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COUNTRY CASE STUDY: LIBERIA

IMPLEMENTING RESOLUTION
1325 IN LIBERIA:
Reflections of Women's Associations

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IMPLEMENTING RESOLUTION 1325 IN LIBERIA:

Reflections of Women's Associations

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ACRONYMS

AU	African Union
CBP-WAWA	Capacity Building Project
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
IfP	Initiative for Peacebuilding
IREX	International Research and Exchanges Board
MARWOPNET	Mano River Women's Peace Network
MODG	Ministry of Gender and Development
NAP	National Action Plan
NCDDRR	National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
UNIFEM	UN Development Fund for Women
UNMIL	UN Mission in Liberia
WAWA	Renaissance of West African Women Associations
WONGOSOL	Women NGOs Secretariat of Liberia

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

'Long before Resolution 1325 came into being, we were already doing 1325.'

With the launching of its Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2009, Liberia became the first post-conflict country with a National Action Plan (NAP) to implement Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. The significance of the resolution is that it urges the international community and UN Member States to enhance women's participation in peace processes. Liberia's NAP is expected to sustain and enhance women's peacebuilding efforts and take decisive steps towards gender equality and sustainable peace in Liberia. At the same time, women activists in Liberia are quick to point out that long before Resolution 1325 was adopted women's activism played an important and visible role in bringing an end to Liberia's civil war.

The direct involvement of women in peacebuilding activities raised awareness of their own capacities and potential to build a sustainable and peaceful society that is inclusive to women. As such, Liberia's women's organisations and networks embody a significant amount of practical peacebuilding knowledge and experience. In a sense, Liberia's women's organisations are leading the way with respect to working with Resolution 1325 within a challenging post-conflict environment. The question is whether, and to what extent, Resolution 1325 is strengthening or facilitating women's peacebuilding efforts in Liberia.

Under the auspices of the Initiative for Peacebuilding (IfP), International Alert conducted a relatively small study on women's organisations in Liberia to address this question. The objective was to document what impact Resolution 1325 is having on the strategies and activities of women's organisations. The primary focus of the research was to generate a tentative assessment of how and to what extent women's organisations are utilising Resolution 1325 in their work and how the resolution is shaping their strategies and activities. The study was informed by a research framework that sought to document achievements, lessons learned and constraints across three areas of analysis:

1. Coordination, collaboration and networking between women's organisations;
2. Activities and strategies of women's organisations; and
3. Influence and impact of women's organisations.

The research was conducted in August 2010 by a Monrovia-based research team, which consisted of two researchers and a research assistant, as well as two London-based staff members of Alert. The study gathered qualitative information from a broad spectrum of women's civil society and community-based organisations, including youth, faith groups, rural women and peacebuilding organisations, legal and human rights institutions, and organisations involved in peacebuilding activities. Participants were both male and female. The methodology used for this study included key informant interviews, focus group discussions and a two-day workshop in Monrovia to discuss initial findings with representatives of women's organisations. A comprehensive research report has been produced from which this briefing paper is drawn.

The main rationale for this study stems from the fact that Resolution 1325 is generally regarded as an important instrument for enhancing women's participation in peacebuilding processes and has the potential to contribute to a more peaceful and inclusive society; however, women's peacebuilding efforts remain

insufficiently understood by international institutions and policymakers,¹ which is further compounded by the fact that the evidence base with regard to the implementation of Resolution 1325 remains underdeveloped. The result is that there continues to be a gap between the realities women face in conflict-affected contexts and the perceptions of decision-makers in national, regional and international institutions. It is hoped that the findings of this study can make a modest contribution to bridging that gap.

1 See J. El Bushra (2003). 'Women building peace: Sharing know-how'. International Alert. Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/pdfs/knowHowPaper.pdf>

IMPLEMENTING RESOLUTION 1325: FINDING A PRODUCTIVE BALANCE BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Women activists participating in this study tended to agree that the Liberian government under the leadership of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has taken many positive steps in terms of advancing women's rights and gender equity as well as implementing Resolution 1325. It is clear to them that the government supports the full implementation of various UN, African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) conventions, resolutions and protocols on women's rights and gender equality, including Resolution 1325. The government's political will and commitment has manifested itself in the fact that the legislature has passed laws that increase the maximum sentence for rape, guarantee women's right to property under both state and customary laws, and address the customary practice of "widow inheritance". The government has also instituted a special fast-track court to try cases of sexual and gender-based violence. The Liberia National Police, with support from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), established its Women and Child Protection Section in 2005, training police officers in the management of cases of sexual violence. Furthermore, the Ministry of Gender and Development (MODG) has a specific mandate to mainstream gender in policies, plans and programmes across the government, which has resulted in the establishment of the 1325 Secretariat within the Ministry. All of these achievements must be credited to the combined efforts of the government, legislature and women's organisations.

However, the research also revealed considerable confusion among women activists as to the roles and responsibilities of government and civil society with regard to implementing Resolution 1325. This particular issue crystallised around the implementation of the NAP on 1325. At this stage, a fairly ambitious NAP needs to be translated into a limited and therefore more realistic set of priorities and targeted activities. The question that looms large is to what extent civil society can expect to exert a measure of influence over this process and, subsequently, how civil society will be involved in the implementation of the NAP. Given these concerns, the relationship between the government and civil society was a prominent theme during the validation workshop and focus group discussions. In essence, the issues at stake for women's organisations are: what role can and should civil society play in implementing Resolution 1325, and what is the most appropriate relationship between government and civil society vis-à-vis the implementation of the NAP.

The examples given at the start of this section suggest that it is possible for both the government and civil society to find a working mode in which they operate in tandem to generate tangible results. For example, the role of civil society is pivotal in transforming policy aspirations into impact on the ground through the implementation of concrete programmes and activities across the country. In addition, the expertise and practical knowledge of women's organisations represent a critical resource which could be utilised by the government to inform the setting of targets and priorities for the NAP. Overall, there was keen interest on the part of women's organisations to be active and constructive stakeholders in the implementation of the NAP. Yet, there was also a feeling among research participants that there was a need for improved mechanisms to facilitate collaboration and constructive engagement between the government and civil society on issues pertaining to Resolution 1325. That perception may be, to some extent, based on the fact that the NAP was designed with considerable participation and input from civil society. The NAP has, without a doubt, benefited from civil society's expertise and knowledge, but, equally, it has raised

expectations about civil society's role and position in the subsequent implementation of the NAP. Thus, there is a clear expectation with regard to the depth and quality of civil society participation in implementing the NAP, and both government and international agencies will need to identify opportunities to facilitate meaningful participation.

Women's organisations, on the other hand, will need to contend with the fact that the relationship between government and civil society is shaped by a rather fundamental paradox, and one that is not exclusively confined to the Liberian context. On the one hand, civil society can play a supportive role by implementing a number of government-funded activities that contribute to the implementation of the NAP. On the other hand, women's organisations also have a function in holding the government to account and influencing its agenda in order to address women's peacebuilding priorities. One of the challenges women's organisations face is therefore to navigate the potential incompatibility of receiving government funding while at the same time being able to independently monitor and influence the government's approach to implementing Resolution 1325.

Discussions during the validation workshop made it clear that implementing Resolution 1325 is far from a technocratic exercise. Rather, the discussions and expectations around the NAP are fundamentally political in nature, involving trade-offs and priorities that are likely to be influenced or even contested by civil society actors. This means that there is no straightforward formula as to how engagement between government and civil society can be strengthened further. At a more abstract level, the discussion about roles and responsibilities between government and civil society can be seen as an encouraging sign that Liberia is in the process of building accountable and inclusive state–society relations. The task at hand for the government, civil society and international actors alike is to explore opportunities to facilitate the development of a more productive division of labour between the government and civil society, without compromising the independent role and position of women's organisations. Organising dialogues about how to move forward with the implementation of the NAP may well offer opportunities to strengthen the quality of interaction between government and women's organisations.

CONCRETE BUT PARTIAL ACHIEVEMENTS: THE NEED TO ENHANCE SUSTAINABILITY AND LONG-TERM IMPACT

'How can we move from projects and programmes to institutions?'

In the course of this research, participants were asked to highlight success stories and what they considered to be real achievements. The majority recognised that progress towards the fulfilment of gender equity and women's rights had indeed been made. Through alliances and networks, women's organisations have been able to utilise their combined strength and influence to advocate for women's legal rights in relation to various thematic issues such as violence against women; health and education; economic empowerment; and leadership and decision-making, among others. It is also clear that women's organisations often carry out innovative activities to address concrete problems or issues at the community level as a strategy to maintain and sustain peace and security. The picture emerging from this research process is that women's organisations often fill gaps that are not always immediately understood or prioritised by the government and international actors. Most of the grassroots work is based on the needs of women as articulated by themselves, and covers areas such as psychosocial support, economic empowerment and income-generating projects, as well as the accompaniment of survivors of violence through the health and justice process system. Much of the work revolves around the provision of practical skills and awareness-raising to address women's needs. The Women NGOs Secretariat of Liberia's (WONGOSOL) approach to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was mentioned as a clear example of the innovative peacebuilding work carried out by women's organisations in Liberia. WONGOSOL facilitated community dialogues across the 15 counties with the aim of raising awareness and encouraging the participation of women at the community level in transitional justice processes. The report of the TRC was used as a focal point to provide a space for women in communities to analyse the TRC report from a women's perspective. Participants in the validation workshop exercise found that this was a good exercise in awareness-raising.

Because of their direct involvement in community-based work, women's organisations in Liberia are bridging the gap between policy and practice, thereby utilising and multiplying often limited resources and capacity to generate impact on the ground. Yet, while progress and achievements are acknowledged, there is also some frustration about the piecemeal nature of progress. There is a strong sense among the women's organisations that more can and needs to be done, despite the accomplishments to date. A major concern expressed during the validation workshop was how positive changes and achievements can be sustained in the long term. Participants shared a feeling that much of the work of women's organisations was small-scale in nature and focused on community responses to immediate needs and priorities. However, it was recognised that there was also a need for more strategic approaches in order to sustain and increase the impact of the work of women's organisations. There was a clear understanding that the implementation of projects and programmes needs to be complemented with a more strategic focus on advocacy, lobbying and influencing at the institutional level in order to sustain the work of women's organisations at the community level. When asked about the challenges involved in making the transition from project-focused activities to long-term impact and sustainability of the peacebuilding efforts of women's organisations, three broad themes were highlighted during the discussions.

The first relates to the fact that there is a tendency among women activists in Liberia to quickly rally around a common cause, irrespective of socio-economic and political diversity. Respondents highlighted this as a particular strength for awareness-raising and advocacy. For example, this responsiveness and ability to mobilise

gave considerable impetus to the promulgation of several laws and policies to address gender inequities in Liberia. The importance of mass mobilisation was expressed by one of the participants as follows: 'when women are united around a common goal, their voices are heard'. However, there is also a potential weakness in this approach to advocacy, as it generally tends to be ad hoc in nature and therefore not sustained, thus resulting in little or no follow-up. The women's organisations participating in the research stressed the willingness of women's organisations to form alliances, learn from each other and continue to pioneer collaborative approaches to advocacy. In their view, the main priority was to build on this and further develop common platforms and structures that could serve to strengthen the momentum and impact of their advocacy work.

Secondly, the effect of funding regimes on the sustainability and long-term impact of the work of women's organisations was also a major strand in discussions. Participants dwelled at length on the availability and accessibility of funding, on the one hand, and the competition for scarce resources among women's organisations, on the other. Apart from the observation that resources generally are not easily or readily available to women's organisations in Liberia, considerable concern was expressed about the adverse effects of funding regimes on their work. This included the often unpredictable nature of donor support and the threat of donor fatigue, which tends to inhibit a more long-term and strategic approach to the work of women's organisations. In addition, the propensity on the part of donors to support quick-impact and short-term projects was seen as unlikely to foster more sustained approaches to the implementation of Resolution 1325. Overall, participants conveyed a sense that the prevailing funding regime – which is skewed towards short- to medium-term projects – kept women's organisations trapped in ad hoc approaches to Resolution 1325 implementation.

Finally, respondents stressed the need for better and more consistent monitoring and evaluation, at the level of both civil society and government. There was a general feeling that the lack of thorough assessments – seen as the result of insufficient monitoring and evaluation skills and resources – of past and existing projects related to Resolution 1325 inhibited learning and the development of strategic approaches. This deficiency prevented active learning and the redefining of strategic approaches. There was an expectation that monitoring and evaluation could contribute to the long-term impact and sustainability of outcomes with respect to the implementation of Resolution 1325.

LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF RESOLUTION 1325 COMPOUNDS A PERCEIVED LACK OF OWNERSHIP

'We're working with a document that we don't know much about.'

A substantial number of participants in the research expressed the opinion that Resolution 1325 is basically a UN document over which women's organisations exercise little ownership. The result is that its implementation is understood to be primarily a matter for the government and the international community. At the same time, informants tended to argue that having a sense of ownership over Resolution 1325 was absolutely critical for its implementation in Liberia. When asked, initial responses appeared to suggest that the perceived lack of ownership stemmed in large measure from a limited understanding among women's organisations as to the value and utility of the resolution. The majority of key informants admitted to having minimum or no knowledge and understanding of Resolution 1325. The feeling of possessing insufficient knowledge also applied to other international instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women. In a similar vein, participants expressed having difficulties in understanding government policies, including the national gender policy, the NAP and the linkages between the various international instruments to promote gender equality. As a result, one of the key recommendations consistently brought up during the discussions was the need to increase the level of information and education on Resolution 1325. There was a strong feeling among participants that sensitisation and awareness-raising around the resolution would generate a deeper sense of ownership over and broader support for the resolution, which would subsequently strengthen ongoing efforts to operationalise Resolution 1325.

However, it is worth highlighting that the conversation around the notion of ownership over Resolution 1325 and the concomitant insistence on the need for education and awareness-raising was complicated by the fact that Resolution 1325 means different things to different people. As a consequence, references to the resolution tended to take on an amorphous quality during the discussions about its actual impact in Liberia. The same observation applied to concepts such as "understanding", "awareness-raising" and "sensitisation", which tend to be used as catch-all terms. What therefore became clear in the course of the research was that 'understanding and owning 1325' depends entirely on how Resolution 1325 is framed in relation to two distinct target audiences: individuals and communities, on the one hand, and policymakers and decision-makers, on the other.

When participants referred to the resolution in connection to their work in local communities, it was primarily framed as a potential vehicle for advocacy on women's rights, which could be used to impart a message about such rights among ordinary citizens. Hence, the resolution is utilised as a tool for women's empowerment, whereby sensitising and educating ordinary citizens on the contents of the resolution was regarded as a key objective. At this level of communities, the notion of having ownership of the resolution is understood in terms of citizens having an informed understanding of the resolution and of women's rights. One example was the frequent reference during the discussions to the necessity of increasing the involvement of men and youth through sensitisation and public campaigns on the resolution. This conveys a broad assumption that country-wide education and awareness-raising campaigns on Resolution 1325 could generate a sense

of ownership at the level of society and thus push it outside the realms of policy. As one participant asked, 'Do women know that they are the owners of 1325?' Overall, the perceived lack of ownership was attributed to the fact that large sections of the population did not have an in-depth understanding of the contents and purpose of the resolution.

With regard to policymakers and decision-makers, the discussion of ownership of Resolution 1325 was primarily framed in terms of what it could do to strengthen and amplify the work of women's organisations. Most participants agreed that Resolution 1325 had the potential to generate opportunities for women's organisations to advance and strengthen their work on women's empowerment and peacebuilding. Overall, they tended to approach the resolution as a tool to engage and work with the government and international actors. There was a strong sense that being able to 'talk 1325' was of strategic importance to gain access to decision-making structures and resources. However, one of the problems alluded to during the validation workshop was the fact that women's involvement in bringing an end to Liberia's civil war preceded the adoption of Resolution 1325. This meant that many women's organisations continue to work on peace and security without specifically referencing Resolution 1325. However, with the adoption of an NAP on Resolution 1325, women's organisations are beginning to feel the pressure to synchronise and harmonise their activities with the government's policy agenda around Resolution 1325. At this level, the perceived lack of ownership primarily centres on the feeling that limited knowledge of the resolution was significantly limiting the ability of women's organisations to tune into and connect with policy discussions. There appears to be recognition that 1325 is fast becoming "the only game in town", and women's organisations perceive a risk of being relegated to the margins and missing out on resources. The need for a more informed and detailed understanding of the resolution was therefore referenced as a critical precondition for ownership and active involvement in the implementation of Resolution 1325.

RESOLUTION 1325: THE BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO PARALLEL SPHERES OF ACTION

'We need to go back, pick up 1325 and carry it forward to the place we are now.'

This study sought to assess whether, and to what extent, Resolution 1325 is strengthening or amplifying women's peacebuilding efforts in Liberia. Given the nature of this research – in essence a preliminary assessment – there is no straightforward answer to that question. At a more conceptual level, there is a challenge with regard to establishing the exact impact of Resolution 1325 in the context of Liberia and attributing progress to the resolution itself. The feedback received from the participants in this research indicates that the value of this research activity is to be found in the fact that it provided a space for learning, reflection and exchanging of good practice and lessons learned accumulated during the decade that Resolution 1325 has been in existence.

There was an overwhelming consensus among the participants that this is a critical time for women's organisations in Liberia to cement the gains made during the last decade and forge ahead. Much of the work of these women's organisations is "learning by doing" in often difficult circumstances with limited resources. The basic rationale behind this study – to try to capture and document some of the learning – stimulated rich discussions and asserted the critical need for further documentation of the peacebuilding work of women's organisations in Liberia in order to sustain and strengthen the impact of their work. The fact that the peacebuilding work of women's organisations in Liberia preceded Resolution 1325, and that Liberia is one of the very first post-conflict countries with an NAP, means that there is a lot to learn from the experiences of women's organisations to utilise Resolution 1325 in their peacebuilding work.

The research made it clear that one of the more fundamental issues that should be given further consideration is that women's organisations and policymakers operate in different spheres that may run parallel but rarely interact. Bridging that gap remains a challenge and the question is to what extent Resolution 1325 is helping, or can help, to address that gap. The responses from participants suggest that to some extent the resolution can be seen as providing an entry ticket for women's organisations into the world of policymakers and decision-makers. Taken at face value, the resolution seems to provide for language and concepts that can be shared, which may, in turn, provide a bridge between the spheres of policy and community-based work. In addition, there is a clear expectation on the part of women's organisations that incorporating the resolution into their work can increase leverage and ownership, facilitate engagement with, and influence over, decision-making processes, and generate access to resources.

The concerns raised by women's organisations during the course of this research suggest that, if Resolution 1325 provides an entry ticket into the policy domain, there may also be a price to pay. One thing is clear, while Resolution 1325 may help to mobilise policymakers and international agencies, women peace activists adopt a more organic approach that departs from the cumulative experience of women to define their peacebuilding priorities. There is a risk that, in the interaction between women's organisations and policymakers, women's peacebuilding priorities may not easily fit within the framework of the resolution and the priorities of policymakers. This may be further compounded by the fact that prevailing funding regimes do not easily match with the sometimes innovative strategies and activities of women's organisations.

What the research made clear is that women's organisations have a clear perception of achievements and lessons learned, as well as the opportunities and priorities for the implementation of Resolution 1325 in Liberia.

Although they may not always refer explicitly to the resolution, women's organisations participating in this research recognised that it can be a critical tool to strengthen and deepen their work. They also highlighted that women's organisations in Liberia embody a vast amount of practical knowledge in terms of 'doing 1325'. For them, the key challenge and priority is to further strengthen mechanisms to ensure that women's peacebuilding priorities and experience find their way into broader efforts to implement Resolution 1325 and consolidate peace in Liberia.

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