

The Transformation of the US-Based Liberian Diaspora from Hard Power to Soft Power Agents

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Abstract: As a result of a “hurting stalemate” and the failure to capture power through coercion, moderate elements within the US-based Liberian diaspora resorted to soft power in order to have a greater impact on homeland affairs. The effectiveness of the diaspora is aided by the attractiveness of diaspora success and US culture, the morality of diaspora policies, and the credibility and legitimacy of the diaspora. The US-based Liberian diaspora exerts soft power influences towards peace building via the following mechanisms: persuasion and dialogue; public diplomacy; media assistance; and development assistance/job creation campaigns. The study concludes that development assistance/job creation campaigns are the least sustainable because of cost compared to the other mechanisms that attract a buy-in from the community. This research is based on snowball and in-depth interviews with forty US-based Liberian diaspora leaders that also includes leaders of non-Liberian advocacy groups and participatory observation of selected diaspora activities from 2007-2010. It is also supplemented with content analysis of US-based Liberian diaspora online discussion forums and archival records of congressional hearings on Liberia during the civil war.

Introduction

The emergent literature on diasporas and conflict as captured by Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen (2006); Hazel Smith and Paul Stares (2007); Feargal Cochrane (2007); Terrence Lyons (2004), and Camilla Orjuela (2008) points to contentious politics and the exercise of hard power which tends to generate conflict in the homeland. In international politics, “power” can be defined as “having the ability to influence another to act in ways in which that entity would not have acted otherwise. Hard power is the capacity to coerce them to do so.”¹ The diaspora often exerts hard power influence via military and/or economic coercion of its opponents in the pursuit of a desired political outcome. This form of political power often relies on confrontational policies imposed by one powerful political body upon a lesser economically or militarily endowed body. The US-based Liberian diaspora by virtue of its relative economic strength vis-à-vis its home-based compatriots exercised wanton hard power in the course of the fourteen-year civil war.

This paper argues via the US-based Liberian diaspora case that in a post-conflict environment, diasporas are capable of exercising soft power influence towards peace building even when some of its prominent members have expended hard power for conflict. Hard power such as financial resources that were channeled for coercive purposes can be channeled for

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persuasive purposes and co-optation in order to achieve a desired outcome towards moderation or peace. Buttressing this point, Nye has observed that “hard and soft power are related because they are both aspects of the ability to achieve one’s purpose by affecting the behavior of others.”² The transformation of the US-based Liberian diaspora’s hard power into soft power occurred when the use of hard power for coercive powers failed and led to a “hurting stalemate” among stakeholders in the Liberian conflict. The effectiveness of the diaspora in exercising soft power was boosted by the following: attractiveness of diaspora success in the US; diaspora credibility and legitimacy; morality of diaspora policies; and attractiveness of US culture, values and norms. The following are the avenues through which the US-based Liberian diaspora uses to exert soft power influence: persuasion and dialogue; public diplomacy; media assistance; and development assistance/job creation.

Methodology

The Liberian diaspora in the US is organized along different types of voluntary associations that play various roles on behalf of its members in the host country and at home. Some of the identified groups include the following: (i) Liberian county organizations which are organized along ethnic county lines; (ii) local community organizations—organized geographically by US state/city chapters and loosely federated at a national level under the Union of Liberian Associations in America (ULAA); (iii) political organization—branches of political parties at home; (iv) advocacy groups i.e. Association of Liberian Journalist in America (AJLA); (v) immigration advocacy groups organized to lobby for permanent residents for Liberians; (vi) religious groups (Christian and Muslim organizations); and (vii) alumni associations.³ The above organizations are the formal channels via which members of the US-based Liberian diaspora exert their influence at home from abroad and how they collaborate with some non-Liberian advocacy groups in the USA. This paper is based on snowball technique interviews with forty leaders of the aforementioned organizations made up of at least two leaders from each category of voluntary associations as well as leaders of non-Liberian advocacy organizations and Liberian government officials. Interviewees were promised confidentiality and anonymity in order to solicit participation in the interview and to encourage candid responses. Hence, this paper uses pseudonyms for their names and organizations where appropriate. For verification purposes and to check for bias, these interviews were supplemented with US Congressional records on Liberian hearings in the heat of the civil war and participatory observations via visits to meetings and annual conventions of selected county organizations and regional branches of ULAA. In addition, the discourse on popular diaspora websites and list-serves were monitored in order to provide more contexts for data analysis.

From Hard Power to Soft Power

Joseph Nye defines soft power as the “ability to affect others to obtain outcomes you want. One can affect other’s behavior in three main ways: threats of coercion (sticks), inducements and payments (‘carrots’), and attraction that makes others want what you want.”⁴ Also, soft power relies on three main resources: cultural—places where it is attractive; political values—when the promoter adheres to them at home and abroad; and foreign policies regarded as legitimate and having moral authority.⁵ This is contrasted with hard power, which relies on military and

economic might to make others change their position. Hard power utilizes inducements or threats in the form of “carrots and sticks” that might not necessarily be the best alternative in achieving a desired outcome.⁶

Charles Taylor, the primary architect of the civil war, was a major leader of the US-based Liberian diaspora, having chaired the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA), the umbrella organization of US-based Liberian diaspora organizations in the 1980s. This position enabled Taylor to raise his profile among fellow US-based Liberians, some of whom gave him financial, moral, and material support for his armed rebellion in 1989, which triggered the civil war. One such member of the US-based Liberia diaspora who provided moral and financial support for Taylor’s rebellion is the current President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. In a February 12, 2009 testimony before the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the President admitted to contributing US \$10,000 to Charles Taylor’s rebel National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) via the Association of Constitutional Democracy (ACDL), ostensibly for relief operations in Nimba County at the height of the conflict. Also admitting her moral support for Charles Taylor’s rebellion before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, she said: “I will admit to you that I was one of those who did agree that the rebellion was necessary... But I was never a member of the NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia).”⁷

In spite of the role that the diasporas plays in conflict, it is indeed very troubling that when it comes to peace building, they are under-utilized by the international community in the quest for a viable peace. According to United States Institute of Peace’s (USIP) digital records on Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC), forty-one TRCs have been set up since 1973, aimed at find a lasting solution to a conflict as part of a post-conflict mechanism for peace building.⁸ Regrettably, only one commission, the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, explicitly made provision for the inclusion of the diaspora in the process of healing war-afflicted wounds. The existing literature on the positive role that the African diaspora plays in the development of the continent is often centered on its potential or ability to contribute towards the economic development of the continent mostly via remittances. While this focus is understandable, the African diaspora’s ability to exert soft power influence towards post-conflict peace building, particularly after using hard power for conflict has been under-explored.

Failure of Hard Power

After exerting hard power via financial and material support for Liberia’s fourteen year civil war, a consensus emerged among the US-based Liberian diaspora and compatriots in Liberia that indeed the use of hard power had created a “hurting stalemate” and hence a change in strategy was needed. “The concept is based on the notion that when the parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful to both of them (although not necessarily in equal degree or for the same reasons), they seek an alternative policy or way out.”⁹ In addition, hurting stalemates create the conditions for warring parties to suspend violent confrontation and seek a negotiated settlement. This is because a hurting stalemate creates via prolonged violence an elusive military solution, and the cost becomes unbearable to all vested parties.¹⁰ In the case of the US-based Liberian diaspora,

although some aided Charles Taylor to capture power through hard power (military means), most were disappointed that Taylor failed to abandon hard power and operated without a democratic system. Thus, after Taylor was forced out of power via a combination of international and domestic pressure, the US-based Liberia diaspora was determined to support a candidate who could adopt soft power by adopting democratic ideals. Hence, the overwhelming US-based Liberian diaspora support for Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf who went on to win the presidency in 2005. Ikram warns that “advocates for hard power must remember that its use in the ‘global village’ will have adverse consequences about their image, however just the cause.”¹¹

Factors Enabling the Effectiveness of Diaspora Soft Power

Nye adds that the ability to obtain the desired outcome depends on a set of intangible assets that includes “an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions and policies that are seen as legitimate or having morality. If a leader presents values that others want to follow, it will cost less to lead.”¹² Although the US-based Liberian diaspora does not fully possess all these intangible assets, they certainly have some attractive attributes that gives them an advantage in affecting the behaviors of their fellow compatriots at home. These include attractiveness of diaspora success, morality of diaspora policies, attractiveness of American culture and diaspora credibility and legitimacy.

Attractiveness of Diaspora Success

The ability to shape the preferences of others lies at the core of soft power. This can be manifested at the personal level through the power of attraction and seduction. In the course of a relationship or marriage, the bigger partner does not necessarily have the power; instead power is manifested through the mysterious chemistry of attraction. Smart leaders in the corporate world know that effective leadership involves leading by example and attracting others to do what you want instead of just barking out commands. Also, the success of any community-based policing is dependent upon a friendly police force that is attractive and approachable enough in order to illicit community support to help achieve mutually-shared objectives.¹³ One of the biggest assets of the US-based Liberian diaspora and a source of attraction to their compatriots in the homeland is the fact that the former is the most educated constituency of all Liberians. This is mainly due to the favorable educational opportunities available in the United States for anyone willing to work hard.

US-based Liberians place a very high value on education as evidenced by the fact that working adults often seek avenues for self-improvement and general education classes. Some Liberian organizations in the United States support scholarships for prospective students while graduates maintain strong loyalties to their high schools by forming and joining high school alumni associations. Even though young Liberian immigrants enrolled in the US educational system face a myriad of challenges such as poor preparation due to the civil war, which broke down the Liberian educational system and interrupted the educational calendar for years, many are able to persevere, attend college/universities, and eventually earn degrees. They are able to secure employment in various fields such as teaching, medicine, science, and technology.¹⁴ Thus, the average Liberian sees the educational and financial success of their US-based Liberian

counterparts as something worthy of aspiring to and thereby giving the latter leverage in affecting the behavior of their fellow compatriots at home.

Morality of Policies

US-based diaspora institutions such as the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA) have built a reputation through years fighting against dictatorship and human rights abuses in Liberia such that its members are generally viewed favorably at home. However, this trust is in jeopardy because of growing concerns that the current leadership is too close to the current Liberian government to be an impartial player for peace building in Liberia.

Furthermore, members of the Liberian County Associations which represent the various ethnic groups of Liberia in the US have also earned the trust of their fellow Liberians at home because of numerous material, financial, and moral support that these associations continue to offer their respective communities back home. In fact, during the brutal civil war, the remittances of the US-based Liberian diaspora were very crucial for the sustenance of thousands of Liberians who remained in the country and those who fled to neighboring countries as refugees.

Some members of the US-based Liberian diaspora have not always promoted legitimate policies such as funding the civil war and, as such, have jeopardized their standing in Liberia. However, most Liberians are discerning enough not to use the illegitimate actions of a few to over-generalize about the stance of the overall diaspora community in the US. In addition, US-based diaspora funding for the war in Liberia was not done in the name of the various organizations representing the Liberian diaspora in the US. This is because these diaspora organizations have membership that cuts across the ethnic, religious, and political divides along which the war was fought in Liberia. Second, US laws governing non-profit status under which most diaspora organizations operate forbade the raising of money for war or violence abroad. However, the funding occurred in an informal way where like-minded people rallied together and were able to send money via the normal channels of diaspora remittances such as money orders and Western Union.

Thus, when it comes to the ability to exercise any degree of soft-power influence, US-based Liberian diaspora members who are deemed to have pursued illegitimate policies by their fellow citizens at home will not be able to lead by example or promote any changes no matter how needed and useful their policies or ideas may be. For example, although President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf initially supported violent rebellion against the Doe regime, she is not perceived by many Liberians as a hardliner who crossed the red line compared to fellow former diaspora members such as Charles Taylor and Alhaji Kromah who went on to lead rebel factions that committed major atrocities. Thus it will be inconceivable for the aforementioned rebel leaders to ever exercise soft power in Liberia because of their bloody past. On the other hand, US-based Liberian diaspora members recognized at home as having a track record of pursuing legitimate policies aimed at peace and reconstruction are more likely to be effective in exercising soft-power. This influence could be demonstrated through leadership by example backed by a reservoir of good will among the people. The conferment of the Nobel Peace Prize on President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf further enhances her soft power influence in Liberia because it bestows a high degree of moral authority. In addition, former President Amos Sawyer, who was a professor at Indiana University, returned to Liberia to head the Governance Commission, an important organization mandated to propose government reforms. Similarly, Massa

Washington, a longtime diaspora stalwart, served as a member of the TRC in charge of diaspora affairs.

Diaspora groups often fall under the purview of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) claiming to act as “a global conscience.”¹⁵ They represent broad public interests beyond state boundaries and seek to create new norms by indirectly pressing governments and corporations to change policies. Indirectly, NGOs shape public perceptions of what constitute appropriate actions and behaviors of governments and corporations. The soft power of these non-state actors is fueled by the information revolution that enables them to attract followers. As such, governments have to consider NGOs as both allies and adversaries.¹⁶ In the case of US-based Liberian diaspora, most of them served as adversaries to the governments in power in the course of the civil war but are now serving as allies to the current government and new democratic experiment via soft power in peace building.

NGOs such as diaspora associations and organizations have become adept at penetrating states with a disregard for state boundaries. This is because they build partnership with citizens who are well placed in the domestic politics of several countries. These local partners are able to focus media attention and pressure governments on issues of their interests, thereby creating new types of transnational political coalitions.¹⁷

Attractiveness of American Culture

Liberians have a long and unique historical connection with the United States compared to other African countries. Further, the Liberian diaspora can be classified as a “state-linked diaspora” for as Sheffer (2003) defines it, “state-linked diasporas are those groups that are in host countries but are connected to societies of their own ethnic origin that constitute a majority in an established state.”¹⁸ This is because the Liberian diaspora, unlike other stateless diasporas such as the Kurdish diaspora, is actually connected to a recognized state that it seeks to influence or solicit its assistance in times of need.

Liberians have always viewed American culture as desirable and equate “civilization” with Americanization. This phenomenon can be traced to the early freed American slave settlers who came to Liberia with a set of values and culture rooted in the New World and used it to dominate the indigenes. David Wippmann, citing Alao et al, sums up the superiority complex of the Americo-Liberians over the indigenous people as follows:

They created the social hierarchy they had experienced in the ante-bellum (of the United States) but with themselves as the socially dominant, land-owning class. They considered the indigenous population primitive and uncivilized, and treated it as little more than an abundant source of forced labor.¹⁹

Through their dominance of the indigenous-born Liberians, they frowned on native culture as backwards and institutionalized a set of norms that included literacy, Christianity, monogamy, dress, etc. which denoted “civilization.” For example, in most Liberian parlance, the word “native” is used to denote “uncivilized,” a person unfamiliar with western culture.²⁰ Thus most Liberians of all persuasions that make up the US-based diaspora are looked upon favorably at home for their acculturation to western culture, courtesy of their sojourn in the

United States. A US-based Liberian diaspora leader traces the historical background behind Liberians affinity with American culture and values as follows:

The only difference between the Liberian flag and the United States flag is they have 50 stars and we have one star. If you look at the American Constitution, the Liberian Constitution is modeled after it. So pretty much everything was transported from Liberia; all the values because of the culture, eh the language we are speaking, the education you know, the book, the textbooks are from the United States. And so the United States has a greater influence on the culture and on the values of Liberia.²¹

The aforementioned historical and cultural connection between the US and Liberia makes it relatively easier for the US-based Liberian diaspora to receive a favorable hearing vis-à-vis any peace building message being promoted by the latter.

Credibility and Legitimacy

The aforementioned historical connection between the US and Liberia enhances the credibility and legitimacy of the US-based Liberian diaspora in their quest to exert soft power influence in Liberia. According to Nye, the reputation and credibility of a state or group seeking to exert soft power influence also matters particularly because of the “paradox of plenty.” Thus any information perceived as propaganda may not just be treated with contempt but may also be counterproductive if it undermines the reputation of the provider of the information.²²

Fortunately for the US-based Liberian diaspora, the United States is the most popular foreign country among Liberians based on its unique position for founding Liberia and as its biggest donor and investor. In fact, in the course of the civil war, it was not uncommon for many Liberians to seek refuge in the US. embassy in Monrovia even when security was not guaranteed. Furthermore, the long exposure of Liberians to American culture and norms courtesy of the freed slaves who settled in Liberia made it easier for the promotion of what is referred to as the “American Creed.”²³ According to interviewees, aspects of the American creed that most attracts them are: the relative racial harmony among the various races in the US in spite of a history of animosity; political, ethnic and religious tolerance; value for education; a culture of rule of law; and respect for human rights. In Liberia, American culture, values and norms have become the measurement of civility and hence worthy of emulation.²⁴ This is in spite of the fact that the promoters of the “American Creed” have not always been worthy ambassadors as evidenced by the fact that some prominent members of the US-based Liberian diaspora provided financial and material support towards the brutal civil war. With such popular friends, the US-based diaspora is able to exert soft power influence in Liberia by mobilizing resources from the United States for peace building.

Although there are large Liberian diaspora groups within the West African sub-region and Europe, they do not have the same domestic legitimacy as their US-based counterparts enabling them to actively exert soft power influence. Both the West African countries and European countries that host Liberian refugees do not have the unique historical relationship that the US has with Liberia as the founding nation of modern Liberia. In addition, these countries do not have the level of influence that the US has had over Liberia for years when it comes to foreign policy. As such, the Liberian diaspora in Europe and the West African sub-region have very

limited leverage in deriving any soft power influence via their presence in the aforementioned regions. Third, the Liberian diaspora in neighboring West African countries such as Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire are viewed with suspicion in Liberia because some of them were supported militarily by the governments of the aforementioned countries in the course of the civil war. In fact, Charles Taylor launched his rebellion from neighboring Cote d'Ivoire in December of 1990 with a small band of dissidents that had received training in Libya and were based in Cote d'Ivoire. Lastly, unlike their US-based counterparts, the majority of the West African-based Liberian diaspora is less resourced and leads a difficult life as refugees because of unfavorable host country conditions. This inhibits their capacity to effectively mobilize and exert any form of soft power influence in their homeland.

Diaspora association with an unpopular host country in the view of compatriots in the homeland de-legitimizes the diaspora regardless of the utility of whatever peace building initiative that the diaspora may be promoting. For example, the overwhelming anti-American/Western sentiment among Afghans and Iraqis has seriously compromised the ability of the Afghan and Iraqi diasporas to exert soft power influence over their homeland compatriots. This is because the Afghan and Iraqi diaspora are viewed as traitors by their compatriots for collaborating with an immoral power in support of an unjust cause— invasion. Buttressing this point, Turner (2008) points out that Ahmed Chalabi, whose Iraqi National Congress was propped up by the US. as the “government-in-waiting,” faced a hostile reception from Iraqis and resistance which ultimately fueled the Iraqi insurgency.²⁵ Similarly, in the Afghan case, the fact that three-quarters of President Kharzai’s transitional administration was made up of Afghan diaspora members transplanted by the international community eager to re-shape war-torn societies sparked a lot of resentment from local stakeholders.²⁶ Under such circumstances, the credibility and legitimacy of the diaspora led-government is compromised because in the view of local stakeholders, the government was constituted by an immoral external power. Such perception seriously undermines the effectiveness of any diaspora entity to exert soft power influence because the latter is viewed in the same unattractive and negative light as its benefactors.

Mechanisms for the Exercise of Soft Power

The diaspora has the leverage to manipulate conflict situations towards desirable peaceful resolution. Apart from exercising the roles of communicator or facilitator, diasporas are capable of effective persuasion as well. Diaspora leverage in conflict resolution is backed by the ability to wield carrots and sticks in the form of continuous political and financial support or a withdrawal of such support. Any withdrawal of diaspora support could be devastating for the homeland if the government lacks political legitimacy and is facing economic difficulty.²⁷ “Withdrawal of remittances and investment is another strong card diaspora groups can play. Diaspora’s financial support is extremely important for the homeland country’s economy, particularly if the country is a developing one.”²⁸ This is further reinforced by the neo-patrimonial nature of Liberian society where many families depend on their diaspora relatives for sustenance, thereby giving diaspora members much clout in communities. Thus the US-based Liberian diaspora exercise soft powers influence through persuasion/dialogue, public

dialogue, public diplomacy, diaspora civic engagement, and development/job creation programs.

Persuasion/Dialogue

Some members of the US-based Liberian diaspora have been exercising soft-power influence on their fellow Liberian citizens back home on an inter-personal level through the power of persuasion and dialogue. In a post-war environment where ethnic and factional nerves are still raw, such attempts are helping in the reduction of tensions, confidence-building and reconciliation. A US-based Liberian diaspora leader discovered some of the simmering ethnic tensions during an encounter with an elderly woman who was refusing to acknowledge her own grandchildren because her son had married a woman from a rival ethnic group. The diaspora leader recounts his successful attempt to soothe the elderly woman's prejudice as follows:

... when I was in Liberia, I came across a woman whose son was married to a girl from Nimba and this lady told me those children will never be my grandchildren. And this lady told me that as long as those children have Nimba blood, they will never be my grandchildren. I told her to look at it this way, even though they have Nimba blood, they have your blood too. So don't give up. It is a wrong indictment of the entire Nimba race if there is anything like that. My brother, it's not like one person does something bad we have to blame everybody... I managed to convince them.²⁹

Most African countries lack effective conflict resolution mechanisms, and in a country such as Liberia that is recovering from a brutal civil war, the situation is very precarious, particularly in the hinterlands. This is because there are inadequate and often corrupt law personnel and infrastructure. Such a situation does not inspire confidence among the local populace who are quick to take matters into their own hands thereby blowing petty local disputes out of proportion and risking the escalation of conflict. The leadership of County Associations in the US has often intervened in cases of stalemates in their respective counties by using their good offices directly to mediate and resolve conflicts and disputes.

Sometimes these diaspora leaders use their privileged positions to refer a conflict or grievance to the relevant central authorities in Monrovia for redress. For example, in one such instance, the leadership of the Bong County diaspora in the US resolved tensions that arose between the Bong County Superintendent and a local contractor that threatened peace. The diaspora leadership issued a position statement on the dispute to the President, resulting in a peaceful resolution of the dispute. Describing some of the unique advantages that members of the diaspora have over their Liberian counterparts that enable them to be effective at exerting soft power influence, a diaspora leader I refer to as "Mark," posits as follows:

I have certain authority that an ordinary Liberian in the street does not have ... I can speak to the minister, I can speak to the solicited general or the dean of the law school or the president of the university, heads of civil societies, international NGO's ... So you have to recognize your placement in society... Socially, in the family context, if you are a male in the African family, you may have older sisters but you are the male, you are much respected and people

listen to your views. Much more so if you are from America. You have education, you have money, and you are from America. They listen to you!³⁰

A major post-war legacy of the Liberian civil war is the thousands of former child-soldiers who are now young adults that the Liberian government and international community struggle to integrate into the society at large. "Aid workers estimate up to 20,000 child-soldiers, some as young as seven or eight, were recruited by both government and rebel forces during Liberia's latest war."³¹ This legacy, coupled with the inadequate avenues for conflict resolution, provides a breeding ground for angry youth that can escalate into violence if left unchecked. Thus, one of the avenues used by some US-based diaspora members to assist in peace building is by training some of the youth on how to channel their grievances to appropriate authorities without resorting to mob action and demonstrations. For example, a visiting US-based Liberian diaspora lecturer who served temporarily in the University of Liberia pointed out that when he once heard that students, some of whom were ex-combatants, were about to go on demonstration against the government's delay in paying the salaries of lecturers, he reached out to the student leadership to tone down their heated rhetoric. Instead, he taught them how to write petitions, organize press conferences, and articulate their grievances in a non-threatening manner. The visiting lecturer argued that these were skills and leadership tools that someone needed to teach these students and he was glad to have offered it. Although the demonstration still went ahead, it did not escalate into violence as previously feared.

Members of the US-based Liberian diaspora community also played crucial roles in preventing post-election violence after the 2005 elections when George Weah and his supporters threatened to reject the outcome of the run-off elections. A US-based Liberian diaspora leader, who was himself disqualified from contesting the elections on a legal technicality, worked behind the scenes to convince Weah's camp to eventually accept the outcome of the results. In doing so, he cited the case of Al Gore who conceded defeat to George W. Bush in 2000 in the face of pressure not to and urged Weah's camp to concede in order not to plunge the country back to war. He points out that he was granted the necessary audience and was successful in convincing senior members of Weah's camp to concede because he reiterated to Weah's camp that he had personally exercised moderation when the Supreme Court upheld his disqualification from participation in the 2005 election as a presidential candidate. He did not make a fuss about his disqualification as his supporters urged at the time. Instead, he resorted to a peaceful avenue in the form of a press conference where he announced his acceptance of the verdict and admonished his disappointed supporters to remain calm and realign themselves with any other political party of their choice. This personal experience gave him the necessary credibility to call for moderation with Weah's camp. It also demonstrates the utility of soft power via leadership by example.

The situation changes dramatically, however, when locals have to compete with diaspora returnees for much coveted top government positions and economic opportunities. Such circumstances have created a cold war between the diaspora returnees and locals fueling resentment from the latter who believe that they deserve more opportunities over their diaspora compatriots because the latter did not endure the war and the former did.

A high-ranking US-based diaspora woman leader summed up the tensions between returnees and their local compatriots over high profile jobs as follows:

You know, there is always little tension that people think that some of us were not there during the civil war and some Liberians want to go back to take their jobs. These are little tensions but overall we run the economy. You know through MoneyGram and Western Union organizations, people have put money into the country to make sure that people will start to uplift themselves.³²

In addition, while some US-based diaspora members are using their privileged positions to reduce tensions, mitigate and resolve conflicts, their efforts are not sustainable and should not be a substitute for the provision of long-term conflict resolution institutions throughout the whole of Liberia. This is because most diaspora members have permanent bases abroad and only come back to Liberia periodically. Also, most of the diaspora strategies for peace building seem to be ad hoc. Whatever influences the diaspora brings to bear on peace building and the overall benefits of their efforts each require institutional backing to be sustainable.

Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is another avenue where the US-based diaspora exercises soft power to promote peace building in Liberia. "Shaping public opinion becomes even more important where authoritarian governments have been replaced by new democracies."³³ A parallel can be drawn with Liberia, where the 2005 elections ushered in a new democratic dispensation after a long period of complete state collapse and anarchy. National platforms at important national events such as Independence Day celebrations offer an opportune forum for the US-based diaspora to help shape the national debate towards peace. This is because such occasions have a national character with high public participation that can be a mass communication gold mine. The occasion is also a unifying one devoid of partisanship or divisive ethnic and factional politics so it tends to attract a bipartisan audience. As a ritual in Liberia, during national occasions such as Independence Day, a national orator is chosen based on his/her accomplishments to deliver an inspirational national speech.

The speech is meant to address an important issue of concern that affects the country and acts as a call to action for the nation. For example, during the 160th independence anniversary, the national orator for the occasion was US-based Liberian Kimmie Weeks, a child advocate and founder of Youth Action International, who talked about the importance of education. A 2007 government press release reported that Mr. Weeks stressed in his address that the government should prioritize education and youth development. He also warned that Liberia's development goals will be in vain unless the government invested in development of the youth and admonished the government to come up with a National Educational Policy to address the educational needs of the country.³⁴ The views on education that Weeks championed on the independence anniversary occasion went a long way to persuade President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf to introduce a free and compulsory primary education policy for Liberia.

Diaspora leaders such as Weeks, a successful international advocate and speaker on children's rights, have been described as "alternative" peacemakers.³⁵ This category also includes poets, writers, musicians, prominent scholars, and sports stars such as football players. They are chosen to speak during important occasions because "they have a moral authority and command public respect across ethnic, clan, and group lines and, above all, cannot be accused

of seeking political office. This innovative initiative is commendable and deserves to be more widely popularized.”³⁶

Diaspora Civic Engagement

The involvement of the Diaspora in the social and political dynamics of the homeland is not confined to the realm of politics. Indeed, some diaspora groups choose neutrality over political partisanship with regards to homeland conflicts and instead focus on domestic development through civil society. These diaspora groups sense a natural affinity with homeland civil society rather than the political class. As a result of this, diasporas bolster civil society’s peace constituency in the homeland. The impact is felt at the sub-national, local, and village levels rather than national levels. Civic-minded diaspora groups believe that for viable peace to be attained in the homeland, there should also be a bottom-up approach that compliments a top-down approach as part of due diligence. They believe that peace building can only be effective if there is a linkage of national, sub-national local processes and initiatives with different strategic sites and actors. Hence, support is provided for local human rights organizations, women’s associations, and sponsorship of civic-oriented programs.³⁷

The US-based Liberian diaspora exercises soft power influence through civil engagement via local media assistance aimed at changing the attitudes of fellow Liberians towards peace building norms. This takes the form of diaspora media persons and their organizations offering professional training to their counterparts or providing funds and equipment for the establishment of radio stations. In doing so, the US-based diaspora is able to shape the agenda for broadcast and as the saying goes, “personnel is policy.” Once the agenda is shaped, the content will also reflect peace building norms and values preferred by the diaspora and this goes a long way to shape the public debate and ultimately, public policy. A characteristic of these radio stations are that they de-emphasize political issues which have the tendency to polarize the society. Instead, the focus is on community empowerment and social issues such as human rights, democracy, corruption, and women’s issues that all spheres of society can embrace. In other words, divisive political issues that could lead to tensions are avoided. Another characteristic is that these diaspora-assisted radio stations are community based and as such address issues that are of critical importance to peace building in a particular community thereby allowing for a well-targeted audience.

The US-based Tappita District Development Association (TADDA) has upgraded the Voice of Tappita (VOT, 89.9FM) from a 50-watt community radio station into a 500-watt station that has extensive coverage throughout central Liberia. The UN originally donated station to help with information during the 2005 elections. TADDA’s assistance also included studio equipment such as computers, mixers, digital recorders, studio microphones, etc. In recognition of the radio station’s overhaul and its increased utility in peace building, the government of the Netherlands selected Voice of Tapita as one of three local radio stations in Liberia for collaboration. As part of the benefits of this collaboration, three operators of the station were chosen to undergo further training in the Netherlands.³⁸

With the US-based diaspora providing the funding for equipment and personnel of some FM stations and also educational materials, the latter is able to influence coverage on issues that promote peace building, provided the issues are deemed legitimate by the targeted audience. However, while technological advances have led to a “dramatic reduction in the cost of

processing and transmitting information" it has also led to the explosion of information creating what Nye dubs a "paradox of information."³⁹ He cautions that under this paradox, too much information can lead to a scarcity of attention. This is because people become over-saturated with information to the point where attention instead of information becomes the scarce resource. Thus "those who can distinguish valuable information from background clutter gain power."⁴⁰ The ability of the US-based Liberian diaspora to select the relevant peace building issues and policies for promotion that people can rally around goes a long way to enhance their soft power influence.

In conducting public diplomacy and advocacy, the diaspora should guard against the perception of pursuing a hidden agenda otherwise their messages risk being viewed as propaganda. Under such conditions their credibility and reputation as an attractive agent for change becomes tarnished. In many African countries such as Liberia, the state has a stranglehold on the broadcast media such as radio and television and oftentimes they serve as the official mouthpieces of the government devoid of any critical national debate. As a result of this, the public tends to be very skeptical about state media programming contents and seeks alternative sources of information. This is where diaspora-assisted media that is devoid of partisanship or parochialism can fill the void with credible peace building programs. Citing two RAND Corporation experts, Nye observes that in an information age, politics "may ultimately be about those whose story wins."⁴¹

Development/Job Creation Programs

Another avenue through which the US-based Liberian diaspora is exerting soft power influence towards peace building is direct development assistance and job creation avenues. This is essential with the high unemployment rate in Liberia particularly among the youth. Liberia's unemployment rate is currently estimated at 80 percent, slightly down from a 2003 high of 85 percent.⁴² The country's unemployment rate also ranked 199 out of 200 countries. The government recognizes that a high unemployment rate poses a great security threat to the stability of the country and hence has launched a national poverty reduction plan to tackle the problem. President Johnson-Sirleaf has acknowledged the correlation between unemployment and violence by stressing that "one overarching aim of the poverty reduction plan is to enable the country to break away from its violent past."⁴³ In addition, the poverty alleviation plan also includes the rehabilitation of basic infrastructures, revitalizing the country's shattered economy, building a post-war security system to consolidate peace, and the provision of basic social services such as healthcare, road network, water, and electricity.⁴⁴

For some diasporas, one of the most effective ways to peace in the homeland is through development. The rationale behind this approach is that most domestic conflicts are caused not only by power struggles at the national level but also by unequal distribution of the national resources, extreme social and economic imbalances, marginalization, and widespread poverty. Therefore it is imperative that all these conflict triggers be separately addressed. In this regard, diaspora groupings seek to address some of the economic causes of conflicts by making a positive contribution towards the reduction and stabilization of the social tensions of the downtrodden in society.⁴⁵

This effort is undertaken at the local level through community and welfare projects set up by the diaspora. Diaspora-funded projects are targeted at rehabilitating health centers and

facilities, building schools, supporting rural farmers, and initiating income-generating activities for destitute and marginalized groups. Projects initiated by diaspora groupings are carried out through individual and collective efforts. For example, some individual diaspora members and groups within a diaspora community donate cash, materials, and needed equipment to various bodies and institutions in the homeland in order to help improve community facilities at the village and town levels. Not only do these efforts greatly contribute towards poverty alleviation among individuals through job creation but also provide much-needed services to the communities through the provision of basic public goods and service delivery.⁴⁶

With all the post-war challenges faced by Liberia, it is obvious that the government cannot meet the challenge of job creation alone. As such, other non-governmental bodies such as the US-based Liberian diaspora have a role to play in creating job opportunities. It is in this arena of job creation that the US-based Liberian diaspora can exert soft power influence through its ability to marshal financial and material resources. The more jobs that are created by government and the diaspora, the higher the likelihood that the youth, some of whom are ex-combatants, will stay away from violent and criminal activities that are inimical to the peace. A president of one of the Liberian diaspora county associations in Maryland points out that his organization has an ongoing project in Bong County aimed at rehabilitating former child-soldiers. Aiming to kill two birds with one stone via the provision of safe drinking water and employment, former child-soldiers have been hired to install water pumps in local communities in order to keep them engaged and out of trouble.

A leader of a ULAA breakaway faction also noted the job creation work of the Alumni Association of Konola Academy. This includes hiring and paying local artisans to work on the rehabilitation and maintenance of the school and providing school uniforms to encourage school enrollment. The group links job seekers to diaspora returnees in positions of authority for job assistance and relevant information about rehabilitation programs. In addition, the Konola Alumni Association has supplied farming equipment to promote local agriculture, which is a major source of employment for the community.

According to this leader, because there are several competing needs and demands from home, the Konola Academy Alumni Association only supports projects that have been initiated by the community. This is also aimed at reducing the dependency syndrome that can stifle innovation and also to promote a culture of self-help. A society that is striving towards self-sufficiency is more likely to be stable than one that is dependent on handouts. A self-help society is more likely to be motivated if it gets the extra assistance and encouragement being offered by the members of the US-based diaspora. The society will also be more amenable to persuasion and dialogue in the resolution of disputes instead of resorting to violence to settle disputes for fear of jeopardizing any future assistance from a major benefactor such as the diaspora. "Diaspora, in using the threat of withdrawal of support can potentially move the hard liners in the homeland to soften their views and opt for a negotiated settlement."⁴⁷

The US-based diaspora is also exerting soft power influence in the areas of refugee resettlement by providing financial and material support towards reintegration into society. Such assistance minimizes the risk of returnees pursuing violence or a path of crime out of necessity. According to the Liberian Refugee and Resettlement Commission (2009), in the prior year 10,567 Liberian refugees were repatriated from West African refugee camps. The

breakdown of the number is as follows: Ghana (9,703), Nigeria (422), Guinea (170), Sierra Leone (230), Cote d'Ivoire (14), The Gambia (27) and Senegal (1). This number is made up of 9, 329 returnees from the organized voluntary repatriation program and 420 documented spontaneous returnees.⁴⁸

Returning refugees face a myriad of problems. Most of them are vulnerable when they arrive with virtually nothing and face a tough time re-adjusting to life in Liberia after having lost family members and all their possessions. According to the Liberian Refugee and Resettlement Commission (2009), the Commission is raising funds in the form of loans and grants for the successful reintegration of both the skilled/unskilled and vulnerable people into their communities. The Commission is also training unskilled returnees in vocations that will enable them obtain employment or become self-employed. However, the Commission is seriously constrained by inadequate funding and resources. The ability of Liberia to effectively resettle and integrate its refugees will impact the security and stability of the country as desperation and destitution among returnees could lead to a spike in crime and violence.

Thus any support from the Liberian diaspora towards the resettlement and integration of returnees will go a long way in ensuring the stability and security of Liberia and thus guarantee peace. An example of US-based diaspora support for the resettlement of refugees has been demonstrated by Rev. Hananiah's Ministry of Hope in the Diaspora, which has provided returning refugees with basics such as water wells and education on water safety across the country. The US-based Liberian diaspora has also provided financial assistance towards the sponsorship of the education of returning refugees. For example, in 2008 the leadership of ULAA under then President Emmanuel S. Wetsee instituted a US \$5,000 Scholarship Fund to aid the education of needy but bright young refugees returning from Ghana. As of 2009, two students had received scholarships to attend technical colleges.⁴⁹

The Tappita District Development Association (TADDA) is also heavily engaged in the rehabilitation of some basic amenities that were destroyed in the Tappita District of Nimba County. Nimba County was one of the places that experienced massive physical destruction in the course of the civil war. As part of its efforts, TADDA has rebuilt Tappeh Memorial High School, the only public high school in Lower Nimba County, which was burned down during the war. The rebuilt school has been equipped with a functional library and computer lab. The organization has also built the new Gblougeay Elementary School and the one in Towehtown.⁵⁰ Such diaspora development assistance goes a long way toward restoring normalcy to war-torn communities. This in turn attracts refugees to resettle whenever they hear such progress via word of mouth from trusted relatives and friends even in far away refugee camps.

The importance of providing educational opportunities in the resettlement and reintegration of refugees and former combatants as part of a peace building strategy cannot be under-estimated. According to a 1999 research by Collier "the presence of a high proportion of young men in a society also increases the risk of conflict, whereas the greater the educational endowment, the lower is the risk."⁵¹ Thus, diaspora efforts at providing support for educational opportunities constitute a soft power that contributes immensely in minimizing the prospect of the renewal of war in Liberia. The same research also shows that an increased level of education significantly reduces the risk of war even with a higher population of young men: "Education is relatively more important than the proportion of young men. For example, if we double the

proportion of young men its effect can be offset by increasing the average educational endowment by around two months. Each year of education reduces the risk of conflict by around twenty percent."⁵²

Diaspora assistance empowers people to use their maximum potential for self-development, abandon the past, and take control of their lives. Many diasporas pursue the aforementioned development projects in order to build peaceful constituencies and to promote a culture of good governance in their homelands. They therefore persuade donor partners and development organizations in their host countries to channel their development assistance in the homelands toward these goals. In so doing, the diaspora sets an alternative agenda for peace building. An alternative approach is a welcome development because good governance can only emerge in homelands if it is rooted in solid sub-national and local social institutions.⁵³

Conclusion

The US-based Liberian diaspora is able to exercise soft power influence in aid of peace building by transforming some of its hard power assets, i.e. financial advantage from coercive activities such as war into persuasive ventures aimed at promoting peace. The US-based Liberian diaspora is a major source of attraction to their compatriots in Liberia because of the following: the attractiveness of diaspora success, morality of diaspora policies, attractiveness of US culture/norms/values, and the credibility and legitimacy of the US-based Liberian diaspora in the eyes of home-based Liberians. This soft power influence manifests itself via the combination of diaspora persuasion of fellow citizens towards liberal ideas that are backed by economic incentives aimed at making life bearable for fellow citizens in the homeland. However, not all US-based diaspora members will have an automatic capacity and credibility to effectively exercise soft power influence: history and track record matter. Thus moderate diaspora members who may have initially supported war but were considered less radical and later on promoted peace by advocating negotiation or moderate views are more likely to be effective at exercising the needed soft power influences for peace. Such people can lean on belligerents by citing their own transformation and experiences as role models.

Not all the soft power efforts of the diaspora are sustainable, however. For example, diaspora job creating efforts are directly linked to the state of the economy in the host country and with the US economy still recovering from a recession the diaspora is likely to be more cautionary in charitable giving and financial investments in the homeland. The most sustainable of diaspora soft power efforts are public diplomacy, interpersonal persuasion, and civic engagement involving the sharing of peace building norms either on the interpersonal level or via radio stations or public forums. This is mainly because they are less costly. While the reach of interpersonal prodding is limited as it involves a few people at a time, it is sustainable in the long run as it requires less financial cost. In addition, because a relationship is built in a micro setting between the purveyor of change and the receiver of change, mutual trust develops that helps in attitudinal change. Similarly, once radio stations are set up to provide public service awareness and to promote civil discourse, it becomes a community project with the community becoming responsible for its future sustainability through voluntary service or token financial donations. In addition, the interactive nature of most radio stations makes it possible for listeners and communities to build long standing relationships with those stations that can

empower moderate voices in the community. In terms of policy, there is the need for stakeholders in Liberia's post-conflict peace building to identify and institutionalize sustainable diaspora mechanisms for soft power influence in order to prevent a backslide to destructive hard power tendencies.

Notes

- 1 Wilson 2008, p. 114.
- 2 Nye 2006, p. 4.
- 3 Lubkemann 2008.
- 4 Nye 2008, p. 4.
- 5 Ibid., p. 11.
- 6 Bohorquez 2005.
- 7 BBC 2009.
- 8 http://www.usip.org/search/google_appliance/TRCs.
- 9 Zartman 2001, p. 8.
- 10 Schrod, Yilmaz, and Gerner 2003.
- 11 Ikram 2003.
- 12 Nye 2004, p. 6.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
- 14 Wells, accessed online on 29 April 2010.
- 15 Nye 2004, p. 90.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., p. 91.
- 18 Sheffer 2003, p. 74.
- 19 Whippmann 1999, p. 14.
- 20 Moran 1990, p. 2.
- 21 Author's interview with US-based Liberian diaspora leader, 2009.
- 22 Nye 2004, p. 107.
- 23 Yossi 1999.
- 24 Moran 1990.
- 25 Turner, 2008, p. 13.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Basar and Swain, p. 21.
- 28 Ibid., p. 22.
- 29 Author's taped interview with US-based Liberian diaspora leader, 2008.
- 30 Author's taped interview with US-based Liberian diaspora leader, 2008.
- 31 CNN 2003.
- 32 Author's interview with a US-based Liberian diaspora leader, 2009
- 33 Nye 2004, p. 105.
- 34 Weeks 2007.
- 35 Mahamoud 2005, p. 9.

- 36 Ibid., p. 19.
- 37 Ibid., pp. 7-8.
- 38 Tapita.org 2009.
- 39 Nye 2004, p. 106.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 CIA 2003.
- 43 The Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) 2007.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Mahamoud 2005, p.10.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Baser and Swain 2008, p. 23.
- 48 Union of Liberian Associations in Americas (n.d.)
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Tappita District Development Association (TADDA), 2009.
- 51 Collier 1999, p. 6.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Mahamoud 2005, p. 8.

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