus, despite long-standing commitment to the stability of the basin area, autocracy in Guinea has become an additional source of conflict in the area.

Patrimonial and predatory rule in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone descended into violence and human misery through extraordinary leadership failure and the disintegration of patrimonial politics. British colonial control of the hinterland was exercised through chiefs who, with their educated urban relatives led by the Margai brothers, became the core of the Sierra Leone People's Party and a more representative alternative to the Creole-dominated United Progressive Party in the quest for independence (Clapham 1976). At independence in 1961, Sierra Leone became a unitary state with sovereign authority represented by the parliament. Its political processes evolved a multiparty system of governance maintained by patronage networks that extended from the state house and parliament down to the chieftaincies, sections and villages. This arrangement was not sustainable, because it relied on a constant dispensing of largesse in the face of an increasing clamour for inclusion. Political elites of various ethnic groups sought strategic advantages by manoeuvring among parties, and Sierra Leonean politics grew more polarised, ethnicised and centralised. The intervention of the military in 1967, encouraged by the defeated prime minister, Albert Margai, changed the character of both military and partisan politics in Sierra Leone. For the military, a process of politicisation and fragmentation was set in motion. Set on a course of transformation from their original patrimonial form, Sierra Leonean political processes reached their peak of centralisation and zero-sum politics as Siaka Stevens consolidated his control from 1971 on (Conteh-Morgan & Dixon-Fyle 1999).

By the late 1970s, the regime was almost wholly reliant on a mix of ruthless security bands and a security agreement with Guinea for its survival.

Appropriation of public goods and other economic resources by political leaders who operated in concert with Lebanese merchants attained legendary proportions. A veritable kleptocracy was created (Kpundeh 1994; Reno 1995). By the time of his retirement in 1985, Stevens, in league with a cabal of businessmen, had thoroughly plundered the Sierra Leonean economy (Reno 1995). In fourteen years of plunder and repression, every significant political and civic institution had been demeaned or destroyed. With the state at an advanced stage of crisis, he turned over the government to the commander of the army, Brigadier-General Joseph Momoh, who proved unequal to the challenge to resuscitate Sierra Leone. Momoh's ineptitude took Sierra Leone further along the path to violent collapse. Unpaid military and security forces, a demoralised public service, armies of unemployed youth and an increasingly impoverished mass population became the core elements of a flammable society. It took Charles Taylor and his collaborator Foday Sankoh and an armed band to strike the match.

Disintegration of Liberia's oligarchy and its patrimonial military

The military takeover of 1980 in Liberia ended a century-old oligarchy and changed the character of overcentralised and predatory rule, but did not end it. Under the oligarchy, political stability was ensured through patron–client networks that linked indigenous lineages and clientelist networks to the core of settler society. The Liberian military was very much a part of this arrangement: its rank and file were drawn from indigenous lineages, and linked to the Monrovia oligarchy through indigenous governance arrangements. This relationship, coupled with American oversight, kept the military loyal to the oligarchy for over half a century. Growing internal demands for inclusion and a changing regional and international order at the dawn of African independence produced pressures that imposed changes on both the Liberian state and its military during the period following the Second World War. After president Tubman's death in 1971, his successor Tolbert struggled to cope with the security consequences of such increased demands, and at the same time sought to curtail patronage by reforming the bureaucracy. To bolster security, he recruited heavily among urban youth, many of whom were semi-literate and unemployed, and turned to a newly established military academy to offer them training. Tragically, Tolbert proved unable to manage the forces unleashed by these changes; he became ensnared in them. He lost the support of the core of the settler oligarchy but was unable to build a new political base. He dismantled the patrimonial military but was unable to transform newly

recruited lumpen youth into a truly professional army.⁴ These failures were exacerbated by declining economic conditions in a post-Tubman era of rising expectations. Riots in 1979 took the regime to the brink; the intervention of the Guinean military was required to restore order. A year later, the lumpen military overthrew the government and established a brutal dictatorship. With the withdrawal of American support as the Cold War ended, the violent disintegration of the Liberian state was accelerated.

Thus, despite their different histories and governmental structures, the governments of the three countries similarly evolved into personalised and predatory systems that were repressive and marginalised large sectors of their populations. In the face of rising resistance and changed external circumstances, only Guinea avoided state collapse. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, the military became both a part of the fragile environment as well as the instrument of violent collapse. Liberia's lumpen military became the core of the incendiary device that ignited the basin-wide conflagration. It would take Charles Taylor operating in a post-Cold War regional and international context to ignite that device. How did Liberia's lumpen military become an instrument of basin-wide conflict and how did Taylor appropriate that instrument?

FROM LUMPEN MILITARY TO TERRORIST GANGS

Sergeant Samuel Doe ascended to power from the ranks of the lumpen elements of the Liberian military. Within a few years, he purged the military of all his rivals and of its trained officers, and relied on an undisciplined core recruited largely from his Krahn ethnic group (Sawyer 1987). Later, he tried to transform that core into a half-disciplined army, and build a multiethnic support base among professionals and political operatives who had felt underappreciated by Tolbert. His vision was to establish an indigenously-based oligarchy, perhaps an alternative to the settler-based oligarchy he had overthrown. He allowed his closest associates to draw illegally from the public treasury and to accumulate wealth by whatever means they could. He appropriated for himself the entire timber industry and took personal charge of the accounts of the forest resource establishment. His ambition was to become the overlord of Liberia. Among West African leaders, he strove to be respected as a colleague, and in the larger international community, he wanted to be known as America's staunchest African ally.

In a sense, Doe's mode of control of Liberia came close to classical warlordism as seen in imperial China (Sheridan 1966). Taylor's rule was

different. Even as president, his regime's character and methods reflected the behaviour of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the rebel force composed of networks of plundering, pillaging and murderous bands, including children, that operated under his direct control. These bands were deployed as part of the national security system in outfits such as the so-called Anti Terrorists Unit, the Special Operations Division and the security units of parastatals and logging companies. Others constituted residual pools and were used to reinforce state security and undertake private assignments for the president and some his principal henchmen. With or without uniforms, individuals moved in and out of these units, engaging in pillage, plunder and murder.

A vision of Pax Liberiana

While Doe sought to become the leader of a new Liberian oligarchy, and be respected in West Africa and abroad, Taylor's ambitions were more grandiose. He wanted not only to exercise total control over Liberia and all of its resources, but also to be the leader of the Mano basin area. Taylor was among those Liberians who saw Liberia as the historic leader of the Mano basin area, and its president as *primus inter pares* in the area. As president, therefore, his ambition was to restore Liberia's 'days of glory' and its president's place as leader of one of the three power-blocs in West Africa, the other two being Nigeria and francophone West Africa. The point to be made here is that even though the conflict started by Charles Taylor in Liberia and extended to Sierra Leone and the forest region of Guinea was fuelled by natural resources, it was not solely driven by the quest for control of such resources. Taylor's ambition was also to establish a sphere of political control that transcended Liberia, and he began pursuing that ambition right from the start of his onslaught on Liberia: his armed bands consisted of individuals drawn from many West African countries. Training was provided at the Libyan *Mathabat* under the sponsorship of the Libyan government organisation *Maktub Tasdir al-Thawra* (literally 'Bureau for the Export of the Revolution') (Simons 1993). Several of his senior officials were Sierra Leoneans and Gambians who joined his group with the understanding of receiving reciprocal assistance.⁵

Although Taylor and Qadhafi seemed to be involved in a collaborative venture, they were pursuing different objectives. Qadhafi sought to establish an ideological beachhead in the Mano basin area to undermine what he perceived as the imperialist hold of the United States, Britain and France.⁶ Taking advantage of Qadhafi's zeal, Taylor sought to establish a sphere of political and economic control in the area. Even after becoming

president of Liberia, he continued to cultivate those whom he thought would accept his leadership when they assumed power in other West African countries. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, he lost no time in backing General Guei after his military takeover in 1999. After Guei's death, he continued to back those who had been associated with Guei, and to cultivate low-ranking officers in the Ivorian military (Global Witness 2003). Thus, using elements of Liberia's lumpen military and others drawn from the same pool, an enterprising Charles Taylor could exploit an incendiary situation leading ultimately to the establishment of a system of conflicts in the Mano basin area.

A basin area system of conflict

While it is true that Sierra Leonean youth, both lumpens as well as university students and graduates, were among those preparing violent responses to two decades of injustice, repression and predatory rule (Abdullah 1998; Abdullah & Muana 1998), it was the NPFL's invasion from Liberia in April 1991 that ignited the conflict in Sierra Leone. Foday Sankoh, leader of the RUF, was a senior mobiliser and occasional envoy of Charles Taylor, and the core of the invading force was drawn from Taylor's 'special forces'. Taylor was, after all, the prime force driving the RUF through a violence-conducive environment, long before Sierra Leonean diamonds entered the picture. In organising its military response, the Sierra Leonean government recruited heavily from among Liberian refugees to supplement the efforts of its already demoralised army. Many of these had been soldiers in the Liberian army. It was this group that became the United Liberation Movement for Democracy (ULIMO), and launched a cross-border assault on the NPFL in August 1991. Thus, as early as 1991, a Liberian–Sierra Leonean system of conflict had been established.

As the conflict evolved, the links between theatres in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, including economic ones, grew stronger. Bangura (2000) has explained how the capture of Kono by the RUF and Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) in 1998 opened up opportunities for Liberian rebels. Kono and Kenema in Sierra Leone connected to Lofa Bridge and Bomi Hills in Liberia. Similarly, armed violence in Koindu (Sierra Leone) was fuelled by the flow of weapons and illicit trade, including coffee, through Foya (Liberia) and Guegekudou (Guinea). Contacts between Voinjama in Liberia and Macenta in Guinea were strengthened by trade in plundered goods and provision of war supplies. Most of these clusters of interconnected cross-border flashpoints grew robust over time.

In fact, some are catchment areas of trade and social transactions that predate colonial intervention in the area (Bah 1998). This is why addressing all aspects of this conflict system through state-specific measures ignores its basic character, especially when the entrepreneurs of violence themselves see the area as a single field of operation and at critical junctures recognised a single hierarchy of control. Taylor, for example, was acknowledged by Sankoh and Johnny Paul Koroma of the AFRC as the leader of the collaborating armed groups. He mediated conflicts between the two men, and served as third-party guarantor in the uneasy relationship between their groups (Global Witness 2003). For Taylor, Foday Sankoh was as much a potential political vicegerent as he was an agent of an economic enterprise. After Sankoh's detention, his successor Issa Cisse continued a submissive relationship with Taylor (Global Witness 2002). Up to the moment of his departure into exile, Taylor maintained security units that comprised RUF and Liberian fighters who, under his orders, became a roving force in the basin area and in western Côte d'Ivoire.

The calculus of power and greed

It was only in 2001 that the UN formally acknowledged the links between the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and the entrepreneurial role of Taylor in this conflict system. A UN Security Council (2001) report by an expert panel described the configuration of relationships involving cross-border flows of arms, trade in diamonds and timber, and the movement of fighters, all with Taylor as the central figure. While Taylor's ambition to play a leading role in creating a Sierra Leonean political order that would support his leadership of the Mano basin area is one of the under-emphasised motivations that drove the conflict from its Liberian epicentre, the economic incentive he and others pursued was no less important. Until he became president of Liberia, Taylor remained committed to Liberia's balkanisation and to engagement in a vigorous trade in natural resources. From 1990 to 1994, NPFL exports were estimated at more than US\$400 million annually, most of them timber and minerals. About US\$75 million was estimated to have reached Taylor annually (Global Witness 2003). UN sources and Global Witness have claimed that he maintained foreign bank accounts of multiple millions of dollars managed by his associates, including Talal El-Ndine, a Lebanese trader and Grace Minor, a confidante. On his ascendance to the presidency in 1997, his first executive order was to have 10% of the intake from the maritime registry put in a special account to be controlled solely by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Maritime Affairs and supervised by the president. By the end of the

year, he had limited participation in the timber industry to a few firms in which he shared partnership; a year later, one of these firms, the Oriental Timber Company, had been granted concession rights over much of south-central and south-eastern Liberia, and maintained a security force of ex-fighters who roamed sections of the basin area as part of the Liberian security apparatus. The pillage of Liberia's forests is a major part of the story of plunder of the area. By 2000, virtually all natural resources, agriculture and fishing industries, had been designated as 'essential commodities' to be controlled by Taylor.

A favourable regional environment

The success of contemporary entrepreneurs of violence cannot be explained solely by factors internal to the area. Such perverse entrepreneurial machinations and associated carnage could not have continued for more than a decade without a conducive West African regional environment. The end of the Cold War exposed the vulnerability of many African regimes. Disgruntled opponents of such regimes were able to adopt opportunistic strategies in the sub-region, to which rent-seeking officials in many West African governments responded. The character of such regimes (overcentralised, personalised and predatory), and the nature of interactions among their leaders (often dominated by personal friendships and bitter antagonisms), created an ideal environment for complex intrigues. That is why Taylor's artifice found fertile grounds. Changing his colours and becoming all things to all West African leaders, he was able to present himself as an understudy to Ghana's Jerry Rawlings, a son to Côte d'Ivoire's Houphouët-Boigny, a francophile to Togo's Eyadema, and a business partner to Burkina Faso's Compaore. To the military commanders of many of these countries, he strove to become an admired acquaintance, if not a close friend. Thus, he was able to receive support from a diverse group of leaders, many of whom did not see eye to eye. On establishing himself, access to natural resources provided the leverage he needed to deal with a wider range of actors. With increased violence, plunder, pillage and illicit trade, he was successful in transforming the Mano basin area into a gangster's paradise.

Gangsterism and globalisation

States with personalised or gangster-rulers adopt successful strategies in navigating the global order (Duffield 2000; Reno 2000). Leaders of armed groups seize resource-rich territory and engage in illicit international

trade. Liberia presented a case that crystallised the global context within which a gangster regime provided the nexus where the underworld economy merged with legitimate international trade, and where functionaries of states, including European states, operated in the twilight as economic transactions involving both legitimate and rogue parties (private as well as state) became intertwined. For example, the economic role of the French government in the Liberian conflict clarified how states can promote the economic interests of unsavoury private entities operating in collaboration with gangster regimes. French policy towards Liberia throughout the Liberian conflict was driven in part by French business interests, including those of associates of French foreign policy functionaries such as Jean-Christophe Mitterrand and others assigned to the West African sub-region.⁷ Taylor's ascent to the Liberian presidency in 1997 formalised the relationship between the underworld economy and the state; thus, rogue as well as legitimate elements in the global community found space to operate within the criminal state. Diverse groups such as Christian fundamentalists of evangelist Pat Robertson, Al Qaeda operatives, Ukrainian underworld figures and multinational corporations such as DeBeers, operated in the same market and under the same rules.⁸

FALSE PEACE

The peace settlements negotiated to end the violence in Liberia and Sierra Leone conformed to the power-sharing formula applied typically to conflicts considered to be power struggles over control of the central state.⁹ The 1996 Abuja Agreement for Liberia and the 1998 Lome Accord for Sierra Leone provided for (a) a ceasefire; (b) disarming and demobilising of armed groups; (c) a transitional government formed through a power-sharing arrangement among armed groups with some participation by civil society; and (d) presidential and legislative/parliamentary elections.¹⁰

The Abuja and Lome Agreements

Under the Lome Agreement, the RUF of Foday Sankoh was allowed to take control of a number of government ministries and parastatals, including the parastatal that oversaw the diamond trade. Sankoh himself was given the status equivalent to vice-president of Sierra Leone. Not totally pleased with his lot, and apparently unsure of his electoral prospects, Sankoh attempted to stall the disarmament process and ordered his fighters into Freetown, a move designed to destabilise the transitional government. His arrest did not unduly disrupt the implementation of the

peace settlement. Elections were held and his Revolutionary United Party did not win a single seat in the new parliament. Subsequently, a massive United Nations peacekeeping operation and unwavering British involvement allowed a peace-building process to go on. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been at work, and a Special Court established to prosecute the leaders of groups that grossly violated international humanitarian law has indicted more than ten persons. These included Sankoh who died in detention before he could be tried, and Taylor whose extradition from his Nigerian exile is a growing demand of Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil society actors and the international human rights community. A robust UN peacekeeping presence and substantial British support has enabled Sierra Leoneans to proceed with peace-building in a relatively secure territorial environment. The reconstitution of military and security forces has advanced, a multiparty political order has been established, and competitive elections have been held. Yet prospects for lasting peace in Sierra Leone remain shaky, due in part to the combustible basin-wide environment within which Sierra Leone is situated (Lamin 2003), and to the nature of the governance arrangements reconstituted (Bangura 2000).

In 1997, provisions for disarmament and demobilisation in Liberia were not fully implemented under the Abuja agreement (Sawyer & Wesseh 2000). Elections were held in an environment awash with arms, with ex-combatants posing in some places as local government functionaries keeping a watchful eye over fearful voters. Immediately following his election as president, Taylor embarked on a witch-hunt campaign. Within a year of targeting those who had fought against him, Taylor had created the conditions for the formation of an armed resistance group, LURD, that operated from bases in the south-eastern forest region of Guinea. Guinea used LURD to stifle an emergent collaboration of RUF/NPFL with renegade Guinean soldiers and other anti-Conte forces in the forest region of Guinea. A few years later, as fighters from Liberian security forces collaborated with Ivorian rebels, the Gbargbo government supported the newly organised Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). The advances of LURD and later MODEL significantly disrupted Taylor's timber and diamond trade, and threatened his government's hold on much of the country. While ECOWAS' peace-making strategy sought to establish peace under the sovereign authority of the Liberian government, it became increasingly clear that the government had lost what modicum of support it had among sectors of the Liberian people and the international community. The unsealing of the Sierra Leone Special Court's indictment of Taylor became the final

straw. With human tragedy unfolding throughout Liberia, and LURD's imminent siege of Monrovia, international pressure led by the United States forced Taylor into exile and paved the way for another peace settlement.

Flawed starts

Although power-sharing agreements can constitute a practical initial solution by bringing hitherto belligerent parties into government, the experience of Liberia and Sierra Leone has proved disastrous. Several reasons can be given as to why the power-sharing transitional arrangements constructed by the Lome and Abuja agreements failed. One of the reasons for such failure was the lack of a third-party guarantee. Both agreements called for the establishment of power-sharing governments that were substantially, if not totally, controlled by armed groups whose leaders could hardly find in such arrangements sufficient incentive to blunt their greed and ambition. The assumption that the leaders of the NPFL and RUF were ultimately interested in exercising power through institutions of democratic governance proved too optimistic. Also, the view that the two conflicts were as separate and distinct as the Abuja and Lome agreements suggested ignored the sustained collaboration that reinvigorated both armed groups. Only later, by 1999, and with the huge presence of international peacekeepers and strong British leadership of the international community's involvement, could progress be made in Sierra Leone. This was not the case in Liberia, where the lack of decisive international presence and the failure of the United States to provide required international leadership sent mixed signals to armed groups.

In addition to the need for third-party guarantees, such power-sharing transitional governments need to be constructed in ways that can support democratic reforms even at local levels. Power-sharing in a highly centralised transitional government arrangement provides opportunities for collusion or zero-sum contestation. This is why Spears (2000) has stressed the importance of organising power-sharing around what he calls 'core and satellite agreements', so as to ensure an inclusive process of peace-building that establishes foundations for multilevel democratisation. This requires bringing local people into the process of transitional government negotiations. With massive international involvement and British leadership, this could have happened in Sierra Leone but did not. In Liberia, the rush to elections in an environment awash with arms and riddled with fear was guided by the leadership of ECOWAS who, after a decade of involvement, had grown fatigued.

Compounding these flaws was the fact that the political classes in both Liberia and Sierra Leone failed to elevate the debate about post-conflict governance reforms beyond issues typically prescribed in the good governance agenda promoted by the international donor community. In Sierra Leone, the debate focused essentially on how to ensure accountability at the level of the central state, and how to address impunity and related questions of transitional justice – all very important issues. There were assumptions that far-reaching governance reform, if needed, should take place after elections. In Liberia, in 1997, the debate was more about the timing and mode of elections than about governance reform. Today, Sierra Leoneans bemoan the return of overcentralisation and exclusion, rising corruption and an ineffective judiciary. The establishment of democratic local government has been postponed, and citizens are once again left to function as subjects and clients in search of patrons through whom they can seek benefits from the central state (ICG 2003a). The prognosis for Liberia will not be much different if the current peace-building agenda holds. A process of disarmament organised to involve almost exclusively the UN and the armed groups, and a post-conflict peace-building process of which the key feature is the holding of elections by a transitional government dominated by armed groups only months after disarmament and without substantial governance reforms, is likely to yield a return to business as usual.

The 2003 Accra peace agreement

There are a few significant differences between the 2003 Accra peace agreement and previous agreements. One is that all international, regional and basin-wide actors perceived Charles Taylor as the most critical source of the problem and supported his removal from office. Another is that all of these actors supported the call for the insertion of a substantial stabilisation force vested with Chapter VII powers. The prospects of successful disarmament and demobilisation of armed groups will be considerably enhanced if such a robust force is fully deployed. However, the agreement has some major shortcomings. Like previous agreements, it failed to fully appreciate the basin-wide scope of the security challenge, and therefore to establish an appropriate basin-wide mechanism for disarming and demobilising armed groups. Also like previous agreements, it established a transitional government under a power-sharing formula that reinforces the struggle for spoils of war and lacks effective structures for accountability. More importantly, the agreement failed to construct a platform for fundamental governance reforms and, like past agreements, assumed that

the holding of presidential and legislative elections is the core activity that should truly mark the exit from war and launch a process of democratisation in Liberia. How can these shortcomings be overcome?

THE WAY FORWARD: A MULTILEVEL BASIN-WIDE APPROACH

A quest for simple solutions to complex dilemmas is frequently the path to flawed outcomes. Just as interactions among the people of the basin area have always constituted complex patterns that transcended national boundaries, so has the pattern of conflict. This is why a complex basin-wide, problem-solving approach to conflict resolution and governance reforms is essential. The challenge is to design and apply appropriate configurations of institutional measures to address the various dilemmas of peace-making, peace-building and post-conflict governance at all levels, from local communities to basin-wide or sub-regional level. This requires careful analyses of the various dimensions of each dilemma, and the fashioning of appropriate measures to address each. What is needed is a framework of institutional analysis for peace-making, peace-building and democratic self-governance in the Mano basin area.¹¹

In such a framework, the nature of the tasks or service to be performed plays a great role in determining the nature of the institutional arrangement designed for the purpose. Given the nature of the conflict system and the state of current post-conflict peace-building, establishing an effective security regime and crafting appropriate post-conflict governing orders pose huge challenges that need to be addressed within an institutional analytic framework. Neither of these challenges can be undertaken as solely country-specific projects or at a single level of governance. Both require deepened processes of democratisation from the level of local communities to the regional level. The quest for security must be democratised so that new security arrangements can be rooted in the people of local communities, as well as in national and regional institutions, in order to provide security for all. Governmental arrangements must be reconstituted on principles different from those that underpin the unitary state whose dominant tendency in Africa is to become predatory and repressive. These include principles of shared sovereignty, reposing power at various levels of governance and not solely at the central state level.

Thus, the most significant challenge for Sierra Leone and Liberia is to conceptualise a new governance paradigm for the constitution of democratic orders that will involve the people of local communities in the process of their own governance, and as active participants in the provision

of security. Fixing the central state is important but insufficient. National elections can offer opportunities to retire unwanted leaders; but even this mode of citizen participation is insufficient for unleashing and utilising the potential of the people of local communities as engines of governance and development, and providers of security. Authority must be constitutionally shared at other levels of government and local people must become empowered participants. The challenge of governance reform is also relevant to Guinea where, against a history of overcentralisation, predation and repression, continuing arbitrary rule and brewing political conflicts can only strengthen the basin-wide system of conflict.

In undertaking reforms to yield democratic governance, each country needs to establish a serious process of constitutional reform that will involve a thorough diagnostic assessment of its path to violent breakdown. Such an assessment will have to examine the failed governance arrangements that precipitated violent conflicts and, in the light of identified problems, craft appropriate governance institutions. The tendency to see constitutions as predetermined legal moulds can be a source of flawed institutional arrangements and eventual institutional failure. Each society has to create its own constitutional paradigm, and craft appropriate institutions for democratic governance responsive to its circumstances. That is why processes of constitution creation and reform must be broadly participatory, diagnostic and oriented to problem solving. They must be informed by the best scholarship available, and draw from a society's self-organising potential and from the experiences of others (V. Ostrom 1997). Extraordinary public entrepreneurship is required: innovations and good ideas must be sought and used.

Creating basin-area security arrangements

Establishing an appropriate security arrangement for the Mano basin area requires unpacking the cluster of dilemmas that constitutes the security challenge, and then designing institutional approaches to address the various components of each problem and dilemma. This involves designing multiple tasks to restore order to the basin area and create an environment within which appropriate governance reforms can take place, in order to achieve long-term peace. Specific aspects of each task may require a specific set of institutional arrangements. Some of these institutions may be local, others may be provincial, still others national. Many tasks may require institutional arrangements at multiple levels. For example, the first set of tasks towards establishing a new security regime must include disarming and demobilising all armed bands, setting up early

warning networks and early action structures, and addressing impunity. Establishing an appropriate security architecture is also a priority. A mix of international, regional, national and local initiatives is required to accomplish these tasks.

Disarmament and demobilisation

In order to achieve successful disarmament and demobilisation, a basin-wide approach has to be devised, and this has to include a campaign to uncover hidden weapons throughout the area. Local communities can play a vital role in this undertaking because local people know where such weapons are hidden. Demobilisation can only be assured when disguised structures of command and control are dismantled. This also is a basin-wide undertaking, since armed groups have operated in cross-border alliances. It is also important to ensure the provision of alternative productive activities for ex-combatants as soon as weapons are taken from them. Thus, rehabilitation and training in productive skills are essential activities that must be very closely associated with successful demobilisation. National initiatives backed by the international community, using national and international non-governmental organisations and an assortment of relevant structures, are appropriate for successful demobilisation and rehabilitation of ex-combatants.

Early warning and early action systems

Effective early warning and early action systems require local knowledge of causes and dynamics of disputes, constant vigilance, and careful analysis of warning signals. Effective (especially local) mechanisms for monitoring gathering storms and for dispute resolution are critical. One major challenge for early warning and early action networks in the Mano basin area is to address the numerous local-based ethnic disputes that have been caused or exacerbated by over a decade of violence. Some of these involve cross-border ethnic communities such as the Loma, Mano and Mandingo communities who straddle the Liberian–Guinean border. Pan-ethnic and inter-ethnic associations, community-based organisations and, where appropriate, religious bodies are all needed to assist in this task. For several years now, Poro leaders and local Imams have been engaged in reconciliation initiatives among Loma and Mandingo communities on the Guinean–Liberian border during lulls in fighting (Sawyer *et al.* 2000). Local networks can be linked to provincial and cross-border observatories established with appropriate analytic and monitoring capabilities.¹²

Addressing impunity

The clearest indications of the interconnectedness of conflicts in the Mano basin area can be found in the report of the UN panel of experts and the indictments issued by the chief prosecutor at the Special Court in Sierra Leone. These suggest that some individuals not only bear the greatest responsibility for egregious crimes, but also for over a decade have maintained a ubiquitous presence in every phase and many flashpoints of conflict in the basin area. The prosecution of perpetrators of egregious crimes against the people will signal an end to impunity as well as restore the confidence of local communities in new security arrangements and the new legal regime. This task must fall to the United Nations and those who structure and maintain international order. The African Union must develop its institutional capacity to address the problem of impunity in Africa.

Constructing an appropriate security architecture

The assumption that effective security forces can be organised by merging warring bands to form an army, or by bringing them into an already established military is, at least in the experience of the basin region, questionable. In Liberia, where armed bands were adopted as government security forces, a variant of this strategy has been taken to criminal extremes. In Sierra Leone, despite professional training by the British, the military has not convincingly demonstrated its commitment to supporting constitutional rule and respecting civilian authority (ICG 2003a). In general, African militaries have typically been instruments of control and predation over African societies (Hutchful & Bathily 1998). The militaries of the three countries of the Mano basin area have functioned more as forces of pacification and repression against local populations than as protectors of territorial integrity and national sovereignty.¹³ Thus, in view of past and current experiences, the people of the three countries must engage in vigorous debate about the type of security forces appropriate for their needs. Some key questions need to be decided by members of society: for example, what should be the role of local communities in providing for their defence? Is a national army necessary or is a constabulary force adequate?

The basin area needs a new security architecture that consists of a mix of multiple-level, task-specific security organisations that can appropriately meet the security needs of its people. In view of the current experiences of these people, such security forces should range from local police and community militia units, to provincially and nationally organised constabulary

forces, to basin-wide rapid deployment enforcement units and sub-regionally organised peacekeeping units. The critical challenge is to ensure that these are synchronised and coordinated, professionally trained and committed to protecting ordinary citizens rather than preying upon them. Current experience suggests that the sharing of security responsibilities through the organisation of community militia units nested in larger security frameworks could be an appropriate aspect of a new security architecture. Local communities will remain vulnerable for a while, in an environment strewn with caches of hidden weapons, maladjusted ex-combatants and potential criminal gangs. Community militia units are needed and can be linked to community early warning networks, and further linked horizontally to similar units in other communities. In this way, a civil defence component of the new security architecture can be built from the ground up. At the national level, a national military force reflecting the ethnic and other relevant characteristics of society can be organised through an inclusive process. At the basin-wide level, a rapid deployment force can be a part of the larger West African security architecture being constructed by ECOWAS, to be further nested in an even larger African regional security architecture on which the African Union is working.

Crafting institutions for democratic self-governance

In view of the Mano basin area's experience with overcentralised and autocratic governments and the human tragedies they have wrought on society, the need for new paradigms that will promote democratic governance cannot be overstated. Governance reforms designed to consolidate peace-building, and reduce the possibilities of relapse to autocracy in both Sierra Leone and Liberia, as well as to end autocracy in Guinea, must be based on appropriate theories that vest constitutional authority in several governing institutions located at different levels of governance, as opposed to centralised power in a single centre or at a single level of governance. Within such a *polycentric* governance framework, specific institutions can be designed at various levels of governance to meet specific governance challenges (V. Ostrom 1999). This governance framework involves institutional arrangements that go beyond 'deconcentration', as has typically been the outcome of decentralisation initiatives in Africa (Barkan 1998). In such a framework, two types of governance institutional arrangements can be crafted. One type of arrangement establishes what is called general-purpose government jurisdictions. These are the local, provincial and national governmental jurisdictions. The second type

defines special task-specific jurisdictions set up for the provision of a variety of public goods. Examples include sanitary and school districts that cross-cut local or provincial lines, conflict resolution mechanisms in areas straddling both sides of national borders, special cross-border security jurisdictions, and economic authorities for the management of specific resources. A complex of local, provincial, national and even basin-wide governance institutions can then operate, each with its independent constitutional mandate.¹⁴ Appropriate studies will have to be undertaken to address questions of equity, efficiency, and fiscal equivalency as they relate to the establishment of appropriate jurisdictions for the provision of various public goods.¹⁵

For the Mano basin area such arrangements provide possibilities of constitutionally empowering country-specific governance institutions that will help transform the overcentralised autocratic state, and establish and strengthen cross-border institutions for special purposes, as well as cross-border governance institutions where necessary. Within all three countries, constitutional reforms are needed to create and empower local governance institutions, and establish such task-specific jurisdictions for the provision of public goods and services. School and community health districts, jurisdictions of users of common pool resources as can be established in forest and fishing communities, and other jurisdictions can be established and empowered, such that local, provincial and national institutions and task-specific institutions constitute a mix of authoritative institutions created by and accountable to an array of constituencies (Wunsch 2000). Similarly, special jurisdictions that cross-cut national borders can be designed to address certain aspects of basin-wide security dilemmas. Special jurisdictions can also be established to create or build upon cross-border economic opportunities, especially those in areas with long-standing patterns of vibrant trade, such as that which has been taking place in the Foya-Koindu-Geugekdou catchment area of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea; and between Ganta (Liberia) and Nzerekore (Guinea); or to exploit the hydro-electric potential of the Cavalla river that forms the boundary between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire.

Regional institutions are not new to West Africa. The existence of ECOWAS, the Mano River Union, and several river basin authorities, among others, attests to the vision and initiative of West African leaders. The challenge now is to reform existing institutions so that they deepen their legitimacy among the peoples of the sub-region and, where needed, to create new institutions. Established as a regional economic organisation, ECOWAS was constrained to fill a security void once fighting broke out in Liberia fifteen years ago. Since that time, its major challenge has

been to establish an appropriate sub-regional security architecture. As the conflict widened, so has the challenge of undertaking appropriate reforms. Such reforms often fall short of being rooted in local, provincial and cross-border populations. Elders chosen to mediate interethnic conflicts need to have standing among local people. Long-established cross-border trading regimes among local peoples cannot be ignored or suppressed out of existence by declaring them illegal. The issuance of national identity cards has not bridged the gulf between antagonistic groups within the same country, or broken the bonds between kinship groups that are divided by national borders. Thus, while West African leaders have supplied a West African parliament and a West African Community Court, not only should these institutions be crafted to respond to the needs of the people of West Africa, they must be linked to local communities through a mix of institutions that include town and provincial councils, local courts, provincial conflict resolution mechanisms, cross-border trade regimes all rooted in and constitutionally empowered by constituencies of peoples. This is how the cycle of violent conflicts can be broken.



The Mano basin area is the site of a system of violent conflict that has produced profound human tragedies. A deep understanding of the complex contours of this conflict system is both a meaningful scholarly endeavour as well as an important requirement for successful conflict resolution. The peace-building and post-conflict governance initiatives that proceed from an understanding of these complexities must themselves reflect complex patterns that are rooted in and driven by the people of the basin area, and not by leaders of armed gangs who hold societies at gunpoint, or overcentralised and autocratic governments that easily become predatory and repressive. The cycle of violence must be broken through the reconstitution of order in ways that depart from autocracy. This has to be done in all three countries as progress in one reinforces progress in the others. Failure in any one country can doom the basin area to renewed violence. Orders that promote democratic self-governance are very difficult to construct and sustain; yet there is hardly any alternative that can ensure democratic peace, and enable people to become the driving force of their own development as opposed to subjects and victims. The challenge of conceptualising a new paradigm of democratic governance falls on the shoulders of the scholars of the basin area. Meeting the challenge requires going beyond the contemporary orthodoxies and preoccupations with conceptions of unitary sovereignty.

Democratic approaches to peace-building and post-conflict governance take time to construct, and cannot be realised without substantial and sustained external support that goes beyond financial aid. The resources of the area can be used to provide substantial financial support; but even with this, there remains a critical need for a conducive regional and international environment. Without supportive regional and international economic and legal regimes, the peoples of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea will not be able to find recourse against repression and predation. This is a momentous task that cannot be accomplished without a properly coordinated and sustained international effort.

NOTES

1. The original draft of this paper was presented at the Spring 2003 colloquium of the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University. I thank Vincent Ostrom, Elinor Ostrom, Michael McGinnis, Sheldon Gellar and Anjali Bhat of the Workshop, Gerhard Glomm and other colloquium participants, Peter Schwab of SUNY (Purchase), Amy Poteete of the University of New Orleans, for valuable comments on previous drafts. I also thank Tiawan Gongloe and three anonymous reviewers for very helpful suggestions, and Laura Wisen of the Workshop's library for her assistance. This paper is part of a book project supported by the Workshop and a generous grant (USIP-030-01S) from the United States Institute of Peace. I am deeply grateful to both organisations.

2. I follow Fatton's (1992) adoption of Levi's (1988) definition of predatory rule as the efforts of rulers to establish and exercise maximum control of coercive, economic and political resources. Unlike Fatton, I am of the view that predatory rulers in Africa have not always projected class interests. The destruction and demeaning of institutions, including institutions that support ruling class interests, are frequently part of the costs essential to establishing or maintaining personal rule, as Levi suggested.

3. Author's interview with informant in Conakry in 2000.

4. Ibrahim Abdullah (1998) has aptly referred to hordes of unemployed, restless and ill-mannered youth of Freetown and other urban areas of Sierra Leone as *lumpen* youth.

5. In addition to Foday Sankoh of Sierra Leone, Kukoi Samba Sanyang of The Gambia was a senior official of Taylor's NPFL. Both men had previously sought to overthrow the governments of their respective countries. For Sankoh, see Abdullah & Muana (1998); for Sanyang, see Tri-West web, US Department of State web, World Rover web. Among other West Africans who joined Taylor's and Sankoh's forces was Gbago Zoumanigui of Guinea who was also trained in Libya (see Inter Press Service web).

6. Author's meeting with Qadhafi in Tripoli, April 1992.

7. Mitterrand has since been indicted by a French court for illicit business dealing elsewhere in Africa while serving as African policy advisor in the president's office. See Suzanne Daley, 'Mitterrand's son free on bail after 21 days', *New York Times*, p. A11, 12.1.2001.

8. See *Washington Post*, 29.12.2002; Pat Robertson web for Robertson's letter to the editor of the *Washington Post*; *The New Republic*, 19.11.2001.

9. See, for example, Adebajo (2002); Zartman (1995a); Rothchild & Hartzell (1995).

10. See *Abuja Peace Agreement* (1996); *Lome Peace Agreement* (1998).

11. At the heart of such analysis is the study of how rules structure incentives, pattern interactions and shape outcomes in various contexts in human society. Vincent Ostrom and Elinor Ostrom and colleagues at the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis of Indiana University have, over years of research, developed a framework for institutional analysis and development which I have found useful in thinking about challenges associated with the task of reconstituting order in ways that promote democratic self-governance. McGinnis (1999a, 1999b, 2000) and E. Ostrom (1990) provide the core of this body of literature.

12. The early warning observation centres established by ECOWAS provide a good beginning; however, they need to be linked to local, provincial and cross-border communities in ways that allow for greater direct involvement of groups at local and provincial levels and of cross-border communities.

As established, the ECOWAS observatory is too heavily reliant on monitoring done by national governments. See West African Observatory, ECOWAS website.

13. An exception was when the Guinean military repulsed a Portuguese-backed invasion in 1971.

14. This is essentially the governance arrangement that has evolved in the European Union. Far from diminishing the role of local jurisdiction and homogenising polities, European unity is being pursued with complex mixes of local, provincial, national, sub-regional and regional institutions that allow diversity and highlight unity. See, for example, Hooghe & Marks (2001); Frey & Eichenberger (1999).

15. McKinnon & Nechyba (1997) are among those who have stressed that a jurisdiction is considered appropriate for the provision of a public good if it has the capacity to internalise the externalities associated with the provision of that good.

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