

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: Building Peace and Social Accountability: Lessons from Sierra Leone

featuring

Andrew Lavali, Executive Director, Institute for Governance Reform

interviewed by

Aishwarya Raje, Pearson Fellow

Mwangi Thuita, Pearson Fellow

Monday, February 3, 2020

Full Transcript

U3CP Introducer: Hi, my name is Eduardo Ortiz and you're listening to University of Chicago Public Policy Podcast.

Aishwarya Raje and Mwangi Thuita: You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies and policy issues it affects. You'll hear from experts and practitioners can conduct research, implement programs and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P, in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Mwangi Thuita: That was my vote, my life, a civic education song, encouraging Sierra Leonean citizens to turn out and vote in the 2018 general election. The song featured some of Sierra Leone's biggest music artists, and it was produced with the support of the Institute for Governance Reform. I'm Mwangi Thuita.

Aishwarya Raje: I'm Aishwarya Raje, and in this episode of Root of Conflict, we spoke with Andrew Lavali, the founding Executive Director of the Institute for Governance Reform or the IGR, a research and evidence-based advocacy think tank based in Sierra Leone. In this interview, we discussed the concept of social accountability in a post-conflict context, as well as the IGR's work in promoting sustainable development and strengthening political and economic governance in Sierra Leone. So, some of what we'll discuss today, you've discussed in your presentation, but mainly we want to start with, what are some of the root causes of the conflict in Sierra Leone, which led to the creation of the EGR as well as your role as Executive Director. And then we'll jump into some of the details of the kind of projects that you work on and what you see as next steps, et cetera. So, thank you very much, Mr. Lavali for joining us.

Andrew Lavali: Yeah, it's a pleasure. It's a pleasure being here in Chicago.

Mwangi Thuita: Sierra Leone experienced a traumatic civil war from 1991 to 2002. The report received by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone, which was created after the conflict ended, concluded that it was years of bad governance and corruption and the denial of basic human rights that created the deplorable conditions that made conflict inevitable. Do you generally agree with this assessment of the root causes of civil war in Sierra Leone?

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Andrew Laval: So, the war actually started as a politically based conflict, as a straightforward expression against injustice and misrule. So, later, it became a monster that nobody seemed to be able to handle. But when you look at the cause of war, it's was a sad accumulation of many things set in motion years back by what we refer to as insensitive band of politicians. In many ways, it's quite true for anyone that has been paying attention to civilian, the denial of rights, lack of basic services. Sierra Leone has been at the bottom of the human development index way before the war. Growing up in Sierra Leone, way before the war, there was a common saying that we need to fight before we can have the country moving. It was difficult for, during the one-party era, for people to have dissenting voices. Even when you talk about the way public officials have been treated, they can wait for months to get their legitimate salary for which they have worked. So, that was the story of many, many parts of the country.

Aishwarya Raje: And you're the Executive Director of the Institute for Governance Reform based in Sierra Leone, which is an evidence-based policy research organization that also engages in advocacy work. So, can you tell us a bit more about what is the IGR and what led to its formation as well as what are your main responsibilities as the organization's executive director?

Andrew Laval: Yes. The Institute for Governance Reform, as the name implies, it's an organization established five, six years ago out of a need to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy. We realize that we have a country where the policy making platform and the policy development platform and even implementation are so polarized. So, the policy process is so simplistic, and it can be so superficial. So, Mr. X is saying this because he is Mr. Y, he comes from that region, Mr. Y is saying this because he comes from that region. So, facts and evidence never matter, the university was removed from policy making processes. So, we decided to see how we can help people in the decision-making authority to have their decisions based on evidence too often. It can be difficult to make that possible because people do not have evidence or they don't know that they need evidence to make decisions, but politics is about likely interest.

So, we actually, we brought a new calculus into the decision-making process by saying, let us try to see how we can give consideration to public goods, not just private interests of politicians or regions. Our goal was to see how do we bring in the parameters of public debates. So, see how we can make public debates inclusive and to see how we can support policymaking processes, which is much more evidence than just narrow interest. The biggest research piece that launched us was a couple of years ago on the census. So, there was this attempt to undercount one part of the country and to overcount another part of the country. So, we realized that the census was in error by about 35%. So, one of our research advocations was, how do we get a good sense of data for planning purposes?

It's not just about who wins the election. It's really about how do we plan for healthcare, for education, for young people. Given the data we had at that time, it doesn't matter which mathematical formula I use. Sierra Leone was destined for complete failure. What we did in that piece of research was to see how we can provide planners with an alternative argument as to how to do a better census, we always provide incentives that if you do this, this is what you stand to gain. It's not just about lambasting, because too often people think civil society is just a terrain of contestation between citizens and leaders. But we, in our work, ensure that there is always an incentive created. So, if you do this, this is how you may look good and is how people will appreciate you. And your longevity in power, in public office, can actually depend on that.

Aishwarya Raje: And I'm curious to know if you could speak a little bit about the survey methods that you use, basically getting a sense of what are the most important policy priorities for citizens in Sierra Leone. And were there any challenges in terms of reaching the populations that you wanted to reach and collecting the data that you wanted to get? How was that method? How was that survey administered?

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Andrew Laval: We actually did three surveys. It was part of the advocacy on free fair peaceful elections, but on top of that, how do we have meaningful elections? Elections not based on vote buying, not based on giving cheap alcohol or identity politics, but what we did in those surveys, to see how we can make that shift. We adopted lot of participatory approaches to ensure that we get data, both for us over and beyond collection of data. But how do you use data to inform decisions? How do you use evidence to inform policy making process? So, what are the incentives to ensure that policymakers actually use evidence? Because, too often, we believe that people in decision-making can be benevolent. You know, if you are giving resources, you are giving the right advice, they can deliver good results, or if they don't, they are corrupt. We make these assumptions without understanding what their pressures are, without just doing the sole view, what are citizens' views, what are the voter priorities?

How are institutions situated to deliver the results of those priorities? So, we have a randomized process where we statistically ensured that everyone in a country has a fair amount of chance opportunity to be spoken to. So, we actually collected votes that are registered for 2012. First, we did what we call stratification of the country because in the country there are 14 districts and there are shades of opinion in every district. First and foremost, we consider how much pots of money do we have for this research? And second, how much time do we have to do it? So, based on that, we stratify the country because we don't have the money to do a census. We have money to do a piece of research to inform elections. On the basis of election results, over the last three elections, since the introduction of democracy, we realized that there are three clusters of the country.

There's one cluster. That is what we call the strong goal of political parties. These are the batch of districts, about 8 to 7 of 10. These are districts where one political party consistently won elections by over 55%. There are another four sets of districts that we call competitive districts. So, the criteria for competitive districts, these are districts, either one political party has to be winning elections, but the margin of defeats was not above 55%. The top criteria was what we call these swing districts, where you only have two districts. So, these are districts that are swung from one side to another, over the last three elections. So, for strong goals, you satisfy two criteria. It has been won by one person and consistently the margin of defeat or victory is about 55%. So, in competitive districts, there can be two of those variables, and the swing district, none of the tables applied.

So, based on that, based on that stratification, we formulated our research tools and we got our sample sizes. We did a rigorous sampling with the support of statistics early on. So, we hired enumerators, about 90 of them for us to do the data collection. For us, what is more important? Every academic can do research, but what is more important for a policy practitioner? What's going to be the optic of that information? We just try to tick the boxes that it was not our own views, our own opinions. It was actually done through a rigorous methodology that would drive the data, but over and beyond, that is how do we ensure that there's an optic 1) how do we ensure that data generated is going to be used to improve performance of electoral management, elections management institutions, and over and beyond that, how are we going to ensure that politicians actually take citizens feedback?

And the only politicians can do that is when they trust the source of data, they are part of the data generation process, or they at least understand how it all went on. At the end of the day, there will be backlash. They will disagree because if the data swings in a certain way, to say this party is not going to win or is going to win, there will be some, some critics. We've had Donald Trump talking about fake polls. So, the issue of opinion polling, I mean, in Africa, in Sierra Leone, I could say that those are the very first ones we're getting so far. So, you expect the set interest to fight against it, bots, interviews we are taking. So, to some point that if you take that same methodology, you repeat in another survey, you will get the same results. So, we ensure that that was done.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Mwangi Thuita: So, the citizens manifesto, that idea, along with the 720 civil society groups, which included women's advocacy groups as well. You guys came together to produce a landmark citizen manifesto before the 2018 elections. So, this was supposed to set up a framework for debates on citizens' expectations of aspiring candidates in 2018. Could you go through some of the core issues that were highlighted in the manifesto and what were some of your outreach strategies?

Andrew Laval: So, the first that we did was to do what we call the KAP, a knowledge, attitude, and practice survey. So, we did three KAPs. So, the first one was to get a baseline. The second one was to get a midline, and then we had to see the end line to see whether all what we're doing is yielding results. So, we ensured that political parties were involved. For the first time, we brought political parties together to agree on a tool to measure. Some opposition parties were not happy because they think we're giving so much to the ruling party because they have the financial muscles to campaign. So, if they know what citizens want, they will have greater muscles to campaign. So, what we did in terms of outreach was to broaden the constituency around that, so that it's not seen as one organization, it's not seen as one region in a context where there is massive polarization historically over time.

So, the question was, how do we ensure that this seems to be all sides of the box being represented? So, we brought in religious leaders, we established a steering committee of people. So, the consortium brought together 45 members. So, those 45 members that were co-chaired by the inter-religious council. Sierra Leone has two major religions. 23% of us are Christians, 75% of us are Muslims. So, by bringing Islamic and Christian leaders, you've actually brought the entire country under one roof. And we agree on a dissemination strategy. So, if the Archbishop of the country speaks, how do you ensure that that message spreads in all churches in a day? How do you ensure that the mosques all get all of that? We brought together loose groups, structured groups. In many ways we try to see how the citizens manifesto priorities can be used as a basis for election. The things they agreed to when we did the first KAP, the most important for them was water.

People say, we need water. We need someone who can bring us water. I can see one of the things that influenced that research was because the research was done in March. It's a big dry season where most of the water wells were run dry. So, it may not be the case if we do it at another time. So, it was water, it was food. They talk about livelihoods. It was jobs. Then later down, you talk about infrastructure, and politicians always know that those are immediate priorities. If you need water, you can get water. I can get water for you in an election week. I can get food for you in an election week. But the idea behind the citizens manifesto is how do we address the perineia of the problems that haunts us? How do we translate elections into results? Because many African countries are doing competitive party politics. They are doing competitive elections. And how do you see elections translating into real development outcomes? So, the citizens must manifest to also initiate a conversation as to how could policy matter in an election's environment.

Intermission, Just China: As China's role grows greater on the global stage. You want to stay up to date on the issues most pressing to China, both domestically and internationally, check out the Just China podcast for in-depth analysis on recent headlines and investigative reports on Chinese matters that affect our globalized world. We are Just China. Find us on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you enjoy your podcast listening.

Mwangi Thuita: Did the leaders embrace the proposed reforms that you came up with in the manifesto? do you think it had an impact on the electoral process? What are the lessons learned from 2018 that you will take moving forward?

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Andrew Laval: By the next election, there'll be another citizens manifesto. So, at least something fundamental was introduced. We wanted to achieve this. We got this. But fundamentally we introduced a culture of having policy-based conversations at the time of elections. How do we ensure that young men as a country coming from conflict, where there are always incidences of electoral violence? So, the citizens manifested in many ways provided that basis. And it dovetails into the first presidential debate, over 40% of the country listened to that debates, and over at least 12% of the people said I voted because I listened to that to the debate and it changed my view. So, if you look at the electoral map after the elections, this was the very first time Sierra Leone had, well, in a major way, because Sierra Leone has been having some, apart from the two major parties, some minority parties coming in. For the very first time, we have four major parties in Parliament. It actually should, it differentiates a different democratic shape.

So, the citizens' manifesto was a big democratic milestone for Sierra Leone. It laid the foundation for conversation. Seven of the priorities that we have selected, one was a lot of women were saying they want to be represented in parliament, because one of the biggest causes of Sierra Leone's war was exclusion and young people were saying we want 15% of the candidates nominated by political parties to be young people. Women went as far as 40%. And there was a third choice where people were saying we need accountable, ethical leadership. So, we want to use the citizens manifests to address corruption. So, in a way the citizens manifesto was used to introduce conversation around political behaviors, how it's not just about providing water. Well, how are you going to assure us that you will take a certain set of behaviors that will make you provide water once you're empowered?

Aishwarya Rajee: That's great. And a lot of your work examines how political incentives can shape institutional performance, especially in fragile state context. And you've spoken a bit about social accountability. So, what does that mean to you? The term social accountability, and how does it matter to the democratic processes of a weak state? And additionally, in terms of since the IGR was founded, what are some changes that you've seen socially or politically in Sierra Leone?

Andrew Laval: Yes. I'm glad you mentioned social accountability. For a weak state, if you push institutions that are already weak, there's a tendency for them to collapse. What has made us not slide back into conflict since the war ended about 18 to 20 years ago is how do we always make sure that we are mindful of where we came from? We demand accountability, we demand standards, but we were mindful of fragility as well. So, you do that by building trust. So, always ask ourselves, how many blocks of confidence, how we build it. So, you build trust between citizens and governments. We make sure that our institutions are not perfect. It's not a U.S. Senate. It's a weak parliament where these officials can be polarized, but at the same time, we use citizen voices as a platform for conversation, like the paper we did on the census, where it was the most influential paper we've ever done.

Parliament spent at least 40% of one of its debate looking into the same census, taking it to otherwise to say this group wants to be marginalized by the other group and that it will have resorted to violence, but we introduced that and then it provided a foundation for conversation. So, that's always what we do. For IGR, with our mantra being, "bridging the gap between knowledge and policy," we believe that the biggest area of conflict has been around resource allocation. So, we've done quite a number of papers. One of the papers we did was the cost of politics. We asked ourselves, "Why are institutions not performing the way they should perform? Why is the parliament weak? Why is their executive weak?" So, instead of really just sitting down and blaming, we always ask, what can we do to make institutions perform properly?

One of the theses we have is that institutions behave unproductively because the context in which they operate is not just about – yes, the leaders can be wicked. You can demonize them for all you care. But certain times,

ROOT OF CONFLICT

the context in which institutions perform do not produce results. So, if you take a Sierra Leonian politician to the UK, to the U.S., the institutions in those countries will not necessarily allow them to behave the way they behave. So, in the cost of politics, we specifically looked at what is making parliament ineffective. So, we look at MP allowances, MP salaries, and we'll compare that to MP expenditures, and realize that if you compute the MP allowance and salaries in a given month, in a given year, it's way lower than what an MP earns. And this crucial factor actually shifts politics, the way citizens demand, what are citizens expectations, because people always demand very personalized benefits.

So, this MP should give me money when I need money, they should give me address to my medical needs. They should address to my child's education educational needs. So, we realize all that makes parliament dysfunctional. So, we need a conversation between citizens and parliamentary institutions. How do we ensure that parliament is better situated to support citizens' priorities? So, the cost of politics was about that. After we published the cost of politics, six months after, there was a big backlash from citizens after Parliament published their request for a pay raise. So, IGR was among one of the only organizations that came to the rescue of Parliament, that we need a broader conversation. We know citizens are angry with you. Maybe you've made a raise too much, but we know what your problems are. So, how do we get a conversation on this? So, we did a paper on pay and composition of members of parliament.

Mwangi Thuita: So, IGR's mission is to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy. There's also a gap between policy and politics, and politicians exist in the political arena. And we have to think about how to incentivize good behavior. We can talk about weak institutions, but that's kind of abstract. Politicians within those institutions, within Parliament, within executive agencies in Sierra Leone and countries like that in Africa have incentives to participate in corruption, to mobilize voters along ethnic lines, and to do things that are not in the voters' interest. So, how do you at IG take seriously the reality of the political process?

Andrew Lavali: Normally, what many politicians wants is to stay in power. And normally what many citizens wants is to get better welfare. And too often, citizens in the weak and polarized states, there's a tendency for citizens to get distracted. And then they kind of pursue the agenda of the politician. So, instead of demanding healthcare, they say I'm supporting my brother, brother does not deliver. I normally say the story that if you dress two major colors, party colors, red and green, and they are situated in the South and East and in the North and West. So, geographically, the country is kind of divided along those party lines. So, there is a tendency for you to dress someone that is unaccountable in red. And then that person sees just a popular language in the North, and then votes for that person. You can do the same for the South.

You can dress someone unaccountable in green. [...] So, what we normally do, we introduce not only rewards, but we introduce sanctions. I think the biggest challenge that many organizations face is how to align those interests. Yes, you want to come, you want to stay in power, or you want to come to power, but they are certain things we consider for you to be given, to trust that authority. For 2018, in particular, we develop what we call the Bio meter. In the elections, we are tracking campaign promises of all leading aspirants, at least the four leading aspirants. So, the Bio meter is really following some of the actions that have been supported by the Open Society Initiative for west Africa. In Nigeria, you have the Buhari meter, in Senegal, you have the Sall meter, after Macky Sall.

So, in Sierra Leone, Maada Bio won the election. So, we track his promises, he made 556 promises. So, put that in one document, and it becomes the measure for opposition parties to hold him to account, and for civil society to hold him to account. So, we disaggregate those promises by clusters. These are your promises in agriculture, promises in health care. Every year. By next year, we'll be publishing the Bio meter for year two. We've got people within government that are doing shadow scoring of the biometer. So, they also score

ROOT OF CONFLICT

themselves. Like I said, our mantra is to not antagonize them, but just make sure that we have the same journey, we want good health care, good education. If you do not deliver to us – in fact, we are not putting this target for you. You set the targets, if you do not deliver to us. And what does democracy provide? Democracy provides one environment where you have all the totality, a given period. We can talk about changing that party after elections.

Aishwarya Raje: So, my own background is in global health. So, I'm particularly interested in learning a bit more about the IGR's work in monitoring health investments in Sierra Leone, post Ebola outbreak of 2014, 2015. And when you have a country like Sierra Leone that already has weakened institutions and is really making an attempt to develop economically, what were the unique challenges that the country faced? When on top of that, there was this disastrous public health outbreak that not only caused health problems in the country, but economically, it was really difficult for the country to recover. So, what have you seen in the past three, four years since the outbreak that the IGR has been monitoring in terms of health investments or just economic investments to try to rebuild from that outbreak?

Andrew Laval: I think one of the things that Ebola did was to further destroy service delivery infrastructure, delivery of health, delivery of education. I think for many commentators, they argue that Ebola is just a microcosm. It just showed a microcosm of a Sierra Leonian problem. It showed that healthcare was not working. So, Ebola came 18 years after post-conflict peacebuilding, and it showed that we did not invest much in decentralized services. We did not invest much in local institutions. So, you have this massive presence of NGOs over time. So, less than 1% of aid actually goes through local structures. So, it was very easy for Ebola to overrun from the border of Liberia, the Kailahun area. It was very easy to overrun, to hit the capital and destroy over 4,000 people within a year. So, what we've been doing is to see how do you build health systems after Ebola? Rebuilding Ebola was about rebuilding health services.

You build an educational service, for education, a basic Ebola control message. You say you have to wash your hands. You have to do this. For many people that are illiterate. It was difficult for them to literally understand that overnight. So, you actually need to have long-term development investments in education at the same time as health care. How many drugs are going to hospitals from the capital, are going to hospitals in rural areas? We saw that those accountability structures are non-existent. So, post Ebola we devised a tool, what we call the service delivery index. The service delivery index literally looked at the delivery of basic services in MP constituencies and local councils. So, for the first time, we collect the government own data on health care. How many nurses are being recruited in this small clinic? Which clinics have drugs? We approach all the social accountability.

The idea is not to embarrass them. The idea is to say, this is the challenge, and people will love you more as a member of Parliament if you work with them to address this. So, we did this ranking. So, in some ways, some of the questions we'll be asking is who determines the health priorities of Sierra Leone? Is it donors? Is it government? Is it the people? And how do we bring citizens and that stronger presence of government into that conversation? The last time we checked, less than 8% of drugs are being procured by the government. So, most of drug procurements are done internationally. So, we asked ourselves, how do we ensure that the best set of drugs have been procured, who determines which drugs? Which analyses have we done to ensure that those drugs are actually used? I know WHO does quite a lot of those analyses and there are certain things we are not so competent to comment on.

Mwangi Thuita: Do you think Sierra Leone is a good case study of a good example of successful foreign intervention? What can it teach us about how to support the recovery process after conflict?

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Andrew Lavali: Yeah. Sierra Leone is an interesting case of multi-lateralism. Yeah. In a number of arguments, there is one country where multi-lateralism has really walked effectively, but beyond the international success, there was quite a lot that we can give to the leadership at the time and the people at the time. Sierra Leone had a leadership that conceded to the rebels and you hardly see this in other African countries. Say you know what, you want power, get off the bush and come and share. So, that made us to go to Luma in 1999 and develop an instrument that outline the disarmament, demobilization of some 75,000 fighters. So, after that, the country has been really resilient. The people, we are easy to say, you know what? We have limbs that have been chopped off. So, you've done that to us.

Let us forget about that and move on. Even when we'd walk, these days, we have to keep in hindsight what happened during the war and how do we ensure it is not be repeated. So, the appetite for peace is growing, it's ever there, but it's growing. In fact, there is an argument out there that even at the time of war, Sierra Leone, by the level of tolerance that people have, could be more, much more peaceful than some other countries that have not tasted war. Because it is easy for me to, for the past five, six, seven years, our performance on the peace index has been very high. I think we had about the second highest in West Africa. So, peace is there because the culture of the people is really peaceful. There is nothing really to worry about. So, we believe that if we fix the problem of accountability, and as you rightly described from the start of the conversation what the TRC painted, that neglect, disregard for rights, and neglect of basic services, made somebody say, "I'm going to monopolize the grievances, I'm going to fight," but the moment that ended, I think we can have a forward-looking country. Yes, it's possible.

Mwangi Thuita: Thank you so much for your time for visiting us here at Harris.

Andrew Lavali: Yeah. It's my pleasure meeting you here. Thank you very much.

Mwangi Thuita: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict, featuring Andrew Lavali, Founding Executive Director of the Institute for Governance Reform. Special thanks to Yi Ning Wong for editing and the UC3P production team and to the Pearson Institute for their support.

Aishwarya Raje: For more information about the Pearson Institute's events and research, visit thepearsoninstitute.org, or follow them on Twitter.