

**THE CARTER CENTER IN LIBERIA:  
PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND RULE OF LAW  
IN DIFFICULT TRANSITIONAL SETTINGS**

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## Foreword

The Carter Center has been actively involved in Liberia since the early 1990s when former U.S. President Jimmy Carter was requested to assist in regional efforts to bring an end to the brutal civil war that ravaged the country between 1989 and 1996. Some 200,000 Liberians were killed in the war, and nearly half of its pre-war population of some 3 million was displaced. The country's economy and infrastructure were similarly decimated. After numerous failed attempts at peace, the Abuja Peace Accord was negotiated in 1996 under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The Accord called for the disarmament and demobilization of combatants and for presidential and legislative elections. Although disarmament and demobilization were only partially complete, and despite the clear advantages in resources enjoyed by the powerful warlord and candidate Charles Taylor, elections were eventually held in July 1997.

Because of its involvement in the country's peace process, the Center was encouraged to organize an international observation mission for the 1997 Special Elections. The balloting resulted in the election of Charles Taylor, who garnered more than 75 percent of the vote. The Center's final report concluded that while election day processes were sufficient to provide an opportunity for Liberians to freely select their leaders, there were significant problems affecting the pre-election environment, especially inequities in campaign resources and media access, inadequate voter education, and deficient voter registration roles. The Center also noted that many Liberians reported they supported Charles Taylor because of fears that the war would resume if Taylor were not elected. More broadly, the Center concluded that the overall success of the election had to be assessed in terms of its role in the larger peace process—as a war-termination election—and in light of future progress toward building a lasting peace and a democratic society.

In spite of their flaws, the 1997 elections served to re-establish a legal and constitutional framework in Liberia and opened the door for efforts to promote democratic development. Toward this end, the Center maintained a small field office in Monrovia and in 1998 began a multifaceted democracy and governance program funded by USAID aimed at strengthening civil society, institutionalizing respect for human rights, and encouraging more accountable government. The Center program contains five major components: (1) subgrants and training for human rights monitors and paralegals, in partnership with the Justice and Peace Commission, a Liberian NGO; (2) support to independent media institutions aimed at improving government-media relations and promoting government accountability; (3) assistance to establish a cooperatively run independent printing press; (4) small grants and capacity-building assistance to several Liberian NGOs; and (5) efforts to advocate for the creation of a credible and effective Human Rights Commission.

Now nearly three years into the Taylor administration, Liberia is at a crucial crossroads. In spite of government commitments to restructure the security forces and to foster human rights and good governance, few tangible steps have been implemented. Although President Taylor's control of the country is secure, he shows little tolerance for independent political activity and views the efforts of human rights NGOs and independent media as inherently anti-government. His special security forces stand accused of numerous abuses, including extra-judicial killings, illegal detentions, and brutality; and government ministries are widely viewed as corrupt. As a result, international aid has been severely reduced and further support is contingent upon demonstrable progress in these areas of concern. Unless significant improvements occur soon, most of the international community seems poised to write off the Taylor government as a lost cause.

With nearly a decade of engagement in Liberia, The Carter Center has accumulated a wealth of experience in the country. Through its post-election programs, the Center has endeavored to strengthen human rights and to support and sustain the small but vitally important Liberian civil society sector. Given the difficult context of a war-to-peace transition and the Taylor administration's apparent determination to thwart efforts to strengthen civil society, however, it is hard to measure the impact of these efforts. This is true both in terms of assessing the country's overall democratic development and more narrowly in gauging the impact of Carter Center programs.

This Working Paper is intended as a critical review and assessment of the record of the Center's long-term involvement in Liberia, with particular attention to the post-election programs. The paper was written by David Backer, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Michigan who was a Graduate Assistant at the Center in the Summer 1999, and Dr. David Carroll, my colleague and Associate Director in the Center's Democracy Program. Their analysis highlights the difficulties inherent in efforts to promote human rights and the rule of law in settings such as Liberia where governments are authoritarian and hostile to the development of an independent civil society. Backer and Carroll argue that the failure of the Liberian government to respect human rights norms and to support the empowerment of civil society groups creates the misleading impression of inefficacy on the part of local NGOs and their international partners. They argue that such circumstances call for long-term efforts to sustain civil society and that rather than assessing changes in government behavior in the short term, indicators of progress should consider measures of improved capacity within civil society organizations. Backer and Carroll also point out certain problems and tensions that arise between local NGOs and their international partners due to differences in their respective priorities and agendas.

Although the paper is drawn almost entirely from The Carter Center's experience in Liberia, we believe it offers insights and lessons relevant to a broader policy and academic audience concerned with programs to support civil society and to promote human rights and the rule of law around the world.



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## ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

This paper addresses a deceptively simple question: what are appropriate standards for local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in especially challenging political contexts? The Carter Center's experiences in Liberia during the 1990s offer several lessons in this regard. First, the failure of a government to respect human rights norms creates a misleading impression of inefficacy on the part of local NGOs. Second, the best index of progress over the short run may be capacity building—*i.e.*, education, training and empowerment—rather than institutional change and policy reform. Third, although international support to local human rights NGOs may understandably stress attempts to increase the efficacy of what seems like chaotic and diffuse work, international efforts directed at coordinating NGOs are potentially at odds with the organic development of civil society.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Human rights norms are an established element of the vernacular of politics. At one level, they provide criteria of good governance: public officials and institutions are regularly held up against the standards established in international conventions and national constitutions, which build on a long legacy of philosophical debate, civic discussion, and practical application. Relative to these benchmarks, many governments fall short. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are often active in the resulting breach, whether by documenting abuses, educating citizens, lobbying for reform, or even supplying alternative forms of "governance." Appeals to the universality of civil liberties, democracy, and the rule of law are common. As a result, human rights norms also become a measure of the performance of local NGOs, who are inevitably evaluated in terms of whether their country embodies these ideals.<sup>3</sup>

Is this truly a fair gauge of NGO accomplishments, especially those operating in countries that are ravaged by conflict, lack a sustained commitment to the rule of law, or exhibit only a limited legacy of activism? Neither participants nor observers are entirely unrealistic about the gains that can be realized under such trying conditions. Most would acknowledge that progress is likely to be slow and difficult. Nonetheless, a widespread sentiment among analysts of developing civil societies is that activity is overly diffuse, organizations excessively chaotic, and the rate of advance exceedingly sluggish. "If only they could focus their energies and work together" is their semi-optimistic refrain. Others are skeptical that local NGOs can achieve much amid the violence, corruption, and poverty, despite being dedicated to seeking change.

From either point of view, politics in accordance with basic human rights and the rule of law is indispensable. But what should outsiders do to make this a reality? Membership in the community of nations presupposes a degree of openness, providing access to multilateral agencies, diplomatic missions, and international NGOs. To the extent that openness genuinely exists, the political agendas of these outside forces and actors can impinge on local actors. This raises the issue of respecting various forms of sovereignty—the dominion of a government in making and implementing national policy, the autonomy

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Sara Tindall (The Carter Center), Conmany Wesseh (CEDE), and James Verdier (JPC) for their input. The views expressed should not be construed as an official statement of The Carter Center. Any faults remain our responsibility alone.

<sup>2</sup> We understand the term "civil society" to refer to the segment of society that is both separate from the state and a realm for voluntary collective action to influence and persuade the state. NGOs, as specific forms of voluntary associations, are key actors within civil society. This paper concentrates on NGOs working in the areas of human rights, governance, and the media, and sometimes uses "civil society" as shorthand to refer more narrowly to the NGOs working in these and related areas.

<sup>3</sup> In recent years, there has been a call for NGOs to apply comparable yardsticks internally—to observe principles of accountability, fairness, and equality in programming, financial management, leadership elections, etc.

of a group in organizing and representing its members, the independence of a citizen in defining and voicing his or her priorities. The result is somewhat of a paradox: high expectations about outcomes, but discomfort about interfering in processes. This hesitancy is accentuated by the desire shared by both local and international actors for local politics to be natural and self-sustaining. Thus, even though local NGOs may benefit from the assistance of external partners and the urgings of the international community, these relationships generally bring distinct tradeoffs and drawbacks.

Our paper explores the dilemmas involved in implementing and evaluating efforts to promote human rights and the rule of law in an especially challenging political environment. In staking out this area of interest, we recognize that some may deem the context redundant. After all, doesn't the sense of urgency surrounding these aspirations presume a deficient, hostile setting? We believe that there are qualitative differences among the countries where such issues arise (*e.g.*, Mexico is hardly on a par with Sudan or even a neighbor such as Guatemala), and wish to better understand how these circumstances affect the interplay between local NGOs and international actors and standards. In particular, we take a close look at the forms of direction and assistance that are provided, the types of difficulties and conflicts that arise, and issues concerning how progress is measured.

Our particular focus is a case study of Liberia, whose turbulent politics has undeniably affected the development of its civil society (Section 2). As a result, we envision that this snapshot may be instructive of the issues that arise in similar settings. Our analysis is based primarily on the first-hand experiences of The Carter Center in that country during the 1990s (Section 3). We believe our perspective is illuminating because of the long duration and diverse nature of the Center's engagement and programming. We describe four distinct phases of involvement, covering a broad spectrum ranging from (a) peace negotiations; (b) conflict resolution / management (c) election monitoring; and finally (d) human rights promotion and civil society capacity building. This distinctive collection of experiences elicits several points of discussion—on issues of priorities, methods, sovereignty, funding, and results—that may resonate in other political contexts (Section 4). We then conclude with possible policy implications and suggestions for future research (Section 5).

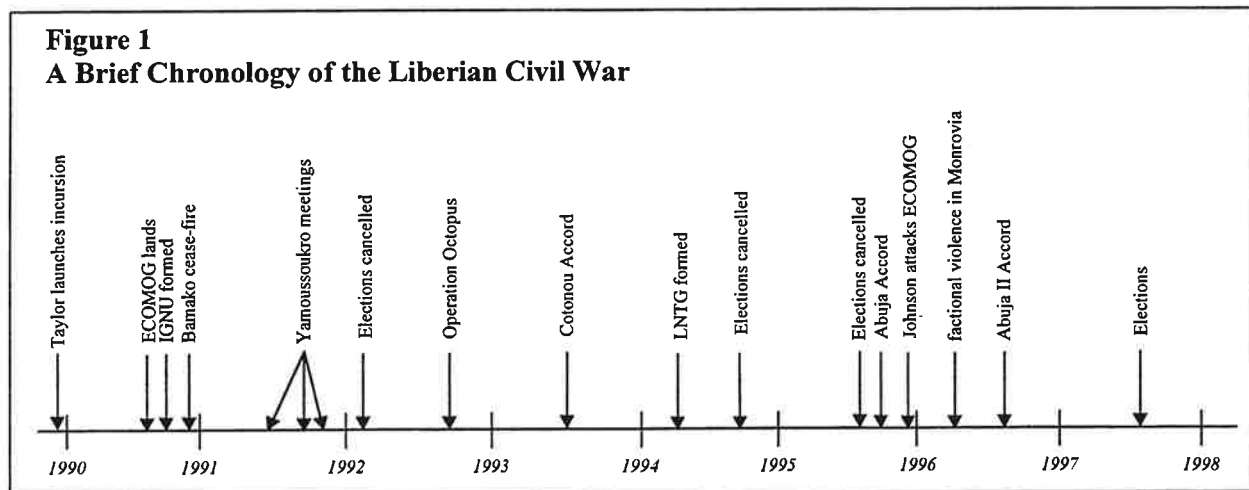
## 2. HUMAN RIGHTS IN LIBERIA

Liberia is, by all measures, a difficult place in which to seek accountability, respect for fundamental liberties, and observance of the rule of law. Several factors conspire to produce this challenging environment for civil society. To begin with, human rights activism is a relatively recent phenomenon in Liberia. There are currently hundreds of registered groups, yet virtually all "have only begun to operate since the war and most of the people running the organizations have no previous human rights experience."<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that civil society was non-existent prior to 1990; some organizations and interest groups date back to well before the war. Those that did exist, however, tended to be narrow in their focus and at most peripheral to the human rights arena. Some are professional associations like the Press Union of Liberia (PUL), the Liberia Marketing Association, and the National Teacher Union of Liberia. Others, such as Women's Development Association of Liberia and the New African Research and Development Agency, are dedicated to development concerns. Organizations with a church or religious affiliation have also maintained a presence, likely due to their distinctive mission, natural infrastructure, and independent resources. In addition, there are youth groups—the forerunners of the party affiliates that have sprung up since 1997—that enjoy a longer history.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Status of Human Rights Organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa – Liberia*, Swedish Foundation for Human Rights (Stockholm) and the International Human Rights Internship Foundation (Washington, DC), 1994.

The thin foundation is hardly surprising: much of Liberia's political, social, and economic life during the last two decades has been dominated either by a brutal dictatorship or by an equally devastating civil war. In April 1980, Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe led a group of noncommissioned officers who seized power from the Americo-Liberian oligarchy, which had dominated Liberian politics since the country was founded in 1847. During his presidency, Doe relied heavily on the military—populated mainly by his Krahn ethnic compatriots—to ensure public compliance, and human rights groups were strictly outlawed. The scale of repression peaked in 1985 following a failed coup attempt by General Thomas Quiwonkpa, which was prompted by the fraudulent ballot count in that year's elections. This uprising provoked massive reprisals against General Quiwonkpa's ethnic Gio and Mano supporters in Nimba County, exacerbating ethnic tensions.



An armed incursion by Charles Taylor and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in late 1989 unseated Doe, and initiated a civil war that would last until 1996 and result in the near total devastation of the country.<sup>5</sup> Out of a pre-war population of about 2.5 million, roughly 250,000 people died, over 800,000 became refugees, and nearly everyone else was displaced at some point.

Ironically, the war also effectively cleared the way for various forms of political activity that had been impossible under the Doe regime. Numerous NGOs were created to address a variety of needs, including the dissemination of human rights information, the distribution of relief supplies, and community reconstruction.

Yet the erratic nature of Liberian politics—most notably, the civil war that raged on and off (mostly on) for seven years—unquestionably dampened the development of civil society (see Figure 1). Between 1990 and 1996, there were no less than 13 separate peace accords signed by the factions involved in the conflict.<sup>6</sup> These agreements produced three separate transitional governments: the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU), the Liberian National Transitional Government (LNTG) and the Council of State. None lasted even as long as two years, due to renewed fighting initiated by one or another of the factions. For the same reasons, three different sets of elections scheduled under the terms of agreements ultimately had to be cancelled. Thus, even during times of relative peace, the specter of violence and social upheaval loomed over Liberia.

<sup>5</sup> President Doe was eventually assassinated by opposition leader Prince Yormie Johnson in September 1990.

<sup>6</sup> See also footnote 9 for a description of the early initiatives.

While the war generated certain needs and openings for NGO activity, it also took a hard toll on civil society. During the April 1996 factional fighting that erupted in Monrovia, combatants systematically looted NGO offices, UN agencies, government buildings, and commercial establishments. These invasions prompted the evacuation of nearly all of the international humanitarian workers; as described above, much of the local population was displaced or fled the country. The three main warlords—Charles Taylor of NPFL, Alhaji Kromah of the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO-K), and Roosevelt Johnson of ULIMO-J—clearly targeted the nascent civil society as part of a deliberate program designed to crush any form of civilian opposition.<sup>7</sup>

Large-scale fighting in April 1996 led to renewed political talks and eventually the signing of the so-called Abuja II agreement that paved the way for a transitional government, disarmament, demobilization, and “special” elections. Instead of signaling a successful “democratic transition,” the elections were more generally characterized as critical for their “war termination” role. The elections were plagued by serious deficiencies, including a woefully incomplete disarmament and demobilization campaign, and a huge advantage in control over economic and political resources for one warlord-candidate, Charles Taylor. Taylor captured more than 75 percent of the vote, in what many analysts felt was a “vote for peace” (rather than a vote for Charles Taylor, who was the strongest force and a constant threat to peace if not in power). Despite the obvious flaws, international observers (including The Carter Center) deemed the narrowly-defined election day processes as reasonably free and fair, in the sense that the vote count was an accurate reflection of the ballots freely cast by voters. In the broader picture, however, The Carter Center noted that while the election represented a critical step forward in the peace process—in terms of ending the civil conflict—it did little to foster a transition to democracy.

Not surprisingly then, the end of the war has not brought an end to the antagonism towards independent political activity and organizational life. Since being elected president, Charles Taylor and his administration have compiled a less than sterling record on the human rights front. The police and security forces have been accused of abuses such as extra-judicial killings, illegal detentions, and police brutality. In addition, the government has engaged in various forms of subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle press censorship. Although there are a number of independent newspapers and radio stations, all of which operate relatively freely most of the time, there is simultaneously an overall air of political control and awareness of lines that should not be crossed. The result is not so much one of formal censorship than of media’s self-censorship induced by the power of the state and periodic intimidation.

President Taylor has also exploited the courts as a weapon to stifle criticism, demanded—with some success—that foreign donors channel funding through government ministries, and periodically harassed the staff of both international and local NGOs.

To add to this, civil society encountered many of the problems that typically plague post-conflict societies. Given the poor state of the economy and the near total loss of businesses and foreign investment, funding and resources are constant concerns. Moreover, much of Liberia’s infrastructure was severely damaged during the war. Two years after the elections, Monrovia still lacks power. Communications remain unreliable, and most buildings have yet to be repaired or replaced. Rural areas are even more under-equipped as far as technology is concerned and are further isolated by poor roads. Partly for these reasons, the NGOs that mainly sprang up in Monrovia—a cottage industry fueled to some extent by the international presence in the capital—have been slow to extend their reach into rural communities.

The areas in the north, especially Lofa County, have also been adversely affected by the spillover of combatants and refugees from Sierra Leone’s recent civil war, as well as periodic armed incursions allegedly from Guinea and involving Kromah and/or Johnson, two exiled warlords. The former issue

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<sup>7</sup> ULIMO split in 1994 over a leadership contest between the Mandingo (Kromah) and Krahn (Johnson) ethnic factions.



may begin to fade now that a peace accord has been signed and a transitional government installed. The latter issue, however, remains a source of considerable anxiety and instability. In mid-August 1999, for example, at least 16 (and perhaps as many as 100) hostages, including foreign relief workers from Médecins sans Frontières, the International Rescue Committee and the London-based medical charity Merlin, were taken during fighting around the border towns of Kolahun and Voinjama. This crisis followed an earlier incident in April 1999 when an armed group attacked Voinjama, causing many residents and NGO staff-members to leave the town indefinitely.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, despite having taken the nominally positive step of holding an election, Liberia has not developed a particularly vibrant, competitive politics. President Taylor's National Patriotic Party (NPP) captured more than 75 percent of the vote; no opposition party managed to secure even a 10 percent share. With its landslide victory, the NPP currently holds 49 of the 64 seats in the House of Representatives, in addition to 21 of the 26 seats in the Senate. As a result, Taylor faces little in the way of institutional obstacles or alternative centers of power when it comes to policy-making. Few leaders in Congress are able or inclined to act independently of President Taylor, and those that do risk his wrath and retribution. Taylor is known for his autocratic style of leadership and has only a small circle of close advisors. The threatening presence of an array of security forces serves as a reminder of his position of power.

In such a setting, local NGOs are effectively thrust into the role of *de facto* opposition groups, whether they like it or not. Almost any form of programming, from assessments of prison conditions to rural development enterprises, could be construed as an indictment of the government for failing to abide by accepted standards of conduct or to provide necessary services to the public. Furthermore, the official audience in Liberia, President Taylor in particular, is not sympathetic to independent undertakings and is extremely sensitive to criticism. Consequently, although NGOs, for the most part, are permitted to go about their day-to-day activities, they have experienced numerous incidents of interference and face the constant threat of harassment.

Nonetheless, a number have managed to maintain an active agenda and a prominent public profile. A good example is the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), which was one of the earliest human rights NGOs to form. Its primary mission has been to disseminate information and to provide legal representation to victims of abuses.<sup>9</sup> The JPC also networks with other human rights organizations across Africa and throughout the world as a means of developing its expertise and publicizing human rights issues. In the process, the JPC has emerged as a model for the creation of other local NGOs, such as Liberian National Democracy Monitors, Liberia Prison Watch, the Movement for the Protection of Widows' Rights (MOPOWR), and Liberia Watch for Human Rights. Each of these organizations has carved out an important niche in civil society.

The recent surge of organizational activity, however, also exhibits an alarming downside: rapid growth has engendered fragmentation, incoherence, and opportunism. By all accounts, within any given functional area there are simply too many groups with the same basic agenda. The obvious ways one could conceive of to economize and streamline NGO activity within Liberia's civil society—ranging from minor collaborations, such as information sharing, to outright consolidation of organizations, with networking as a popular intermediate option—have been utilized only sporadically. Such duplication of effort is seemingly counter-productive in an environment where resources are scarce and the needs are substantial and pressing. In addition, the divisions between organizations, both formal and inter-personal, may prevent them from presenting a unified front on key issues, thus undermining their common goals.

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<sup>8</sup> Carter Center field staff were caught in the cross-fire during this incident.

<sup>9</sup> More recently, the JPC conducted paralegal training under a subgrant from The Carter Center (see Section 3).

Finally, the depth and overall credibility of NGOs have also been diminished by the fact that a significant percentage of them were purportedly founded to address private concerns or even personal grievances.<sup>10</sup>

Outside observers often seize on this last set of assessments as an indication of a necessary reorientation. Case in point is the 1994 report *The Status of Human Rights Organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa*, which was compiled and published by the Swedish Foundation for Human Rights and the International Human Rights Internship Program.<sup>11</sup> An entire section of the report is devoted to outlining the erratic, superficial, and even perverse development of civil society across the countries studied (including Liberia). These concerns animate their recommendations for greater information sharing, program coordination, managerial training, internal democracy, etc. As we describe in the next section, The Carter Center has confronted many of these same issues in designing its Liberia programming over the past decade.

### 3. THE CARTER CENTER IN LIBERIA

Since the early 1990s, The Carter Center has been actively involved in efforts to end the civil war, to encourage the development of civil society, to promote good governance, and to institutionalize respect for human rights in Liberia.<sup>12</sup> During this time, four phases of engagement can be discerned:

- Phase I: March 1991 – October 1992 (and after)  
Primary Focus: High-level Conflict Resolution and Negotiation
- Phase II: January 1993 – April 1996  
Primary Focus: Political and Civil Society Networking; Building capacity for Conflict Resolution and Management
- Phase III: March 1997 – September 1997  
Primary Focus: Election Monitoring
- Phase IV: September 1998 – present  
Primary Focus: Human Rights and Capacity Building

Although each phase exhibits a different programming focus, there have been important overlaps. High-level negotiations sometimes involving former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, for example, have remained a critical aspect of The Carter Center's involvement throughout the entire period. Moreover, peace issues have not entirely faded from view given the periodic incursions, ethnic violence, and turmoil that plague the region. The ongoing projects to promote human rights and build capacity in civil society exhibit clear continuities with previous work. Networking is also an element of current programming, although the emphasis has shifted from establishing inter-organizational associations to the intra-organizational development of capabilities.

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<sup>10</sup> This mirrors the phenomenon of political parties amounting to personal vehicles for their paramount leaders, which is prevalent throughout Africa as well as in other regions of the world. Russia provides an extreme example of manipulating organizational affiliations: it has been a common practice for politicians—from Yeltsin on down—to join parties solely for the purpose of an election campaign, after which all ties are severed.

<sup>11</sup> *The Status of Human Rights Organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa*, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of activity through 1997, see The Carter Center report, *Observing the 1997 Special Election Process in Liberia* (Atlanta: The Carter Center, 1998).

offensive in an effort to gain unilateral control over the country (Operation Octopus), the intensification of the violence eventually forced The Carter Center to close the field office in October 1992.

### **3.2 PHASE II: POLITICAL AND CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORKING: BUILDING CAPACITY FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND MANAGEMENT**

The field office was reopened in January 1993. With armed conflict ongoing, The Carter Center remained active in efforts to foster peace-building dialogues. Together with President Carter, who made several trips to the region by 1994, the field staff met repeatedly with the heads of the interim governments, faction leaders, members of civil society, and officials from various West African nations.

The accumulation of constructive discussions resulted in two significant networking initiatives sponsored by The Carter Center to bolster long-term efforts to resolve the conflict. Chief among these was the Liberian Initiative for Peace-building and Conflict Resolution (LIPCORE), which emerged from a series of meetings organized by The Carter Center during 1994 and 1995. LIPCORE provided a forum for the open exchange of viewpoints and concerns, drawing representatives of the different factions as well as military officials, NGO staff members, and other prominent Liberians. These open debates offered an important public outlet during the transitional tenure of the LNTG, whose timetable was delayed and ultimately undermined by the stalled implementation of the July 1993 Cotonou Accord.<sup>15</sup> One of the important issues that emerged on the agenda was the increasing incidence of internal splits and factionalization among the various warring parties. It became evident that the peace process would not make progress until these internal quarrels stabilized and any new dissident movements were adequately recognized during negotiations and represented as part of the ensuing political restructuring process.

In the meantime, The Carter Center also began the first of its initiatives designed to help develop and sustain political space for local NGOs working on issues of peace and development in Liberia. Beginning in early 1993, the staff of the field office collaborated with influential members of civil society to establish the Liberian Network for Peace and Development (LNPD). The original consultations were held under the auspices of The Carter Center, the Interfaith Mediation Committee, and the Christian Health Association of Liberia. These meetings brought together 17 prominent local NGOs (see Table 1 on next page),<sup>16</sup> as well as representatives of the three other international organizations participating in Project Liberia along with The Carter Center: the Friends of Liberia (FOL), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI).

The LNPD was designed to function as a clearinghouse for information, to encourage the sharing of resources among its members, and to provide a forum for promoting program harmonization and cooperation. Its initial development, however, was rather shaky. After the LNPD's official launch on August 31, 1993, doubts developed in both camps as to the exact nature of the working relationship between The Carter Center and participating local NGOs. This issue prompted The Carter Center to bring in an expert consultant, Zoila Ellis, to re-examine the LNPD. She concluded that the network was barely functioning due to the lack of clearly defined operating procedures and criteria for membership. She then worked to re-design the LNPD's formal apparatus and mission statement.

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<sup>15</sup> Despite the deployment of additional ECOMOG troops in mid-1994, the disarmament plans never gained sufficient momentum; the reinforcements eventually withdrew after coming under attack. The September 1994 elections were also cancelled due to the ongoing conflict.

<sup>16</sup> A total of 18 NGOs actually joined the LNPD. The Carter Center had envisioned that there would be 20-25 members.

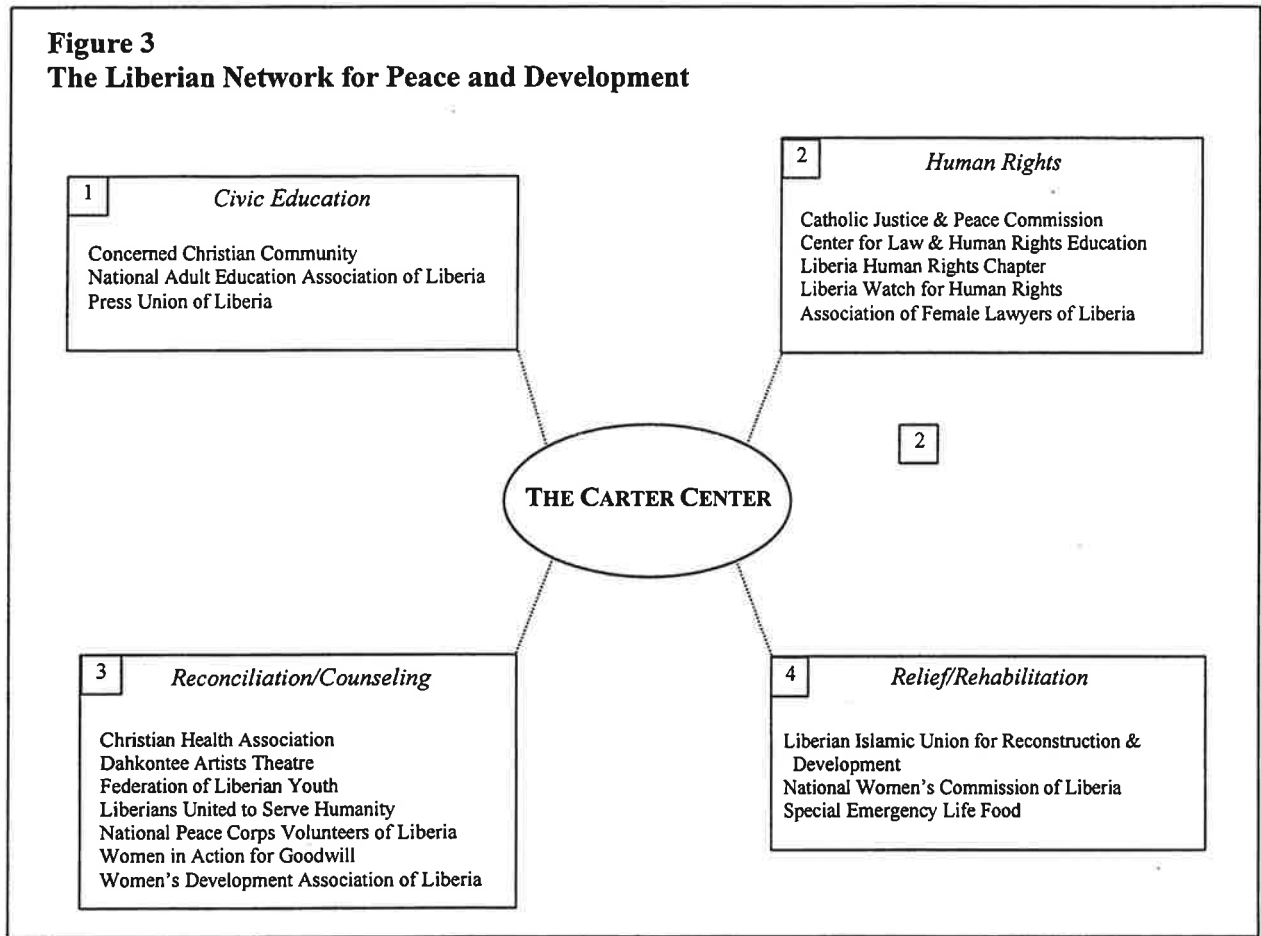
TABLE 1

## THE ORIGINAL MEMBERS OF THE LIBERIAN NETWORK FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

ORGANIZATION	PRIMARY MISSION	OTHER ACTIVITIES	EXTERNAL FINANCING
<i>Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia</i>	Provide legal aid to disadvantaged women	conducted workshop to formulate women's position on proposed polygamy law	none known
<i>Catholic Justice and Peace Commission</i>	Human rights advocacy on behalf of the Catholic Church of Liberia	provides legal aid to detainees without counsel lobbies for the repeal of inhumane laws	Catholic Church Carter Center
<i>Center for Law and Human Rights Education</i>	Provide legal aid to disadvantaged persons and communities	conducted workshops about incorporating human rights concepts into high school courses	Carter Center
<i>Christian Health Association</i>	Coordinate network of eight hospitals and clinics across Liberia	trauma counseling conflict resolution/management training	none known
<i>Concerned Christian Community</i>	Community development	organization of self-help programs distribution of relief packages community welfare elections	Carter Center
<i>Dehkontee Artists Theatre</i>	Dramatization of reconciliation messages	Children's Peace Theater	Carter Center
<i>Federation of Liberian Youth</i>	Coordinate youth activities	sponsored 1994 youth forum on peace process	Carter Center
<i>Liberia Human Rights Chapter</i>	Dissemination of human rights information	public discussions regarding civil crisis	none known
<i>Liberian Islamic Union for Reconstruction and Development</i>	Distribute relief supplies and reconstruct destroyed communities	trauma counseling and rehabilitation programs for internally displaced persons	none known
<i>Liberians United to Serve Humanity</i>	Distribute relief supplies	registration of returning refugees programs to foster reincorporation of combatants	none known
<i>Liberia Watch for Human Rights</i>	Conduct public education concerning the rule of law and human rights	provides legal aid to victims of rights violations conducts discussions on reconciliation	none known
<i>National Adult Education Association of Liberia</i>	Engage in functional adult education	conducts peace education and training	Ministry of Education
<i>National Peace Corps Volunteers of Liberia</i>	Foster the spirit of volunteerism	delivers peace messages and promotes disarmament prepares young people for return to civilian life	Carter Center
<i>National Women's Commission of Liberia</i>	Umbrella organization of grassroots groups	runs women's counseling centers conducts discussions on war-time abuses	UNICEF Dutch church group
<i>Press Union of Liberia</i>	Educate public concerning national issues	organized forums to discuss civil conflict	Carter Center
<i>Special Emergency Life Food</i>	Distribute relief food	coordinates community-based development projects	Carter Center
<i>Women in Action for Goodwill</i>	Provide food to internally displaced persons	disseminates reconciliation messages through media	none known
<i>Women's Development Association of Liberia</i>	Conduct and publish research on role and status of women in Liberia	trains students on reconciliation and healing assists girls leaving school due to civil crisis	none known

Source: Wonde (1997)

**Figure 3**  
**The Liberian Network for Peace and Development**



One notable by-product of this review was the decision to create a small grant-making program, under which The Carter Center supported projects by member organizations in the areas of civic education, human rights, reconciliation and counseling, and relief and rehabilitation (see Figure 2). A formal application process was designed to familiarize member organizations with grant application, billing, and management. Meanwhile, the field office continued to provide organizational support to the LNPD, in addition to aiding in the production of the network's quarterly newsletter.<sup>17</sup>

In April 1996, the renewed factional fighting that swept through Monrovia forced the field office to close again (see Section 2). The sudden exit of The Carter Center had a devastating effect on the two major networking initiatives that had been undertaken during this phase of engagement. With the country caught up in violence and most international workers having fled, there was little basis on which to sustain political and civil society strengthening initiatives like LIPCORE. Similarly, without the administrative anchor supplied by the field office, the LNPD fell into disarray. The Carter Center's steadfast support had generated expectations that it would retain a central role for the foreseeable future, despite its having made a formal commitment only for two years (beginning in March 1994). Other organizations unquestionably assisted with transforming the concept into reality, but the field office single-handedly provided the management and logistical support that was critical to its survival, at least initially. As a result,

<sup>17</sup> The emphasis on building and sustaining networks extended beyond the field office. In 1994, the Atlanta-based staff established the Mickey Leland Fellowship Program, under which individuals associated with various Liberian NGOs were brought to Atlanta for capacity-building, training, and consultations with local civic organizations.

the interruption created a void that the participants were probably not prepared to fill—even leaving aside the exigent circumstances.

### **3.3 PHASE III: ELECTIONS**

The Carter Center returned to Liberia in 1997, conducting a series of pre-election missions, monitoring the July elections, and returning for two post-election assessment missions. The field office was again reopened in April 1997 to facilitate these activities. The main programming components during the run-up to the elections included an evaluation of preparations (March); workshops and consultations on ways to improve communication between the electoral authorities and the political parties and to help develop a code of conduct for parties (April); and an intensive training program for the human rights community concerning monitoring of election-related human rights issues (June).

As noted above, the elections took place in the context of a weakly-enforced peace agreement brokered by ECOWAS (with Nigeria playing the dominant role), in which key aspects of the demobilization and disarmament process were not fulfilled. In addition, given its huge advantages in terms of control over territory and resources, Charles Taylor's NPFL (now the NPP political party) was clearly on top of an unlevel playing field. Given these issues and other problems in the run-up to the elections, most of the opposition parties called for a postponement of the elections from May until October 1997. However, under pressure from ECOMOG, the parties all finally agreed to go forward with an election in July.

The Carter Center's efforts during the electoral period were directed in some way or another toward institutionalizing the electoral process, deterring fraud and other post-election disputes, and establishing a code of conduct for political parties. Just prior to the elections, The Carter Center devoted special attention to the training of human rights groups. One set of seminars discussed the constitution, and elections and civil society in a democracy, with an emphasis on election-related rights such as freedom of expression, assembly and association. A second set, which addressed the topic of institution building, explored the relationship between the media and the judiciary, the police and the military.

In the months following the elections, The Carter Center also conducted two significant assessment missions. The first, in August, was tasked with identifying priorities for the effective promotion and protection of human rights. With the elections still fresh, however, its actual focus was somewhat broader. Most notably, the mission encountered some residual controversy as to whether the elections had truly been free and fair. In particular, the JPC maintained serious reservations about the entire process, and pointed to the fact that civil society had not been consulted as part of the final decision to proceed with the election, despite its persistent demands for a postponement. The JPC also cited problems attributable to a lack of voter education, as well as direct interference by ECOMOG and election officers.

On the human rights front, many expressed concerns over the lack of protection against repression and violence now that the international community had begun to withdraw personnel and turn its attention to other situations around the world. President Taylor's promise to adopt a tough anti-crime agenda was also received with some trepidation, especially in legal circles. His initial appointments—which some felt were insufficiently inclusive—raised another red flag, as did his vow to strengthen tribal communities. A common view was that both steps could potentially stoke the antagonisms that had fueled the civil war.

Transparency and accountability were also major issues for the new government. The former was raised after Minister of Information Joe Mulbah hinted that the government would

employ a restrictive approach to the freedom of the press. The latter became a controversial issue after President Taylor announced plans to create a human rights commission to investigate abuses and a reconciliation commission to heal the wounds of the past. Many human rights NGOs were disheartened by the fact that the human rights commission was not permitted to investigate allegations of abuses that transpired during the civil war. The Ministry of Justice, however, maintained that such a mandate would conflict with the terms of the Abuja II peace accord.

The second post-election mission, in September, was tasked with surveying the overall political landscape and exploring areas for future Carter Center involvement. One source of continuing debate was the apparent rush on the part of the new administration to establish the human rights commission. Although The Carter Center and others repeatedly emphasized to President Taylor that planning for such a Commission needed to include thorough consultation with civil society, particularly the Liberian human rights community, this advice was ignored. In spite of this failure to consult with civil society, the Carter Center kept open the option of providing assistance to the new commission as a potential programming area. The team also concluded that The Carter Center should consider organizing training for judges and journalists—and human rights education more generally—and possibly aiding the government in preparing a development strategy.

### **3.4 PHASE IV: HUMAN RIGHTS PROMOTION AND CIVIL SOCIETY BUILDING**

The current phase of involvement began in September 1998, when The Carter Center secured a one-year grant from USAID to support programming related to promoting and protecting human rights and strengthening civil society. This undertaking, which had been in the works since the post-election missions of the previous fall, resulted in the fielding of a new expatriate staff to the Monrovia field office in November 1998.

The current Carter Center program includes five main areas of activity: (1) efforts to advocate for the creation of a credible and effective Human Rights Commission; (2) assistance to the Justice and Peace Commission to strengthen its capacity to monitor, document, publicize, and provide legal redress for human rights abuses; (3) capacity-building for independent and effective media, including training workshops with journalists; (4) assistance to establish a cooperatively run independent printing press for Liberian media institutions; and (5) a small-grants program to support various other NGO activities.

In addition to these project, Carter Center field staff decided to observe the trial of 14 Liberian citizens arrested on treason charges, resulting from an outbreak of violence between government forces and fighters loyal to former faction leader Roosevelt Johnson (but at the time a government minister) in September 1998.<sup>18</sup> The reasons for witnessing the treason trial were: (1) to determine what national laws and customs generally applied in this case; (2) to consider whether they conformed to international standards enshrined in treaties to which Liberia was a party; and (3) to assess whether the trial was conducted in a manner consistent with these national and international standards. The Carter Center report concluded:

...there was a continuing pattern of disregard of the legal requirements for conduct of a criminal proceeding in Liberia and a lack of adherence to the notions of fairness, impartiality and due process which underlie those legal requirements... Taken as a whole, the problems in the handling of the treason trial proceedings inevitably lead to the conclusion that these Defendants did not received a fair hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal and their rights were

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<sup>18</sup> Five of the defendants were convicted in December; the trial for the remaining nine is ongoing, albeit at an erratic pace.

not protected in a manner consistent with the rights to due process and other rights and standards enshrined in the Constitution of Liberia or consistent with international standards.

Although the assessment was discouraging, the observation process has assisted The Carter Center in designing other projects, described below.

Liberian Commission on Human Rights. The disappointment over the treason trial has been mirrored in the frustrations concerning the Liberian Commission on Human Rights (LCHR). The Center's objectives were to strengthen the LCHR through a multi-faceted approach. In particular, the Center urged the Chairman of the Commission to seek (1) amendment of the Act to provide subpoena power for investigations; (2) funding from the government; and (3) confirmation of a full complement of qualified Commissioners.

Unfortunately, the current leadership in both the House and the Senate make it unlikely that any legislative changes will be enacted, despite a civil society advocacy campaign supported by The Carter Center. Meanwhile, the most recent national budget was approved without any provision for financing the LCHR. President Taylor has taken the public position that government funding would endanger the LCHR's independence, notwithstanding the support provided to the judiciary and the Elections Commission, both of which are ostensibly independent. There are still no hearings scheduled for consideration of the outstanding nominees. Worse yet, the Chairman has not been able to obtain an audience with President Taylor to urge progress toward the creation of a credible institution.

These failings have stymied The Carter Center's original hope that it might be able to work both directly and indirectly through local NGOs to promote the increased organizational, administrative, and functional capacity of the LCHR.<sup>19</sup> The Center has had numerous frank discussions with human rights organizations concerning the relative merits of working with the Commission in light of its current situation and the government's intransigence. Local NGOs agree that such efforts would not only be futile, they would also send the wrong signal to the government and the people of Liberia—*i.e.*, supporting an ineffectual institution. As a result, The Carter Center recommended to USAID that it re-program the resources originally allocated for providing assistance to the LCHR and instead increase the funding for projects undertaken by small NGOs (see below).<sup>20</sup>

Justice and Peace Commission; human rights monitors and paralegals. The other aspects of the current USAID project, several of which promote the work of local NGOs (see Figure 2), have proceeded with few complications. The sub-grant to the JPC is designed to build that institution's capacity to monitor, document, publicize, and provide legal redress for human rights abuses. In April, the JPC organized the first National Monitor Training Workshop, which included 60 participants from all three Catholic dioceses in Liberia as well as observers from several other local NGOs.<sup>21</sup> Assessments of the workshop by Steve Wilson, JPC's National Director, and then field office Director Phyllis Cox concluded that future activities should focus on increased planning, expanded training in the participatory methodologies of training monitors and paralegals, and stronger coordination between and among the national and regional offices.

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<sup>19</sup> One proposal was to provide technical support for the development of an annual human rights reporting process.

<sup>20</sup> According to the results framework for The Carter Center's current project, collaboration with the LCHR presumes that "there is a reasonably strong possibility, politically or practically, of it becoming in the future an independent and functional body with some genuine intention of working toward achievement of work at a level of minimum international standards."

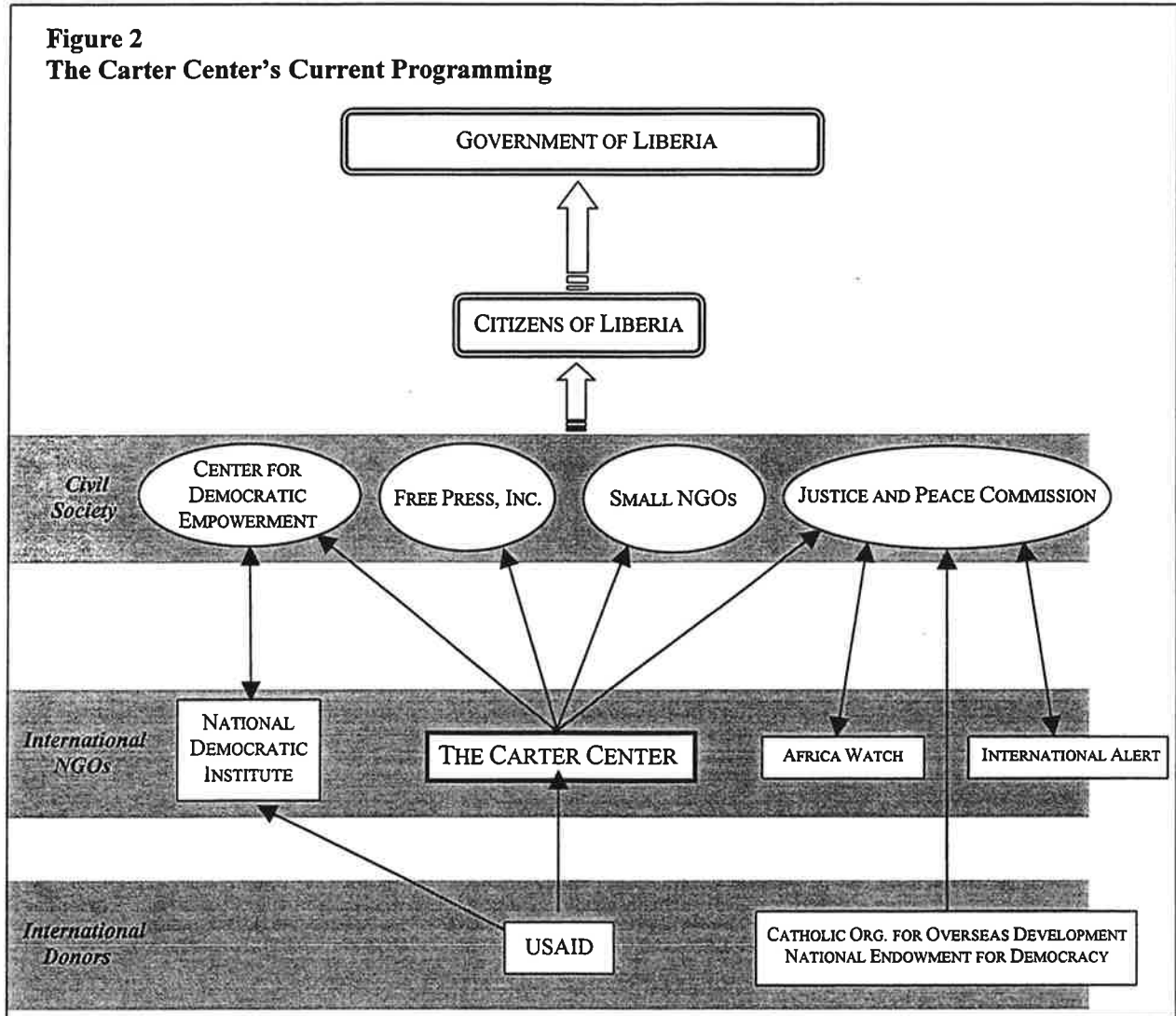
<sup>21</sup> One of the direct results of the workshop is the initiation of monitoring in Buchanan, where several trainees have begun to lead community discussions and are liaising with the one lawyer there who is helping on some cases.



Media support: Center for Democratic Empowerment: The primary objective of the sub-grant to the Center for Democratic Empowerment (CEDE) has been to enhance the role of the media in public life. Core activities include developing a mechanism to improve government-media relations and promoting the Press Union of Liberia's Code of Conduct. In addition, CEDE began a series of "Democratic Colloquia" designed to educate journalists and to encourage members of the media and the legal community to work together on a more regular basis.

With additional support from the Center, in 1999 CEDE also sponsored a major conference designed to involve a broad spectrum of individuals in a constructive dialogue to identify ways of overcoming impediments to economic growth.

**Figure 2**  
**The Carter Center's Current Programming**



Media Support: Free Press Inc. Another major initiative of The Carter Center has been to help establish Free Press, Inc., which is planned as a non-profit cooperative that will own and operate an independent printing press. The purpose of this project is to bolster the viability of

independent media organizations in Liberia. Currently, there is only one independent printing press. The press is owned by a Lebanese businessman and comes under pressure periodically from the government for printing materials critical of the government. As a result, this single independent press is vulnerable to official pressure, and will sometimes refuse to print some newspapers, or will unilaterally and without notice raise the price of printing, etc.

So far, The Carter Center's project has helped to create the management structure for the new organization. The major outstanding issue is whether and how the government might be represented on the cooperative's Board of Directors. Minister of Information Mulbah turned down the invitation as an official representative but said he might consider membership as an individual. Once these matters are resolved, the Board will officially be seated and draw up a constitution. The Carter Center is currently negotiating to secure at least one offset printing press, and the cooperative is preparing to seek additional funding so that it can acquire all of the equipment necessary to operate a fully independent printing facility.

NGO small grants. In addition, the Center has been providing funds and technical assistance to four smaller projects designed to enhance the capacity of local NGOs to address human rights concerns in their communities. The first project supported seven organizations that agreed to train 750 teachers on human rights issues at three regional institutes administered by the Ministry of Education.<sup>22</sup> The second project consisted of an assessment of the conditions of detention centers—both legal and illegal—and the treatment of those in detention.<sup>23</sup> The Ministry of Justice has responded positively to the 39-page report detailing the findings of the assessment and recommending improvements to places of detention.<sup>24</sup> The third project supports MOPOWR in its efforts to sensitize the public to the needs and rights of widows. The core activity is a survey of widows in targeted communities. MOPOWR is currently seeking to extend the survey and to develop self-help groups capable of addressing problems in regards to food, security, and housing.

The Carter Center also used funds to sponsor training for eight local NGOs, with the notion that the impact would ultimately radiate throughout civil society. Many organizations profess a desire to get training but are unaware of more effective interactive discussion techniques; instead, most would resort to classroom-style lectures. Another gap is in the areas of management and organizational development: many NGOs have enormous good will, but few are thought to have the requisite expertise to convert their ideas into effective action. Organizations are largely controlled by domineering personalities, decision-making is frequently dictatorial. The field office tapped the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) to introduce the organizations to more progressive styles of training and leadership.<sup>25</sup> The participating NGOs were chosen because they are small, relatively new, and focus on rural areas outside of Monrovia.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The Ministry has since concluded an agreement with UNICEF to fund additional rounds of training at other institutes.

<sup>23</sup> The parties initially designated to undertake the project were Liberia Prison Watch (LIPWA), the Rural Human Rights Activists Program (RHRAP) and Mr. Pius Sonpon, judicial/prison monitor of the JPC, acting in his individual capacity with the consent of his organization. Unfortunately, RHRAP acted against the agreement it made with the other parties. As a result, RHRAP was dropped as a partner and the information it was scheduled to collect had to be reconfirmed.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, soon after its release, the Assistant Minister for Rehabilitation visited the field office to request assistance in addressing issues of rehabilitation within the prison system. Meanwhile, The Carter Center has also agreed to support a follow-up program with LIPWA, which will conduct prison monitoring, document cases of illegal detention or abuse of rights, provide legal assistance to indigent defendants, and support rehabilitation programs.

<sup>25</sup> Based in Gbarnga, the JRS has been involved in Liberia since the beginning of the war. The training team uses a method called Development Education and Leadership Training in Action (DELTA), which provides direct experience in participatory community mobilization, in addition to instruction on leadership and decision-making skills.

<sup>26</sup> The eight are: LIPWA, MOPOWR, Liberian National Democracy Monitors, Liberians United for Democracy in Africa, Human Rights Association for Older Persons, Liberia Watch for Human Rights, Liberia Human Rights Observer, Inc., and the Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse & Neglect. Six of the eight are charter members of the recently established

### 3.5 THE FUTURE OF THE CARTER CENTER IN LIBERIA

Although the current grant from USAID expired at the end of 1999, The Carter Center has applied for a one-year renewal. The proposal includes support for the field office in addition to extending the programming that has been undertaken during the past year. As we write this paper, however, the future of this project is in legislative limbo. During the annual Congressional budget negotiations, both the U.S. Senate and House Foreign Relations Committees placed a hold on all non-humanitarian aid to Liberia, citing concerns about the record of President Taylor and his administration. Unless this freeze is lifted—or alternative funding can be secured to bridge the gap until such a decision is rendered—The Carter Center will once again be faced with the prospect of having to close its field office in Monrovia. Although the circumstances surrounding its potential exit may be less traumatic than in the past, the damage to existing initiatives would be no less substantial.

## 4. DISCUSSION

We suggested at the outset that the experiences of The Carter Center in Liberia provide insight into the effects of uncooperative political conditions on the interplay between local NGOs, on the one hand, and international actors and universal human rights norms, on the other. We now wish to isolate several areas in which struggles have emerged as the result of clashes between the two. Our discussion is intended to be suggestive—hence the largely anecdotal nature of the evidence—rather than provide definitive conclusions. That qualification notwithstanding, we find ourselves raising several issues: (1) human rights priorities; (2) methods of engagement with governments; (3) organizational sovereignty; and (4) funding constraints. These considerations lead us to several conclusions about how to assess bottom-line results, which we think are potentially relevant to other contexts and countries, and to the analysis of local organizations engaged in efforts to promote human rights and the rule of law.

### 4.1 PRIORITIES

To begin with, there are indications that Liberian NGOs adopt different priorities from their international counterparts. For example, whereas Amnesty International continues to emphasize accountability for the perpetrators of human rights abuses in Liberia—both pre-war and post-war—local human rights groups currently concentrate their energies on training, civic education, and legal aid.<sup>27</sup> To a certain extent, these objectives could be viewed as consistent and complementary. And, in fact, the underlying motivations are not necessarily different, in as much as they both derive from a commitment to basic rights and liberties.

Yet the discrepancy between the two agendas reflects clear differences in approach that cannot be ignored. While certainly not incompatible, the different points of emphasis suggest distinct visions of how progress on human rights can and should be achieved. Amnesty International's perspective is characteristic of its particular mission and reflects a more purely normative outlook. In contrast, local NGOs in Liberia have adopted a conspicuously practical approach that acknowledges—even if it does not fundamentally accept—the government's position on war-time abuses and its unwillingness to supply viable mechanisms for the investigation of recent violations.

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Network of Human Rights Organizations, which in May organized a one-day monitoring and fact-finding workshop for which the field office provided some financial and logistical support.

<sup>27</sup> Amnesty International, *Annual Report 1999: Liberia*.

In fact, a similar juxtaposition can be drawn with The Carter Center's LCHR programming. The Center's original objective was to ensure that the Commission became a fully operative and credible institution, capable of scrutinizing and redressing human rights issues. The underlying assumption was that only a credible and independent Commission would be seen as legitimate, and that without it, the government's stated intentions to improve human rights would be rightly questioned and doubted on all sides. Therefore, The Carter Center in effect said to President Taylor and his government, "if you are really serious about improving human rights in Liberia, demonstrate the seriousness of your intentions, and we will help you."

Although local NGOs initially engaged in an advocacy campaign after the government created a commission with limited authority, no funding and inadequate staff, they soon gave up any hopes that there a credible institution would emerge. Therefore, they turned their attention elsewhere, and focused instead on engaging in training, education and legal aid, and on providing the monitoring service that the government has thus far refused to provide.

The Carter Center, for its part, has taken the lead from civil society actors and NGOs in terms of how and whether to engage with the LCHR. For a while, the Center considered that it might still be worth trying to assist the LCHR, as a means of testing whether the government of Liberia was serious about implementing its proposal, which the whole world would then be able to evaluate, for better or worse.

To some extent, there was also an element of reasoning that perhaps a weak LCHR is more likely to contribute to improving human rights in Liberia than none at all, and that the Center should therefore support it. Over time, however, the Center decided that it was more advisable to follow the local NGOs and steer clear of the LCHR until such time as it is given the necessary authority, funding, and staffing to do a minimally credible job. As a result, the Center has decided for the time being to re-program funds away from the LCHR in favor of supporting the activities of small local NGOs. Although there is still hope that progress can be achieved in the area of institutional design, the current approach favors grass-roots development.

## 4.2 METHODS

Along similar lines, there is what amounts to a running debate over the appropriateness of pursuing relationships with the government of Liberia. As alluded to earlier, former President Carter is committed to the notion of high-level dialogue as an important, if not exclusive, element to any Carter Center program of activity. While the logic of such an approach was obvious during the peace negotiations, it is less easy to understand in post-election contexts. Given President Carter's reputation and stature, one of the unique strengths of the Center is its ability for high-level access and influence. Despite periodic criticism, President Carter and the Center continue to work under the assumption that one possible key to success will be the ability to retain and use the influence that President Carter can and does have on political leaders.

Since the early 1990s, President Carter has developed a long relationship with Charles Taylor built over the course of numerous visits to Liberia. In many ways, this relationship is still a critical part of the Center's strategy and position in Liberia. For example, President Carter has written letters to President Taylor on multiple occasions to raise human rights issues or other concerns, such as the recent violence in the north. Until President Taylor recently cancelled his scheduled visit to the U.S. in September to attend the opening of the U.N. General Assembly, there were tentative plans for he and President Carter to meet in Atlanta to discuss the situation in Liberia.

At one level, President Carter's view is unassailable. He has justifiable faith in his ability to make a difference, which derives in part from the prestige of the office he held and the reputation that he

has developed since then. Nonetheless, at some point it becomes necessary to question whether this dialogue can be effective. Cynics suggest that President Taylor simply tells President Carter what he wants to hear on subjects like human rights, accountability and transparency—or else avoids that difficult ground altogether. After all, they say, Taylor is a conniving and ruthless politician concerned only about keeping up appearances, so as not to cut himself off from the international community and the various forms of aid that it provides to Liberia. The view from the “inside,” however, is that President Carter is well aware of President Taylor’s interests and motivations.

This view is also consistent with the Center’s notion that human rights advocates should engage all levels of political society, including at high levels, and hope for movement on one or more of these fronts. In this framework, Carter’s contact with Taylor are just one element in a broader picture which also includes U.S. Department of Justice grants to Liberia’s Ministry of Justice, and Carter Center and other comparable organizations collaborating with local NGOs such as JPC and CEDE.<sup>28</sup>

The dilemma is that the links to political leaders and the various organs of government are unpalatable when their human rights record is unsavory, and can lead to the conclusion that such links serve to legitimize what is, or should be, an illegitimate government. The key question to answer is not whether such high-level contact provides a measure of validation (which it may do), but rather whether on balance it serves to undercut or strengthen independent efforts directed at political reform and community mobilization.

### 4.3 SOVEREIGNTY

Our next observation is that outsiders are inclined to espouse a different organizational model than their local counterparts. Outside analysts repeatedly comment that one of the most significant challenges in Liberia is to focus the activities undertaken by various NGO groups toward an emergent civil society. Consequently, despite being generally committed to the desirability of maintaining the autonomy and diverse missions of different groups, analysts, consultants, and field staff stress associations among—and even the consolidation of—local NGOs. This logic is also an element in the networking initiatives The Carter Center has undertaken in Liberia. The local organizations, by contrast, have expressed some ambivalence about such strategies. At least at this stage, they appear to prefer to maintain a greater sense of independence, even if doing so may undermine their interest in more effective political advocacy.

As we discussed earlier, the duplication of efforts in a context characterized by limited resources is a valid concern. Yet is all fragmentation and redundancy necessarily sub-optimal? Not necessarily. The fact that organizational networking and consolidation are not always readily embraced—though they make sense in the abstract—deserves further reflection. These responses could be deemed “inefficient” and “reactionary,” but the resistance is understandable and perhaps even desirable. If the networks are (or become) artificial constructs, they risk disturbing the natural development of organizations with their own interests, tactics, and undertakings.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the true test is whether this architecture is self-sustaining; if not, resources devoted to its construction and maintenance are potentially wasted. Cases like the LNP, which existed only as long as The Carter Center was there to support it, are indicative of the inherent challenges involved in trying to foster such inter-group associations.

Another angle on this subject is supplied by the analogy between promoting civil society and institutionalizing a market economy. Recent experiences in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, for example, demonstrate that capitalism cannot simply be implanted through force of formal structures—

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<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, we described how the Chairman of the LHRC sought to lobby President Taylor.

<sup>29</sup> Local NGOs may actually benefit from maintaining a somewhat lower public profile—witness the recent phenomenon of increasing hostility towards big-name international NGOs in Liberia.

a legal system, regulatory agencies, etc.—and institutional support. Instead, a fully operative market economy must go through a process of evolution whereby participant firms habituate themselves to a world in which they freely enter into contractual relationships, choose to develop and sell new products, etc. Likewise, a vibrant and effective civil society cannot be created in short order, no matter how sensible and articulate the vision.

#### 4.4 FUNDING

International efforts to promote and protect human rights norms can also have a paradoxical effect when it comes to financial matters. Consider the recent decision by the U.S. Congress to freeze all non-humanitarian aid to Liberia. One can draw a link between this step and reports by respected human rights organizations like Amnesty International, as well as the more general sense that the money is being wasted because the Liberian government has failed to show adequate respect for universal norms of politics. The underlying assumption is that any funding either directly aids the government, or indirectly affords it some measure of credibility in the eyes of the international community. Withdrawing support for these programs is then viewed as one means of gaining leverage over the policies of the Liberian government. In this sense, the decision by Congress has a strategic rationale.

Of course, this stance by the U.S. opens it up to charges of double standards, due to its inconsistent application of human rights criteria to various regimes, *e.g.*, Cuba versus China. In addition, and perhaps of more immediate concern in this paper, is that a hard-line policy toward Liberia is not likely to have the desired effect, and may even be counter-productive, at least in terms of the Carter Center's efforts involved: withdrawing support to efforts to bolster civil society will only serve to hurt the very organizations that are attempting to build and maintain some political space that is independent of the government of Liberia and President Charles Taylor. If the U.S. want to show its displeasure with Liberia's human rights record, and perhaps its actions and links to other rebel forces in the region (most notably the RUF in Sierra Leone), then eliminating support to respectable and credible NGOs in Liberian civil society is not the answer. Besides hurting the wrong persons and groups, such a policy can lead the government of Liberia to adopt a bunker mentality and induce greater hostility towards U.S.-based NGOs and possibly other organizations.

This controversy leads us back to the subject of methods. One of the most interesting complexities we observe is the lack of a unified voice from the international community regarding the pursuit of human rights in Liberia. In other words, the universal norms to which we all supposedly subscribe do not translate into a single tactical approach. The patterns that external observers detect when they focus their lens on developing civil societies are present in similar measure when the lens is inverted to examine the efforts of those who seek to influence politics in these settings. The manifest tribulations—differences, competition, duplication, etc.—are no more easily eliminated.

#### CONCLUSION: ASSESSING RESULTS

In addition to the issues raised above, a final complexity concerns the appropriate methods for assessing the state of politics in emerging democracies. With normative standards come expectations of results on the ground. As we noted above, however, the drawback to a results-oriented mindset is an overemphasis on tangible indications of change. This mindset must be reconciled with the fact that some standards of conduct are simply out of reach, despite the

best efforts of civil society, international actors, and even certain participating officials. Therefore, it is important to consider the need to adjust for constraints when measuring the "influence" of an emerging civil society. Some of the desired structural, institutional and policy effects may emerge over the long term, but during the initial stages the results are likely to be more diffuse, ephemeral, and/or obscure. This is particularly the case with programming dedicated to grass-roots development: education, training, and other forms of community empowerment and mobilization take time to embed and diffuse.

This paper raises a deceptively simple question: what are appropriate measures of success for NGOs operating in especially challenging political contexts? A natural instinct is to focus on substantive political change—*i.e.*, major leadership overhauls, institutional redesigns, and legislative reforms. As we discuss at the outset, however, rapid, significant progress on these dimensions is probably unrealistic under those circumstances. Although most subscribe to this point of view, we question whether their apparent pragmatism translates into reasonable expectations of civil society. Even the most benign appraisals conclude that the activity is overly diffuse, the organizations excessively fragmented, and the rate of political improvements exceedingly slow. Such commentaries may reflect an underlying optimism about the future prospects of civil society in these settings, but a certain paternalistic, even domineering, spirit can begin to intrude. These issues are particularly relevant to the complex interactions between international NGOs and their local counterparts. The Carter Center's experiences in Liberia suggest several important lessons in this regard.

First, the failure of a government to adhere to accepted human rights norms creates a misleading impression of inefficacy on the part of local NGOs. One should not be surprised at the lack of institutional development in the area of human rights: it is symptomatic of the problems that newly democratizing countries often experience. In our case study, the Liberian state is not so weak that it is precluded from making significant strides, even though governmental authority is somewhat fragile.

The more pressing problem is a shortage of political will on the part of the top leadership, and an apparent unwillingness to tolerate anything but the weakest of independent sources of political action and information. Civil society is not incapable, but it has yet to acquire the influence and access that would enable constituent organizations to steer through major changes. The recent elections provided an opening, but President Taylor has not allowed the opening to grow into genuine development of strong civil society actors. The net result is a set of civil society actors that are allowed to exist, but narrowly constrained in terms of what they can openly do.

This gap is frustrating; however, it should not be taken as a sign of complete malfunction or inefficacy on the part of Liberian NGOs. Instead, there may be more subtle reasons to believe that advances are being made that can have a lasting impact. One indicator of NGOs' impact, if not on strengthening human rights protections and the rule of law, but at least on the government of Liberia's own power calculations, are the repeated public statements by President Taylor and other government ministers complaining about the work of Liberian NGOs. Time and again, President Taylor has charged that the human rights NGOs criticize the government and attempt to stain its human rights image internationally only because they believe that that is how they can secure external funding (and not because of any problems in Liberia). This sensitivity suggests that while the NGO's have only had a limited impact on formal institutions, the force of their political impact is not ignored by the government.

Second, the best target area for work on human rights and the rule of law over the short run may be citizen education and empowerment, rather than institutional change and policy reform. In fact, despite everyone's good intentions, it may be counter-productive to focus attention—at least at this early stage—on lobbying for reforms, restructuring, and administrative compliance. Such pursuits need not disappear from the agenda; however, a more effective strategy may be to set one's sights on enhancing

the basic capacity of civil society and encouraging broader forms of popular mobilization. This approach offers only limited immediate rewards and therefore requires tremendous patience on the part of those hoping to foster change. Yet an overriding sense of urgency can be destructive in as much as it forces organizations and individuals to pursue goals that are beyond their reach.

Third, efforts directed at the strategic coordination of human rights activism—at least those initiated by outsiders—are potentially at odds with the organic nature of the development of civil society. As we described at the outset, local NGOs use human rights rhetoric as a springboard and generally benefit from external assistance in their pursuit of political change. Yet the same human rights norms can also become an unwelcome burden, especially if they come to be perceived as the convenient, moralizing demands of parties without the same stakes or exposure. Assuming the goal is for a country's politics to be natural and self-sustaining, these standards must be willingly embraced by local NGOs, rather than force-fed. More significantly, even welcome intervention may stifle the necessary growth of civil society.

The “moral” of the story is that while local NGOs in countries like Liberia desperately need external support, their undertakings must ultimately be self-sustaining. When an outside organization lays the foundation, there must be an “exit” strategy that can be implemented whether the facilitator determines that it has achieved its objectives or is forced to leave by circumstances beyond its control. In the end, there is simply no substitute for learning by doing and the development of indigenous capacity.

We offer these reflections recognizing that we have no quick, convenient solutions. In many respects, the struggles involved are classic examples of the clash between idealism and realism, which is inevitably sharpened under conditions of resource scarcity, social upheaval, and political intransigence. Under these unpredictable circumstances, the greatest dilemma for an organization like The Carter Center is to discover how it can put its resources to good use. We advocate a greater emphasis on grass-roots capacity building and mobilization, but recognize that the impact of such programming is difficult to measure. While direct lobbying for structural and institutional reforms should not be abandoned, it is important to be realistic about what can of progress can be expected, and how fast.