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# From Fragility to Resilience: Rethinking Security in Sierra Leone Through a Community-Driven Approach

Joseph Nylander

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**Abstract: Sierra Leone, a nation forged in the crucible of a brutal civil war (1991-2002), has made significant strides in rebuilding its state institutions and establishing peace. However, its journey remains a testament to the persistent challenges of post-conflict state-building. Endemic poverty, political fragility, corruption, and external shocks like the 2014-2016 Ebola epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic have continually tested the nation's resilience. Traditional state-centric security sector reform (SSR), while necessary, has proven insufficient in addressing the multifaceted and localized nature of insecurity that citizens experience daily. This article argues that the path from fragility to sustainable resilience in Sierra Leone lies in a fundamental rethinking of the security paradigm. It posits that a community-driven approach, which empowers local actors and integrates informal justice and safety mechanisms with the formal state apparatus, is not merely an alternative but an essential component for building lasting peace. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, policy documents, and case studies, this article examines the limitations of the top-down security model and analyses the effectiveness and potential of community-based security structures. It concludes that a hybrid security governance model, fostering synergy between state and community actors, is critical for addressing the root causes of insecurity and cultivating a resilient social fabric capable of withstanding future crises.**

***Keywords:*** *Sierra Leone, Security Sector Reform (SSR), Community-Driven Security, Human Security, State Fragility, Resilience, Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Community Policing.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

For over two decades since the end of its devastating civil war, Sierra Leone has been emblematic of the international community's efforts in post-conflict peacebuilding. The Lomé Peace Accord of 1999 and the subsequent disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programs, heavily supported by international partners, laid the groundwork for a new era (Government of Sierra Leone, 1999). A cornerstone of this effort was the comprehensive Security Sector Reform (SSR), aimed at transforming the very institutions—the army and police—that had either collapsed or been complicit in the conflict's atrocities. The goal was to establish a professional, accountable, and democratically controlled security apparatus capable of guaranteeing the state's monopoly on violence and protecting its citizens.

However, the liberal peacebuilding model, with its heavy emphasis on top-down, state-centric institution-building, has faced significant challenges in Sierra Leone, as it has elsewhere (Paris, 2004). While the absence of large-scale armed conflict is a monumental achievement, fragility persists. The state's capacity to deliver essential services, including security and justice, remains weak, particularly outside the capital, Freetown. Public trust in state institutions, especially the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), is often low, marred by perceptions of corruption, politicisation, and excessive force (Bangura, 2018). This gap between the formal state security framework and the everyday security needs of the populace has created a space where citizens increasingly rely on non-state and community-based mechanisms for safety and dispute resolution.

Events like the 2014-2016 Ebola crisis starkly illustrated the limits of the state-centric model. When the formal health and security systems were overwhelmed, it was community mobilisation, trust in local leaders, and hyperlocal communication networks that proved pivotal in containing the outbreak (Richards et al., 2015). This experience served as a powerful reminder that resilience is not solely a function of state capacity but is deeply embedded within the social fabric of communities. The security challenges facing Sierra Leone today are not primarily existential threats to the state but are

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rooted in localised issues: land disputes, youth unemployment and violence, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and the illicit drug trade, particularly the recent scourge of "kush" (a synthetic cannabinoid). These are issues that a traditional, top-down security approach struggles to address effectively.

This article, therefore, seeks to critically examine Sierra Leone's post-conflict security architecture. It argues that a paradigm shift is necessary—moving beyond the exclusive focus on strengthening state institutions towards a more inclusive, **human security** approach that recognises and empowers communities as primary stakeholders in their own safety. This community-driven approach is not about replacing the state but about complementing it, creating a hybrid model of security governance where formal and informal systems interact and reinforce each other. By analysing the evolution of security in Sierra Leone from the post-war SSR to the contemporary landscape, this paper will explore the anatomy of community-based security mechanisms, their successes, their challenges, and their potential to forge a truly resilient and peaceful future for the nation.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW: UNPACKING SECURITY IN POST-CONFLICT CONTEXTS

The discourse on security in post-conflict nations like Sierra Leone is situated at the intersection of several theoretical frameworks: state fragility, Security Sector Reform (SSR), human security, and community-driven development.

### ➢ *State Fragility and the Limits of Liberal Peacebuilding*

The concept of the "fragile state" gained prominence in the post-Cold War era to describe countries with weak institutional capacity, legitimacy, and authority, rendering them unable to perform core state functions, including providing security and justice (Rotberg, 2004). The international response, often termed "liberal peacebuilding," has traditionally focused on a top-down approach: rebuilding state institutions in the image of Western liberal democracies, assuming that a functional state would naturally lead to peace and development (Paris, 2004). This model prioritises establishing a state monopoly on legitimate violence, formalising the rule of law, and creating a market economy.

However, critics argue that this template-driven approach often fails to account for local context, power dynamics, and the resilience of non-state or "hybrid" forms of political order (Bøås & Jennings, 2007). In many post-conflict settings, the state is not the sole, or even primary, provider of governance. Informal institutions, traditional authorities, and civil society actors often hold greater legitimacy and are more effective at delivering services, including security (Menkhaus, 2007). Applying a one-size-fits-all model can thus undermine these existing local capacities, creating a hollow state that lacks deep roots in society. Sierra Leone's experience reflects this critique; while formal institutions were built, they have struggled to gain the full trust and confidence of the population, who often perceive them as distant, corrupt, or biased (Albrecht & Jackson, 2013).

### ➢ *The Evolution of Security Sector Reform (SSR)*

SSR emerged as a key component of the liberal peacebuilding agenda. Early "first-generation" SSR focused narrowly on the technical and operational aspects of reforming security forces—right-sizing the military, training the police, and improving equipment (Hänggi, 2004). In Sierra Leone, the initial SSR efforts, heavily supported by the United Kingdom, were lauded as a success story. The Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) was restructured, and the notoriously corrupt police force was rebranded as the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), with a new emphasis on community policing and human rights (Baker, 2010).

Over time, the concept of SSR has broadened. "Second-generation" SSR acknowledges that technical fixes are insufficient without addressing the political context. This includes ensuring democratic oversight, accountability, and tackling the political economy of security, where security forces can be used for partisan or private interests (Ball & Bryden, 2005). More recently, a "third-generation" perspective has emerged, aligning SSR with the broader concept of human security. This approach shifts the focus from state security (protecting the state from external threats) to human security (protecting people from a wide range of threats—"freedom from fear" and "freedom from want") (UNDP, 1994). It recognises that for most people, insecurity stems not from invading armies but from crime, domestic violence, land disputes, and economic deprivation. This people-centric view demands that security provision be responsive to the specific needs of communities, which invariably requires engaging with local actors and non-state justice systems (Lieshout, 2016).

### ➢ *The Rise of Community-Driven Security and Hybrid Governance*

The limitations of state-centric models have led to growing interest in community-driven approaches to security. This perspective sees communities not as passive recipients of security but as active agents in producing it. It encompasses a wide range of practices, from formalised community policing initiatives to informal vigilante groups and traditional justice mechanisms led by chiefs or elders. Scholars of hybrid security governance argue that in many fragile contexts, security is not provided by a single authority but is co-produced through complex interactions between state and non-state actors (Raleigh, 2012).

In Sierra Leone, this hybridity is evident. The formal justice system, centred in urban areas, is often slow, expensive, and inaccessible to the rural majority. Consequently, a vast number of disputes are resolved through the parallel system of chieftaincy and customary law (Ferme, 2001). Similarly, in response to crime, communities have established their own safety patrols and information-sharing networks. While these local mechanisms can be highly effective due to their

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legitimacy and local knowledge, they are not without problems. They can be exclusionary, biased against women or youth, and sometimes resort to extra-legal violence (Harris, 2014). The critical challenge, therefore, is not to choose between the state and the community, but to find ways to foster constructive engagement and create a system of "networked security," where different actors collaborate based on their respective strengths to provide more holistic and legitimate security outcomes for all citizens (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011). This article builds on this theoretical foundation to analyse the practical application and potential of such a hybrid model in the contemporary Sierra Leonean context.

## III. THE POST-WAR SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: A FOUNDATION OF MIXED SUCCESS

The end of the Sierra Leone Civil War in 2002 ushered in an ambitious SSR program, primarily led by the UK's International Military Advisory and Training Team (IMATT) and the Department for International Development (DFID). The aim was to build a security sector that was professional, affordable, accountable, and subservient to democratic control.

- *Reforming the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF)*

The pre-war army was a fragmented, predatory, and highly politicised force that had contributed significantly to state collapse. The reform process involved a drastic downsizing of the bloated force, professional training focused on defence of territorial integrity and subordination to civilian authority, and the development of a new defence policy. The RSLAF has since become a more professional institution, contributing to international peacekeeping missions in places like Somalia and Darfur, which has served as a source of national pride and a symbol of its transformation (Sam-Kpakra, 2012). However, challenges remain. The military's role in domestic affairs remains a point of contention. Its deployment during public order situations, such as the 2014 Ebola quarantines and more recent political protests, has raised concerns about the militarisation of internal security and has sometimes resulted in human rights abuses, eroding public trust (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

- *The Sierra Leone Police (SLP): A New Force for Good?*

The reform of the police was even more critical, as they represent the primary interface between the state and citizens on matters of daily security. The old police force was widely seen as corrupt and ineffective. The new Sierra Leone Police (SLP) was established with a new mandate, uniform, and a service-oriented ethos encapsulated in its motto, "A Force for Good." A cornerstone of the reform was the introduction of community policing, intended to foster trust and collaboration between the police and the public. To this end, Local Policing Partnership Boards (LPPBs) were established across the country, creating a formal platform for dialogue and joint problem-solving (Malan, 2008).

Despite these laudable reforms, the SLP has struggled to shed its old image. A 2022 survey by Afrobarometer found that 46% of Sierra Leoneans believe that "most" or "all" police officials are corrupt (Afrobarometer, 2022). The police are often perceived as being politically aligned with the ruling party, and their heavy-handed response to protests has led to fatalities and accusations of partisan bias. Furthermore, the LPPBs, while a good concept, have often been ineffective. Many suffer from a lack of resources, elite capture by local bigwigs, and a general lack of awareness among the public about their purpose and function. Instead of being genuine partnerships, they often become forums where the police simply inform the public of their decisions, rather than engaging in true collaboration (Albrecht & Jackson, 2013). The gap between the rhetoric of community policing and the reality on the ground remains vast.

- *The Office of National Security (ONS) and the Broader Sector*

A significant innovation of the SSR process was the creation of the Office of National Security (ONS) in 2002. As the coordinating body for all security-related matters, the ONS was designed to promote an integrated and intelligence-led approach to security, moving beyond a narrow focus on the army and police. It established District Security Committees (DISECs) and Provincial Security Committees (PROSECs) to bring together various security stakeholders at the local level, including traditional leaders. The ONS has played a crucial role in early warning and conflict mediation, particularly around contentious elections and land disputes (Sesay, 2017).

However, the effectiveness of this coordinated structure is often hampered by inter-agency rivalries, resource constraints, and the persistent dominance of the police and military in security discussions. The broader justice sector, including the judiciary and correctional services, remains severely under-resourced, leading to lengthy pre-trial detentions and overcrowded prisons, which themselves become sources of insecurity and human rights concerns. Thus, while the architecture of a modern security sector exists on paper, its functionality is consistently undermined by systemic weaknesses, a lack of public trust, and a failure to fully integrate with the lived realities of the communities it is meant to serve.

## IV. THE FABRIC OF COMMUNITY SECURITY: RESILIENCE FROM BELOW

In the spaces left vacant by the formal state, a vibrant and complex ecosystem of community-driven security has always existed, and in many ways, thrived. These mechanisms are not a recent invention but are rooted in long-standing cultural and social practices. They are often the first—and only—port of call for citizens seeking justice and safety.

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➢ *The Enduring Role of Chieftaincy and Customary Law*

Sierra Leone has a dual legal system where formal, state-based law coexists with customary law administered by Paramount Chiefs (PCs) and their sub-chiefs. For the majority of the population, particularly in rural areas, the chiefdom system is the most accessible and legitimate form of governance. Paramount Chiefs are not merely ceremonial figures; they are local administrators, mediators, and judges. They preside over local courts that handle a wide array of civil disputes, including family matters, debt, and, most contentiously, land ownership (Ferme, 2001).

The strength of this system lies in its accessibility, speed, and focus on restorative justice and social harmony rather than punitive measures. Rulings are often based on local norms and aim to mend relationships within the community. However, the chieftaincy system is not without significant flaws. It is often deeply patriarchal, with decisions biased against women, particularly in land and inheritance cases. The process can lack transparency, and chiefs have been accused of corruption, imposing arbitrary fines, and acting in their own interests (Harris, 2014). Furthermore, their jurisdiction over criminal matters is legally ambiguous, creating a grey area where serious crimes may be handled informally without recourse to the formal justice system.

➢ *Community Safety Volunteers (CSVs) and Neighbourhood Watch Groups*

In response to crime and the perceived inadequacy of police presence, many communities have organised their own voluntary safety groups. These groups, known by various names such as Community Safety Volunteers (CSVs) or neighbourhood watches, engage in patrolling, information gathering, and mediating minor disputes. They are the eyes and ears of the community, possessing invaluable local knowledge that the police, who are often outsiders to the communities they police, lack (Denney, 2015).

During the Ebola crisis, these groups were instrumental. They helped enforce quarantines, tracked contacts, and managed burial teams, often at great personal risk. Their legitimacy came from the fact that they were part of the community, not an external force imposing rules (Richards et al., 2015). This demonstrates their immense potential for mobilisation and public service. However, these groups operate in a legal vacuum. Without proper training, oversight, or a clear mandate, they risk becoming vigilante organisations, overstepping their authority and engaging in human rights abuses. The challenge lies in formalising their role and integrating them into a collaborative framework with the SLP, providing them with training and clear guidelines without co-opting them or stripping them of their community-based legitimacy.

➢ *The Role of Civil Society and Secret Societies*

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a vital role in the security landscape, acting as watchdogs, advocates, and service providers. Organisations like Fambul Tok ("Family Talk") have pioneered community-led reconciliation programs, using traditional ceremonies to heal the wounds of war at the grassroots level (Stauffer, 2012).[20] Other CSOs focus on advocating for women's rights, providing paralegal services, and monitoring the security forces for abuses.

A more complex and often overlooked element of community social order are the secret societies, such as the Poro for men and the Bondo/Sande for women. These societies are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of much of the country. They serve as important social institutions, overseeing rites of passage and enforcing social norms and traditional laws. While often viewed with suspicion by outsiders and criticised for practices such as female genital cutting (FGC), they hold immense influence and can be powerful agents for social control and dispute resolution at the local level (Fanthorpe, 2007). Any attempt to build community resilience must understand and engage with these powerful traditional institutions, however complex and sensitive that engagement may be.

## V. ANALYSIS: TOWARDS A HYBRID SECURITY GOVERNANCE MODEL

The Sierra Leonean security landscape is not a binary of a formal state system versus informal community mechanisms. It is a deeply intertwined, hybrid reality. Citizens navigate these multiple layers daily, choosing the forum they believe will best serve their interests. The path to resilience lies not in replacing one system with another, but in fostering a more effective and equitable synergy between them.

➢ *Points of Friction and Collaboration*

The relationship between the SLP and community structures is often characterised by a mix of ad-hoc collaboration and deep-seated mistrust. On one hand, an under-resourced police officer in a remote posting may rely heavily on the local chief and CSVs for intelligence and manpower. They may unofficially refer minor cases to the chief's court to ease their own caseload. This pragmatic collaboration happens out of necessity at the local level (Denney, 2015).

On the other hand, significant friction exists. The police may view community efforts as a challenge to their authority or as vigilantism. Community members, in turn, may see the police as corrupt and predatory, preferring to handle matters internally rather than risk extortion or injustice at the police station. This is particularly true for sensitive issues like SGBV, where victims may fear stigma or dismissal from formal authorities and prefer to seek redress through traditional or family channels, even if the outcomes are less just. Bridging this trust deficit is the single most significant challenge to building an effective hybrid security model.

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➢ *The Challenge of Inclusivity and Human Rights*

A key criticism of over-relying on traditional or community-based mechanisms is the risk of reinforcing inequitable power structures. As mentioned, traditional justice systems are often patriarchal and can marginalise women and youth (Harris, 2014). Youth, in particular, are often viewed with suspicion by elder-dominated traditional structures, which can exacerbate inter-generational tensions and contribute to youth alienation and violence. The rise of "kush" addiction among young men is a security crisis that traditional structures are ill-equipped to handle, often resorting to punitive rather than public health-based approaches.

Therefore, promoting community-driven security cannot mean uncritically empowering existing structures. It must involve a deliberate effort to make these structures more inclusive and rights-compliant. This involves supporting the participation of women and youth in community safety dialogues, providing training on human rights and gender equality to traditional leaders and CSVs, and establishing clear referral pathways for serious crimes and human rights violations to the formal justice system. The goal is to harness the strengths of community mechanisms—their accessibility and legitimacy—while mitigating their weaknesses—their potential for exclusion and abuse.

➢ *Case Study: Community Responses to the Ebola and COVID-19 Crises*

The public health crises of Ebola (2014-2016) and COVID-19 (2020-2022) serve as powerful case studies in resilience. The initial top-down, securitised response to Ebola, involving military-enforced quarantines and state-led messaging, was largely a failure. It stoked fear and mistrust, leading communities to hide the sick and defy health protocols (Richards et al., 2015). The turning point came when the government and international partners shifted strategy to work *with* and *through* communities. They empowered chiefs, religious leaders, CSVs, and local CSOs to lead the social mobilisation, contact tracing, and behaviour change campaigns. It was the trust vested in these local actors that ultimately broke the chain of transmission.

Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, community-level task forces, often building on the networks established during Ebola, played a key role in public education and monitoring. These experiences provide a clear blueprint for security governance: when the state partners with communities, respects their knowledge, and empowers them as leaders, resilience is dramatically enhanced. These crises demonstrated that communities are not simply sources of insecurity to be managed, but are the primary source of a nation's strength and capacity to respond to shocks.

## VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: BUILDING A RESILIENT FUTURE

Moving from fragility to resilience requires a conscious and sustained effort to reconfigure the security paradigm in Sierra Leone. The following recommendations are offered to the Government of Sierra Leone, its international partners, and civil society to advance a community-driven approach.

➢ *Develop a National Framework for Community Security*

The government, through the ONS, should lead a process to develop a formal national policy on community-driven security. This framework should legally recognise legitimate community safety structures (like CSVs), clarify their roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis the SLP, establish clear codes of conduct and accountability mechanisms, and provide a basis for their training and resourcing.

➢ *Reinvigorate and Reform Community Policing*

The SLP must move beyond the rhetoric of community policing. This requires fundamental changes in police training, deployment, and performance metrics. Officers should be trained in mediation, problem-solving, and cultural sensitivity, not just law enforcement. The LPPBs should be reformed to make them more representative of the community, including dedicated seats for women, youth, and other marginalised groups. They need to be given a genuine mandate and modest resources to undertake local safety initiatives.

➢ *Bridge the Formal-Informal Justice Gap*

A tiered approach to justice is needed. The government should formally recognise the role of customary law in handling civil disputes while establishing clear jurisdictional boundaries. Serious criminal matters and human rights violations must be exclusively handled by the formal system. Investment is needed in mobile courts and paralegal services to bring formal justice closer to the people. Furthermore, training traditional leaders on national laws, human rights, and gender equality can help make customary justice more equitable.

➢ *Invest in Localised Early Warning and Response*

The DISECs and PROSECs should be strengthened as hubs for hybrid security governance. Their membership should be expanded to formally include a wider range of community representatives. Funding should be decentralised to allow these committees to respond quickly to localised conflicts, such as land disputes or youth gang clashes, through mediation and dialogue before they escalate.

➢ *Empower Women and Youth in Security Dialogue*

Sustainable peace requires the active participation of all segments of society. The government and CSOs should create and support platforms specifically for women and youth to voice their security concerns and contribute to solutions. This includes leadership training, economic empowerment programs to address root causes of instability, and ensuring their

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meaningful representation in all security and justice bodies, from the LPPBs to the DISECs.

- *International Partners to Adopt a People-Centric Funding Model*

International donors should shift their funding priorities from an overwhelming focus on equipping state security forces to a more balanced portfolio that also supports community-level peacebuilding and security initiatives. This means longer-term, flexible funding for CSOs, support for customary justice reform, and investment in community-led resilience projects.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Sierra Leone has journeyed far from the ashes of its civil war. The absence of war is a reality that should never be taken for granted. However, the peace that has been built remains fragile, and the security of the state has not always translated into the security of its people. The top-down, state-centric model of security, while essential, is fundamentally incomplete. It has failed to adequately address the everyday insecurities that fuel social tension and undermine development, and it has struggled to build deep and lasting trust with the population it serves.

The future resilience of Sierra Leone will not be forged in military barracks or police headquarters alone. It will be built in the villages and urban neighbourhoods, through the tireless efforts of community leaders, volunteers, women's groups, and youth organisations. A community-driven approach is not a panacea; it comes with its own set of challenges related to inclusivity, accountability, and human rights. But it holds the key to a more legitimate, responsive, and sustainable security ecosystem. By embracing a hybrid model that intelligently weaves together the authority and resources of the state with the legitimacy and local knowledge of the community, Sierra Leone can move beyond simply preventing the recurrence of the past and begin to build a future where every citizen feels safe, heard, and empowered. Rethinking security is not merely a technical exercise; it is the fundamental task of redefining the relationship between the state and its citizens, creating a partnership for peace that is truly owned by all.

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