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Constructing space for refugee voices in national peacebuilding processes

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ABSTRACT
The search for sustainable peace after conflict has pushed refugees onto the global peacebuilding agenda, and these days it is common for national peacebuilding processes to extend their reach to those living in exile. This is significant because ordinarily, our modern political system considers the citizen the proper subject of political life, and refugees typically struggle to be seen and heard in national processes. This article examines two examples of refugee participation in peacebuilding: the state-led Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and a grassroots dialogue group created by Liberian refugees in Ghana. Based on five months’ fieldwork, it considers how refugee narratives concerning harm, loss and recovery differed between the two forums, and draws attention to the role of the state in recognising – or not recognising – refugee narratives. It argues that while the inclusion of refugees in peacebuilding processes is a positive development, greater attention should be paid to the factors restricting or diminishing refugee voices and thus impeding the restorative value of such forums. The article concludes by identifying ways to support more diverse refugee voices in national peacebuilding programmes.

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Introduction
The search for sustainable peace after conflict has pushed refugees onto the global peacebuilding agenda. Nowadays, the perspective of those exiled by conflict is recognised as essential to addressing the root causes of violence and building national capacity for managing conflict. This is a significant turn. Ordinarily, our modern political system does not recognise refugees as participants in the political arena; instead, it is the citizen who is considered the proper subject of political life. Refugees, as persons whose governments are unwilling or unable to protect them from harm, are forced to seek safety outside their own political community, and, in doing so, lose their standing as citizens. Without active citizenship, refugees are...
typically denied the capacity to speak politically, as well as the expectation that they will be heard. Moreover, since it is the responsibility of the nation state to protect the rights of its citizens, refugees also lose access to a forum through which they can claim protection of their rights.

This explains why refugee involvement in peacebuilding is so critical: because it can restore the ability of refugees to claim their rights, to speak politically and to be heard. When the state is involved in national-level peacebuilding processes it also offers the state an opportunity to acknowledge and affirm refugee narratives and contribute thereby to repositioning refugees as full, rights-bearing members of the political community.

This article considers the different ways in which peacebuilding processes can create space for refugees to speak and be heard. It examines the type of narratives that emerge in different forums and how they are recognised – or not recognised – by the state. Narratives are critical for peacebuilding processes because they are the primary way in which people make sense of the world, produce meanings, articulate intentions and legitimise actions. When people who have experienced conflict or violence narrate their everyday stories, they articulate the type of loss they suffered, the myriad ways such loss affects their lives, and how they are coping. In doing so, their narratives reveal individual interpretations of conflict and peace and illuminate the differentiated requirements that people need for justice or reconciliation to take place. This makes narratives critical to understanding past violence and deciding how to deal with it; as Gray notes, ‘there is no justice or transition without narrative. It is narrative that performs both of these functions; it is also narrative that inhibits them.’

This article examines refugee narratives in peacebuilding processes by way of two case studies. The first is the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which collected testimony from 1377 Liberian refugees living in Buduburam settlement, Ghana, and then incorporated this testimony into its public report. TRCs are recognised as peacebuilding mechanisms since they are empowered by the state to engage with an affected population and investigate a pattern of past violence or abuse. By doing so, they can open up new spaces for public debate and develop new languages in which to discuss social relations.

The second case study features community-based dialogue groups, known as Peace Cells, established by Liberian refugees in Buduburam settlement and operating

8Michael Ignatieff, ‘Arendt’s Example’ (Speech delivered at the Hannah Arendt Prize Ceremony, Bremen, 28 November 2003).
alongside the Liberian TRC. Through weekly dialogue groups, refugees grappled with how to make sense of violence, how to repair relationships and what a recovered Liberia might look like. Dialogue, in the context of these community groups and this article, refers to the process of genuine interaction between people who may otherwise struggle to communicate effectively with one other. This process of sustained dialogue is a critical component of peacebuilding since it enables people to find common ground for ways of talking, thinking and working together, and is thereby capable of transforming relationships in whole bodies politic.

The article proceeds by turning to a discussion of the methodology and ethical issues arising in the research. It then examines the two case studies: first, the work of the Liberian TRC in Buduburam refugee settlement; and second, the community-based dialogue groups. The article reflects on why the two forums produced different narratives, and why the Liberian state recognised some narratives and not others. It concludes by identifying ways to construct space for more diverse refugee voices within national peacebuilding programmes, and thereby strengthen the restorative potential of engaging refugees in peacebuilding.

**Methodology**

The findings in this article are informed by five months’ fieldwork carried out by the author from February until June 2013 in Liberia and Ghana. The full dataset comprises 87 interviews. This includes 15 interviews with key informants including TRC staff, Liberian officials, Liberian academics and NGO staff, and 72 interviews with Liberian refugees or returned refugees. Of the 72 refugee respondents, 24 were Liberian refugees living in Buduburam refugee settlement in Ghana (10 women and 14 men) and 48 were former Liberian refugees who had returned from Buduburam to Liberia (20 women and 28 men). Roughly half of the refugee interviewees had participated in the TRC and half had not. Of the 24 refugees living in Buduburam, 11 had participated in the TRC and 13 had not. Of the 48 returned refugees living in Liberia, 18 had participated in the TRC and 30 had not.

Interviewees were identified using chain referral sampling, meaning that research participants used their social networks to refer other people who could potentially participate in the study. To avoid referral bias, I established multiple ‘snowballs’ with unrelated persons at their centre, and ensured that participants included a relatively even distribution across ethnicity, sex, age and education. Interviews lasted on average one hour, followed a semi-structured protocol and were conducted in English.

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15Of the 24 refugees living in Buduburam, 11 had participated in the TRC and 13 had not. Of the 48 returned refugees living in Liberia, 18 had participated in the TRC and 30 had not.


17I was concerned that asking people their tribe could be a sensitive issue, so replaced it with the proxy question of dialect spoken. Most participants in Ganta were of the Gio or Mano ethnic groups, and in Gbarnga were Kpelle. In Monrovia and Ghana there was a mixture of ethnicities, but a slight majority of Krahn.

18Almost all interviewees had spent time living in Ghana, which meant that they were used to adapting their Liberian English to a non-Liberian audience.
Throughout the research I adopted an ‘actor-oriented’ perspective, which meant that I engaged with refugees as social and political agents, rather than as passive victims.\(^{19}\) I designed the interview protocol in a way that encouraged participants to reflect upon their – or their community’s – strengths and agency.\(^{20}\) I was also conscious that in the refugee context, vulnerability, compromised autonomy, mistrust and the complexities of community representation make the issue of informed consent more complex.\(^{21}\) This prompted me to omit topics and questions I could not ethically seek consent to ask: for instance, I did not ask any questions about past harm, since revisiting traumatic events could cause the narrator to experience further emotional suffering and I did not feel I could ethically ask participants to assume that risk.

When analysing the data obtained through fieldwork interviews, I employed an inductive process that combined case study analysis and the identification of recurring patterns or themes.\(^{22}\) I conducted open coding, a process that involves breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising and categorising the data,\(^{23}\) in order to fashion interconnections and derive concepts.\(^{24}\)

Wherever possible, I supplemented my interviews and triangulated interview data with written records sourced in Liberia and Ghana. This included the TRC Final Report and outreach materials, as well as written minutes and reports related to the community dialogue groups (known as Peace Cells.) Unfortunately, the cache of Peace Cell documents were ad hoc and incomplete, since repatriation and deportation of Liberian refugees from Ghana had made it difficult for participants to retain systematic records.-\(^{25}\) Nevertheless, they offered insights into the activities as they were taking place at that time and therefore provided a way to counter the time delay inherent in my interview data, since I was asking refugees to reflect on events that had taken place four years prior.

I also took seriously Rodgers’ suggestion that researchers ‘hang out’ with their target population.\(^{26}\) In Liberia, I rented a furnished room in downtown Monrovia and travelled to interviews (including in Gbarnga and Ganta) by public transport, which gave me the opportunity to chat informally with Liberians sharing the journey. In Buduburam, I rented a small room within the settlement and used local facilities, which also gave me the opportunity to chat with other refugee residents. While the information obtained during such interactions does not form part of my formal research

\(^{25}\)Interview with M.O., Liberian return refugee, Monrovia, 7 April 2013.
findings, it did provide an invaluable window into the economic, social, political and cultural context of my research topic.

**Liberian war and the experience of displacement**

The nation-state of Liberia had a distinctive beginning. In 1822, the American Colonisation Society established a colony on the west coast of Africa – known today as Liberia – in order to resettle free-born black Americans, freed slaves of African descent, and Africans freed from captured slave ships. Although they never constituted more than 5 per cent of the total Liberian population, these ‘Americo-Liberians’ were politically, economically and militarily stronger than the indigenous inhabitants, and, over the next 100 years, implemented a political system that denied economic opportunities, political rights and social mobility to the diverse population of indigenous Liberians.

On 14 April 1979, indigenous Liberians demonstrated against a steep rise in the price of the nation’s staple food, rice and were fired upon by state security forces. These so-called ‘rice riots’ are considered by most Liberians (and the Liberian TRC) as the starting point for the civil war that would engulf Liberia a decade later. Following the 1979 rice riots, tensions between indigenous Liberians and the Americo-Liberians led to a coup in 1980, headed by an indigenous Liberian called Samuel Doe. President Doe’s reign was characterised by repression and violence as well as a significant increase in ethnic tensions and ethnic-based violence. Intending to overthrow Doe, Charles Taylor, a Liberian of mixed Americo-Liberian heritage, established a rebel group known as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). In December 1989, the NPFL invaded Liberia from its base in Côte d’Ivoire, marking the beginning of Liberia’s brutal 14-year civil war.

On 18 August 2003, following many failed attempts, the war ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The destruction caused by 14 years of conflict was immense. More than 200,000 people had been killed out of a pre-war population of 2.5 million. Virtually all of the Liberian population had been forced to flee their homes at least temporarily, and official figures estimated that 1.2 million persons were internally displaced and 700,000 persons were refugees. The country’s economy and infrastructure were almost entirely destroyed and in areas where returning refugees lived, UNHCR consistently reported a lack of basic educational facilities, health care, safe drinking water, sanitation, shelter, roads and employment opportunities. Returning refugees also struggled to access adequate housing and reclaim their property.

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28Ibid., 15.
Refugee voices in the Liberian TRC

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between the Government of Liberia, two belligerent forces (‘Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy’ and the ‘Movement for Democracy in Liberia’) and civilian representatives of political parties on 18 August 2003, within the framework of the ECOWAS Peace Process for Liberia. All of the warring factions refused to consider the possibility of a war crimes tribunal; however, they also feared a backlash from both their domestic and international audiences if they asked for a blanket amnesty.37 The compromise agreed to was that of a TRC, along the lines of the South African model.38 The Liberian TRC was thus established in June 2005, through the Act to Establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia.

The Liberian TRC was given a mandate to investigate violations that took place from the rice riots of January 1979 until shortly after the Peace Agreement (14 October 2003. It pursued this mandate in two parts, via testimony collection and public hearings. The Liberian TRC collected more testimony than any other TRC in history; a total of 20,560 statements (collected from both domiciled and displaced Liberians) accounting for 163,315 violations.39 It also held more than 800 public and in-camera hearings.40 Testimony from both the narrative statements and public hearings were incorporated into the TRC’s Final Report, which it published on 30 June, 2009.

The TRC took the novel decision to involve the Liberian diaspora – and eventually, refugees – in its proceedings.41 The involvement of the US-based diaspora was foreseen from the very beginning, with the TRC establishing and mandating a Diaspora Committee to take evidence from Liberians resident abroad,42 and appointing Commissioner Massa Washington, a Liberian refugee who resided in the US, as Chair. According to Commissioner Washington, the TRC was vitally concerned with the US-based diaspora since: ‘Elements in the US diaspora put Taylor’s invasion together. And once the war began, the same diaspora kept it going with funding for ammunition and food . . . In light of this history . . . a truth commission that did not go to America would have been a joke.’43

In order to manage the practical aspects of its engagement with the US diaspora, the TRC partnered with an American legal organisation known as The Advocates for Human Rights (The Advocates.) At the time of its partnership with the TRC, The Advocates had provided legal assistance to hundreds of Liberians resident in the United States, and trained dozens of volunteer attorneys to handle Liberian asylum cases.44

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38 Hayner, Negotiating the Peace in Liberia, 17.
40 Ibid., 32.
42 Liberia: An Act to Establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia 2005 (Liberia) 10 June 2005, Art VIII, s 27, ss A.
It was The Advocates, and not the TRC, that pushed for the TRC’s activities to be extended to the refugee population resident in West Africa. Originally, the TRC encouraged refugees living in West Africa to return ‘home’ to Liberia and give testimony, distributing outreach materials to this effect in Buduburam and other refugee settlements. However, the Advocates pushed the TRC to travel to West Africa and engage Liberian refugees directly in order to gather comprehensive information on the effects of the conflict and ensure justice for victims, a position with which the TRC eventually concurred. In subsequent media statements, the TRC explained that refugee participation was essential since at least 25 per cent of the Liberian population was forced to flee the country during the civil war, making displacement one of the most widely experienced violations of that period.

While the TRC did hold public hearings in the United States for the diaspora, it cancelled the public hearings planned for Buduburam settlement. According to the TRC Report, this was due to confrontations between Liberian refugees and the Ghanaian authorities, although my interviews suggest that security concerns – both for TRC officials and for refugees who wished to testify against perpetrators living in the settlement – provided another impetus. In lieu of public hearings, the TRC invited two refugees from Buduburam settlement to testify in Liberia, symbolically representing the West African refugee community. Ultimately, the lack of public hearings in West Africa meant that the only interaction refugees had with the TRC was through narrative statements, a limitation that affected their perception of the TRC’s work and is discussed in latter sections.

In 2008, the TRC commenced the statement collection process in Buduburam settlement. Thousands of refugees queued for hours, overwhelming the capacity of the TRC staff and prompting TRC staff to train additional refugee statement-takers. In total, 1377 refugees in Buduburam gave testimony, compared to only 237 amongst the US-based diaspora, even though the latter had a significantly larger population base.

In order to manage and make sense of the huge volume of testimony data, the Liberian TRC set up a stringent statement-taking process (applicable not only to refugee statements but to all testimony.) Statements were recorded on a standardised form that required the statement-taker include details of who did what to whom: that is, each statement had to reference a perpetrator, a specific violation, and a victim. Violations were then coded according to a controlled vocabulary of 23 human rights violations and

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47 The Advocates for Human Rights, A House with Two Rooms, 35.
50 Interview with TRC official, Monrovia, 27 March 2013.
51 Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain transcripts of this testimony. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia, Consolidated Final Report (2009) vol 2, 73.
52 The Advocates for Human Rights, A House with Two Rooms, 38.
entered into a specialised database. The result was a dataset of nearly 180,000 violations committed during the war, together with related data on victims and perpetrators. This dataset later provided the basis for the TRC’s recommendations to the Liberian Government regarding prosecutions.

The ‘who did what to whom’ framework set the rules for the type of narratives the TRC could recognise. Refugees could only testify about events they had experienced or witnessed; it was not possible to speak of experiences in the abstract. As one interviewee explained:

At the TRC, people were only allowed to answer strict questions about what happened directly to them. But this is a problem. If you ask the big question: ‘What happened, during the war?’ then it gives a totally different answer to asking someone ‘What happened to you during the war?’ The first one lets you describe what you saw, what you heard, what the general situation was. But instead, the TRC wanted to do a very narrow thing, it wanted your testimony only in order to indict someone, not to understand what had happened.

These restrictions led a number of refugees to decline to testify. Some were reluctant to talk about what happened to them personally, fearing that it would lead to flashbacks and nightmares, or wishing to keep secret the details of atrocities committed against them or their families. Others argued that the war was ‘chaos, nobody knew what they were doing,’ and in such a context it would be meaningless to assign responsibility to former combatants, many of whom were children when they committed crimes.

Other refugees argued against the need to identify those responsible for violence. Occasionally this stemmed from fear that the person against whom they testified would find out and seek revenge, either in Ghana (since perpetrators often lived in the settlement) or after their return to Liberia. Some expressed concern for the accused in a context where wartime abuses were widespread. If someone in the community stood accused of fighting with a rebel group and killing civilians, the rest of the community would shun them and their family, and some refugees believed this was unwarranted. As one interviewee noted:

We have a saying in Liberia, ‘There’s no bad bush for a bad child.’ It means you can’t cast someone into the bush and leave them there if they do something bad. It’s the same for adults or children, it’s the same for all people, you have to keep them around, you cannot banish them away.

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56 Amelia Hoover, Conflict and Gender: Data Overview (San Francisco: Benetech Human Rights Data Analysis Group, November 2009), 11.
57 Interview with M.A., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 11 April 2013.
58 Interview with I.S., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 15 May 2013. See also: Interview with E.S., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 29 May 2013; Interview with P.E., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 26 April 2013.
60 Interview with E.S., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 29 May 2013.
61 Interview with E.B., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 1 June 2013.
63 Interview with I.S., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 15 May 2013.
If victims wished to speak about violence they had experienced, but did not want to reference a perpetrator, they found themselves unable to speak in the way the TRC required. Any time a statement-giver spoke ambiguously, the interviewer would direct them to identify specific details: a particular incident, who the perpetrator was, exactly what happened, and to whom the violation occurred.\textsuperscript{64} Imagining harm in an abstract, unembodied way was not possible.

Equally, when perpetrators gave testimony before the TRC, they also had to speak about violations they had personally committed. They were required to provide details of what, who, where and when the crime occurred – but not why. This caused a number of respondents to doubt the reconciliatory potential of the TRC. As one refugee noted:

Knowing the history and making reconciliation are completely different aims and you can’t do both at the same time. People should explain why they were in the war, rather than exactly what they did. We are more interested in the root causes. People can say why they killed, but there’s no need to say how they did it.\textsuperscript{65}

The narratives emerging through the TRC reflected the tenets of the criminal law tradition: in order to conceive of an atrocity or injustice, the narrator must first imagine a victim, and when victims speak of a crime, they must speak as if there were an agent responsible for their loss; that is, it is not possible to imagine loss without imagining a perpetrator.\textsuperscript{66} Also reflecting the criminal law tradition, the Liberian TRC focused on gathering factual evidence and shied away from making sense of those who committed atrocities or the social conditions eliciting such conduct from them.\textsuperscript{67}

The TRC’s method of asking about wartime experiences had one unexpected repercussion that is worth noting, as it affected the way in which refugee testimony was narrated. As one TRC official recalled:

When we [the TRC staff] first arrived in Ghana, there were thousands of people wanting to give statements, because they thought that the TRC was going to resettle them all to the US. When the TRC explained more about their processes and that it had nothing to do with resettlement, many refugees...were no longer interested.\textsuperscript{68}

In my interviews, roughly half of those who gave testimony to the TRC believed that doing so may lead to their resettlement to the United States.\textsuperscript{69} Interviewees gave several reasons for this perception. The first was that since the TRC outsourced its testimony collection to The Advocates, the majority of staff collecting testimony were American


\textsuperscript{65}Interview with R.A., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 7 June 2013. See also interview with E.S., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 29 May 2013.


\textsuperscript{68}Interview with TRC official, Monrovia, 27 March 2013.

\textsuperscript{69}Interview with Z.I., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 25 April 2013; interview with P.E, Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 26 April 2013; Interview with L.I., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 1 May 2013; Interview with F.I., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 3 May 2013; Interview with R.I., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 14 May 2013; Interview with M.O., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 29 May 2013; Interview with F.I., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 6 June 2013; Interview with J.O., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 10 June 2013.
lawyers. This suggested (from the perspective of refugees) that the TRC was an international, not national process, and was tied in some way to resettlement, since that was the reason almost all foreign visitors came to Buduburam. Secondly, the statement-taking process mirrored the resettlement interviews conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Whenever a refugee applied for resettlement, they had to provide UNHCR a narrative statement explaining why they fled Liberia and what dangers they faced in asylum. The TRC mirrored this process almost exactly.

The perception that the TRC was linked to resettlement led some refugees to believe that their testimony was being judged for resettlement eligibility. This perception, in turn, changed the way some people narrated their experiences. One refugee summarised a view expressed by others:

‘[When they do interviews for resettlement,] UNHCR puts refugees into groups according to their story: there is women-at-risk, or torture, or other vulnerable groups. So [when you give your statement to the TRC] you have to show you belong to one of these groups if you want to be resettled.’

Once the TRC became aware of this widespread misconception, they held public information sessions to explain that providing testimony was unrelated to resettlement. However, most refugees were not convinced; in the view of many, the TRC’s actions spoke louder than their words. One refugee explained it in the following way:

‘Why would the TRC act like UNHCR if they’re not doing something for resettlement? Why would they ask us to tell our stories if they won’t try to do something [related to resettlement] for us? It doesn’t make any sense.’

A reliance on American lawyers affected not only refugee perceptions of the purpose of statement-taking, but also the type of interactions that took place during statement-taking. The American lawyers represented a professionalised workforce who were set apart from the conflict; a position which, due to their perceived status as neutral and disinterested witnesses, may have encouraged some refugees to give testimony. In this setting, the process of giving testimony mirrored the relationship between a narrator and a scribe; or, in the view of some refugees, between a narrator and judge who assessed each person’s eligibility for resettlement. Since the American lawyers had no experience of the war or of living or returning to Liberia, they had no way to engage in dialogue with refugees regarding their shared experiences. This meant the loss of certain types of knowledge since, as Ignatieff recognised, there is ‘always a truth that can be known only by those on the inside. Or if not a truth…then a moral significance to…’

70 Interview with L.I., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 1 May 2013. See also interview with F.I., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 6 June 2013; Interview with J.O., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 10 June 2013.
71 Interview with R.I, Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 14 May 2013.
72 Interview with TRC official, Monrovia, 27 March 2013.
73 Interview with M.O., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 7 April 2013.
74 Interview with Z.I., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 25 April 2013.
76 Interview with TRC staff member, Monrovia, 9 April 2013.
these facts that only an insider can fully appreciate.\textsuperscript{77} Some juxtaposed the arms-length interaction with American statement-takers with their interactions with Liberian TRC officials (a small number of whom had spent time in Ghana as refugees during the war) who could relay their own experiences of rebuilding a life in Liberia after the war.\textsuperscript{78}

### Refugee voices in community-based dialogue groups

In 2003 a group of Liberian refugees living in Buduburam settlement established a community-based organisation called Population Caring Organisation (PCO). Their objective was to facilitate dialogue amongst the Buduburam refugee community about the war and why it had happened, and thereby support reconciliation amongst Liberians.\textsuperscript{79} One of the founding members of PCO explained:

> If you look at the organisations that encourage peacebuilding, they all focus on training. They all try to train people but they don’t actually get people to do something to solve their own problems. … The cause of the previous conflict was that people were not consulted, they were just forced to do things and they didn’t get to talk and decide for themselves. So we tried to help people to talk and find their own solutions.\textsuperscript{80}

PCO pursued this goal by establishing community dialogue groups known as Peace Cells. A Peace Cell was established in each of the 10 zones of Buduburam settlement, and each was facilitated by a Peace Cell leader, identified by PCO on the basis that they resided in the community where the Cell was located, enjoyed good relations with other members of their zone, and exhibited strong interpersonal and communication skills.\textsuperscript{81} Where possible, PCO tried to engage the community in the design of the meetings: from February until May each year, Peace Cell leaders and other PCO staff would talk to refugees in their respective zones, or sometimes distribute surveys, in order to collect topics for discussion based on what people were most concerned about.\textsuperscript{82}

From June until November, Peace Cells met on a weekly basis. Each Peace Cell meeting comprised two hours of discussion.\textsuperscript{83} Meetings took place in a communal space late in the afternoon, and were attended by between 20 and 40 persons, with slightly more women than men.\textsuperscript{84} Meetings were structured around a set of discussion questions covering topics such as tribal prejudice and hatred, the process of reconciliation, the meaning of justice, and how people mediated conflict in their daily lives.\textsuperscript{85} People were encouraged to attend the Cell in the zone where they resided, in the hope that as people got to know each other, share experiences and empathise with each other, they would develop a shared commitment to rebuilding relationships and preventing

\textsuperscript{78}Interview with E.S., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 29 May 2013; Interview with TRC staff member, Monrovia, 9 April 2013.
\textsuperscript{79}Interview with M.O., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 29 May 2013.
\textsuperscript{80}Interview with Morris, Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 7 May 2013.
\textsuperscript{82}Population Caring Organisation, ‘Practical Steps on How to Run a Peace Cell’, (Paper presented at PCO Community Peace Cell Leaders’ Workshop, Buduburam refugee settlement, 2005) 1. Interviews with Peace Cell leaders and participants confirmed that the steps set out in this paper corresponded with what took place in the Peace Cell meetings.
\textsuperscript{84}Interview with L.I., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 1 May 2013.
the recurrence of violence. The people spoke of these groups as a space for people to rebuild their relationships through recurrent interactions; with the expectation that ‘daily talking, knowing each other, understanding each other,’ people could find common ground and begin to establish a relationship.

The dialogue that took place during Peace Cell meetings typically focused on understanding why the war happened, rather than establishing a factual account of events. As such, the narratives that emerged from this forum differed considerably from the TRC, particularly when it came to the testimony of those who committed violent acts. For example, if ex-combatants wished to explain their part in the war, they were expected to explain what drove them or who influenced them to commit violence. Equally, Peace Cell members would censor perpetrators if they started to provide details of how they killed someone. Members would also prevent ex-combatants from revealing the identity of people they harmed, in case someone in the Peace Cell knew the victim.

Peace Cells leaders would also shift discussions from concrete details to more abstract concepts in order to retain space for dialogue. One example given by a Peace Cell Leader involved a child combatant who attended a Peace Cell meeting and admitted he had killed some people during the war. Participants became extremely angry with the child and the meeting was quickly ended. However, several weeks later, the Peace Cell revisited the subject. As the Peace Cell Leader explained:

We dealt with it, later, by making it into a discussion. We talked about this issue in general terms. We asked the people in our group: If you come across an ex-combatant, how should you deal with him? Then together we talked about how to solve it. We talked about the difficulties of the situation, and also about the boy, what happened to him. Later the boy came back to the meetings, and people were not as angry as the first time.

Detaching issues from facts also provided victims with a way of speaking about their own hurt without accusing others of specific crimes. For some Peace Cell members, these were the only conditions under which they were willing to revisit the past. As one member explained:

I don’t want to know who killed my brother. If I see exactly who killed him, then I will jump on him, I couldn’t stop myself. And I never want to hear someone explain why they killed my brother, there is no reason that he should have been killed. But if I went to the Peace Cells, we would talk more generally about what people did, and hear what the ex-combatants had to say. Someone would say I burned this village, but they wouldn’t talk about specific people, or how they killed them. So I could hear about the war, we could admit what happened, but in a general way.

While the TRC’s mandate meant it could only receive testimony about violations that took place from January 1979 until October 2003, the Peace Cells did not impose any

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86 Interview with E.S., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 4 June 2013.
87 Interview with D.O., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 30 May 2013; interview with E.G, Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 4 June 2013.
88 Interview with P.Z, Liberian returned refugee, Ganta, 27 June 2013.
89 Interview with Z.I., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 25 April 2013.
90 Interview with P.Z., Liberian returned refugee, Ganta, 27 June 2013.
91 Interview with P.Z., Liberian returned refugee, Ganta, 27 June 2013.
92 Interview with E.S., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 29 May 2013.
93 Interview with M.O., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 7 May 2013.
time restriction. As a result, people often spoke of the continuation of the conflict in their daily lives. Harms which continued to affect people were understood to be just as much a legacy of the war as the killing, rape and destruction that people had suffered years earlier. When it came to education, for instance, refugees noted that Americo-Liberians had historically denied indigenous Liberians the right to attend school, which contributed to the war; and yet even since the Peace Agreement was signed, and despite the new government overturning discriminatory laws, many Liberians continued to be denied access to education. In this way, participants argued, the conflict continued even though the war had ended. As one Peace Cell participant noted:

Problems from before would spill over and the conflict would continue in people’s daily lives. It looks like it’s a problem from today, but actually it’s related to the war, or to the ethnic stereotypes [and related prejudice] that led to the war. So this became a focus of the Peace Cells: [not just the facts from the past, but] how the past relates to our lives now, today.

Peace Cells also recognised that there are times when violence creates harm that is not adequately captured by the language of rights, but which needs to be addressed in order for the community to recover. Refugees spoke about the breakdown of the family unit as one of the most damaging harms associated with the war, for example, since it affected not only those who lived through the war but also their children.

The narratives that emerged through the Peace Cells, then, differed in fundamental ways from testimony narrated to the TRC. Narratives that emerged in the Peace Cells often moved between the concrete and abstract and shied away from specific details concerning who committed violent acts or how, focusing instead on why such crimes had taken place. Participants could define harm on their own terms and often spoke of violence outside the recognised catalogue of human rights, and drew little distinction between violence that occurred during the war and violence that continued to affect them.

Perhaps most critically, narratives emerged through dialogue: participants were expected to engage with each other by asking questions and drawing connections between personal experiences and broader, abstract issues that affected the whole community. This approach created opportunities for others within the group to agree with, dispute or add to the subjective experience described by the narrator, and ultimately created a multifaceted and fluid narrative that took into account the perspectives of multiple actors. Voices emerged which could not have been captured by the TRC’s standardised method of taking statements, and yet offered critical insights into the many ways Liberian refugees were making sense of the loss they had suffered and how they were attempting to move beyond that loss.

95 Ibid at 1–2.
96 Interview with M.S., Liberian refugee, Buduburam refugee settlement, 29 May 2013.
State recognition of refugee narratives

This section moves to consider how the Liberian government recognised refugee narratives through the work of the TRC, a central task of which was to write the history of a period of violence. In contrast to popular memories of violence and conflict which are multiple, fluid, indeterminate and fragmentary, TRCs play a vital role in fixing memory and institutionalising a view of the past conflict. This is very much a process of construction, since there is no single ‘theatre of memory’ which all members of a national polity inhabit, and it involves not just recounting facts but the development of an underlying ethical narrative of wrongdoing, linked to an imperative to prevent such wrongdoing from happening again. The Liberian TRC performed this task through its Final Report, published on 30 June 2009, which took into account information collected from narrative statements as well as public hearings. It sought to understand how Liberia descended into conflict and how it could avert a repetition of the past, while also strengthening national peace, security, unity and reconciliation.

The mandate of the TRC and the format of its Final Report shaped the type of refugee narratives it recognised. The Final Report set up a clear dichotomy between Liberia’s ‘bitter past’ and its present-day ‘move towards peace, reconciliation and the rebuilding of the Liberian state.’ It described former governments as responsible for ‘poor governance and maladministration’ while commending the new government’s ‘peace-building aspirations’ and the reforms ‘already underway’ to promote a culture of respect for human rights. In doing so, it established a clear moment of transition. This allowed the new Liberian government to portray itself as everything the previous government was not: respectful of human rights, accountable to citizens, and, ultimately, legitimately sovereign.

The idea that Liberia had experienced a transition clashed with refugee narratives. For many refugees, although the harm that forced them into displacement had ended, other forms of harm prevented them from repatriating. Refugees spoke of the economic and social deprivation facing them upon return, including a lack of education, livelihoods and healthcare. These realities were not recognised by the TRC Report, however, which focused on the violations of civil and political rights that forced refugees to become displaced, such as large-scale killing or rape. These crimes were all situated

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100Jay Winter, Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 185.
102Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia, Consolidated Final Report, xxiii.
104Ibid., 323.
105Ibid., 90.
106Ibid., 424.
107For a discussion of how this also took place in the South African TRC, see: Richard A. Wilson, The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), quote at p16.
108Kristen Cibelli, Jule Kruger and Amelia Hoover, Descriptive Statistics from Statements to the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (San Francisco: Human Rights Data Analysis Group, June 2009), 49.
firmly in the past and had largely ceased with the end of the conflict. By contrast, there was no discussion of violations that continued to the present and no mention of the maladministration of the new Liberian government. The time-bound nature of the TRC’s mandate cut these concerns out of view, and the transition narrative established by the Final Report rendered ongoing violence invisible. As Robert Meister points out: ‘the cost of achieving a moral consensus that the past was evil, is to reach a political consensus that the evil is past.’

For Liberian refugees, the reason why this mattered was that it erased the trauma of repatriation. For many refugees, return is not a victorious home-coming but the start of a new cycle in a challenging environment. While the TRC Report never explicitly stated that Liberia was safe to return, its silence around the conditions refugees were turning to – particularly when juxtaposed with sections describing in graphic detail the trauma of war, flight and asylum – implied that their concerns were not justified. Moreover, it squandered an opportunity to initiate dialogue between the government and its refugee population on issues of pressing importance to the refugee population and thereby work, slowly, to rebuild the relationship between refugees and their state.

Acknowledging that TRCs often reflect or pursue state interests is not a new observation. Richard Wilson, for example, notes that when engaging in national peace-building processes, states retain their own interests related to questions of nation-building, legitimisation and the centralisation of state power, while Chandra Sriram points out that, typically, new governments want to showcase their legitimate sovereignty by demonstrating newfound respect for international standards or a renewed ability to protect their citizenry. What this article seeks to add is that when the interests of new governments and their displaced citizens do not align, it may affect the type of engagement refugees can have with state forums such as the TRC as well as the extent to which refugees are likely to perceive justice or reconciliation is genuinely at the heart of such processes.

In the Liberian TRC, a fundamental conflict emerged between the state-led TRC and refugee testifiers over the use of refugee testimony. The TRC used refugee testimony to demonstrate how destructive Liberia’s past had been, and how its citizens had suffered. However, many refugees wanted to use their testimony to justify why they still could not return to Liberia, and to press the new government to address the inadequate living conditions returning refugees faced, as well as ongoing poor governance – a narrative that, within the confines of the TRC’s mandate, received little recognition. This points to a broader tension arising between many transitional governments and their refugee

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110This is despite the fact that when the TRC Report was published, corruption remained pervasive through all levels of government and prevented ordinary Liberians from achieving an adequate standard of living. See for example: International Crisis Group, Liberia: How Sustainable is the Recovery? (Africa Report 177, International Crisis Group, 19 August 2011), 17.


populations: governments typically encourage and advertise the return of refugees as evidence that citizens have confidence in their renewed ability to reconstruct order and security, whereas refugees themselves may be unwilling to return so soon after war. Unless this tension is acknowledged and addressed, the restorative value of involving refugees in national peacebuilding processes is likely to remain distant and aspirational.

**Constructing space for more diverse voices in peacebuilding**

Drawing on the two cases studies, the article concludes with some suggestions for the recognition of refugee voices in peacebuilding processes. The Liberian TRC and the community dialogue groups took different approaches to peacebuilding, although both engaged Liberian refugees who wished to use public testimony as a means of dealing with past grievances and imagining ways to develop a peaceful Liberia. For the TRC, the focus was on constructing a single historical truth by piecing together forensic facts about the past. It relied on a professionalised workforce and a highly structured form of statement-taking, an approach that was critical to its ability to collect, record and make sense of the 20,560 statements it ultimately received. The community Peace Cells, by contrast, operated at the community level and were interested in understanding why, rather than how, perpetrators committed crimes, and how the war continued to affect people’s lives. Peace Cells used sustained dialogue to create multi-faceted, shared narratives and to encourage people to understand, over time, the views of others.

These different approaches shaped the narratives refugees constructed about violence and recovery from violence. The case studies demonstrate that narratives emerging through truth-telling processes are not universal forms of speaking, nor do they necessarily constitute objective truths; rather, they are ‘particular instances, synopses of experience, told at given times for specific audiences and located in distinct spatial and temporal contexts.’ Importantly, the narratives that emerge through peacebuilding processes originate from actors who exist on a spectrum of unequal power, and this allows some actors to promote their version of conflict or peace while sidelining others. Typically, subaltern voices are diminished as more powerful voices wipe out everyday narratives, and individuals who occupy positions of subordination, oppression, or marginality may find themselves targeted for normative narratives that are already given, coercive, not negotiable and disadvantaging.

As this article hopes to have demonstrated, the risk of refugee voices being diminished or coerced within peacebuilding processes is high. State and refugee interests often do not align, and the unequal power hierarchy that exists between the two means that if refugee narratives contradict state interests, the latter has the power to disregard or sideline refugee voices. This undermines one of the objectives of engaging refugees in peacebuilding: namely, to reposition refugees as citizens with legal and moral

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entitlements, and thereby restore their ‘right to have rights’ and their ability to speak politically and be heard. If refugees cannot speak – and be heard – on their own terms, then the restorative value of peacebuilding processes is compromised.

The case studies suggest a number of ways to create space for refugee voices in peacebuilding process. One consideration is the mechanism used to receive and record narratives. A technocratic approach – such as the one employed by the Liberian TRC – utilises a professional workforce and standardised operating procedures, which result in standard narratives, and standard explanations. While this can help to make sense of and compare large datasets, it also has the insidious quality of crowding out space for alternative explanations. This is a crucial factor in privileging some narratives of violence and conflict over others.

Liberian refugees were particularly constrained by the TRC’s technocratic approach because they did not have the opportunity to participate in public hearings. As scholars note in the case of the South African TRC, there is often a disparity between the quantitative social science methodologies that predominate in statement-taking processes versus the qualitative methods that operate in public hearings. When it took statements, for example, the South African TRC’s concept of truth demanded ‘hard,’ authenticated, accurate and comprehensive data. By contrast, it treated the personal truth emerging through public hearings as innately expressive of complex emotions, multiple layers of experience, and a way of conveying the dignity of the individual giving testimony. In this way, it may be possible for the same mechanism (such as a TRC) to utilise multiple approaches that allow different ways of talking about and making sense of violence.

Different approaches to truth-telling may also complement each other. In Buduburam settlement, the TRC and the Peace Cells worked as distinct processes. However, there were opportunities to connect them: when the TRC arrived to collect testimony, for instance, Peace Cell leaders presented the TRC with submissions drawn from weekly discussions at the Peace Cells that expressed refugee perspectives on remembering the past and creating personal or community forms of reconciliation. Unfortunately, this document was one of many lost due to the upheavals of returns and deportations, and it is also unclear if the TRC incorporated the substance of the document into its work. Future peacebuilding efforts should explore ways to connect community-based forms of peacebuilding with state-centric mechanisms (such as the TRC) as a means of amplifying refugee voices without compromising the autonomy of the grassroots initiative.

121Hamid Haddad, The Refugee in International Society, 42.
124See also: Mac Ginty and Firchow, ’Top-Down and Bottom-Up Narratives of Peace and Conflict’, 311–312.
125Catherine Cole, Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009), quote at p166.
126Cole, Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission, 164.
127Interview with M.O., Liberian returned refugee, Monrovia, 7 May 2013.
It is also critical to recognize how power hierarchies operate within peacebuilding processes. For refugees, this entails acknowledging that state and refugee interests are likely to conflict with each other, placing refugee narratives at risk of being overwritten. With this knowledge, practitioners can take steps to create and protect space for refugees to speak on their own terms. This may include recognizing narratives that contradict the idea of a ‘transition’ taking place; ensuring space to speak about the struggles associated with repatriation, or recognizing the ongoing weaknesses of a new government. It may also involve setting aside the conventional human rights framework and allowing refugees to speak about violence as they perceive or experience it.\textsuperscript{128}

In the two case studies, both refugees and returned refugees described peacebuilding and reconciliation in terms of the future, not the past, and were most concerned about economic and social rights and the ability to achieve an adequate standard of living. Many interviewees asserted that in order to forget the past and move on, the most important thing was for people to access ‘jobs and support,’ so that they could meet their basic needs,\textsuperscript{129} and were sceptical that the Liberian government sought reconciliation through the TRC when it failed to provide access to education, health care, and basic infrastructure.\textsuperscript{130} If peacebuilding processes are to re-establish the refugee’s ability to claim their rights, then, they need to create space for refugees to articulate their claims and for the state to acknowledge the claims refugees are making. If genuine dialogue takes place the state may also need to acknowledge that for some refugees, justice might be found in \textit{not} returning. Instead, some members of the refugee community may wish to return ‘not to a place, but to a political community,’ such that their relationship with their state is restored regardless of physical return taking place.\textsuperscript{131}

By paying attention to the practices and perspectives of refugees and constructing space for refugees to speak on their own terms, this expanded repertoire of peacebuilding may strengthen our understanding of the effects of conflict and violence and how communities – and specifically, refugee communities – develop their own paths of recovery.

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