I. UNAMSIL Activity Summary

Overview

The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), active from 1999 to 2005, has been lauded as one of the UN’s most successful peacekeeping operations, although its efforts have not been without criticism. Yet, overall UNAMSIL brought a measure of peace and stability to a country that had suffered from violent rebel attacks for over a decade. UNAMSIL, however, faced an inauspicious start and near-collapse within six months of its creation and could have dealt a death knell to UN peacekeeping after the grave failures of the 1990s. Instead, sustained interest from the UN Security Council, together with substantial support and sustained in-country involvement by the United Kingdom, salvaged UNAMSIL and transformed it into one of the most successful examples of multidimensional peacekeeping. UNAMSIL was a notable pioneer in a number of elements now common to UN peacekeeping, including its integrated mission structure, attention to security sector reform, Chapter VII powers to engage in protection of civilians, and peacebuilding-centered exit strategy.

Background

Sierra Leone was plagued by poor governance and exclusionary politics since the early days following its independence from the United Kingdom in 1961. Elected government gave way to periodic coups and one-party governments, with a resultantly instrumentalized and ineffective security sector and a collapse in the educational system, which in turn gave rise to a large and exploitable population of uneducated and unemployed young men. 1991 marked the appearance of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a vicious rebel group led by Foday Sankoh, which eventually numbered in the thousands. The RUF recruited from among these discontented men and fed on grievances against the country’s political and economic mismanagement, while also further swelling its ranks through kidnapping and child soldier recruitment. The RUF’s decade-long violence in Sierra Leone was marked by the murder, rape, and forced amputation of civilian victims and fueled by rebel control of Sierra Leone’s diamond resources. Between 60,000 and 100,000 people are thought to have been killed over the course of the conflict, approximately 4,000 suffered from severed limbs, 50,000-64,000 internally displaced women may have suffered sexual violence, and 20,000 people were abducted. The RUF insurgency took place against a background of a set of regionally-interconnected civil wars and insurgencies: it was in part a creation of Liberia’s Charles Taylor and functioned with the support of Burkina Faso.

After the army colluded with the RUF in 1997 to overthrow elected President Ahmad Kabbah, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intervened under Nigerian leadership through the ECOWAS Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) to return Kabbah to power. This episode was also crucial in bringing a collective condemnation from the African continent and marked a key step in the emergence of the OAU/AU principle of non-recognition of unconstitutional changes in government. June 1998 saw the creation of the United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) with monitoring and disarmament advisory functions. Battles continued with the RUF rebels, who were also supported by Johnny Paul Koroma’s Armed Forces Revolutionary Council of army defectors. Operation No Living Thing, a particularly bloody offensive on Freetown in January 1999, killed 5,000, including several hundred ECOMOG troops, and 2,500 children were abducted. The Lomé Peace Agreement of
7 July 1999 seemed to offer a solution, outlining a unity government and political participation of the RUF and setting the stage for UNAMSIL to replace the existing political mission. However, the RUF had no intention of honoring an agreement that seemed to validate its use of violence for political ends, leading to many more months of fighting upon UNAMSIL’s arrival.

A Difficult Beginning

Security Council resolution 1270 (22 October 1999) created UNAMSIL with the mandate to support implementation of the Lomé Peace Agreement, aid the government in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), establish a troop presence in key parts of the country, support humanitarian access, and enable secure and free movement for UN personnel. In a first, the resolution provided UNAMSIL with a Chapter VII protection of civilians mandate, and also urged the government to undertake security sector reform (SSR) with international support.

Notably, the initial troop authorization was only 6,000, less than half the number of ECOMOG troops. While the resolution reflected an expectation that ECOMOG would continue to be present and work closely with the UN, Nigeria had been seeking to end ECOMOG’s deployment and planned a full withdrawal by December 1999. Resolution 1289 (7 February 2000) expanded the UN troop maximum to 11,000 and increased Chapter VII powers to cover humanitarian access, DDR, and support to the police, but this would still prove insufficient. In the course of a disorganized handover from ECOMOG, UNAMSIL also faced challenges owing to underprepared troops and differing troop-contributing country understandings of the robustness of the UNAMSIL mandate. The situation reached its nadir in May 2000, when RUF forces exploited UNAMSIL’s weakness after ECOMOG’s departure by kidnapping 500 UN peacekeepers. The UN was forced to rely on the mediation of Charles Taylor and his influence over the RUF to gain their release.

Mission Turnaround, and the Bilateral Role of the United Kingdom

As ‘Funmi Olonisakin has noted, the May 2000 mass kidnapping incident came to be understood in some corners of the UN as a “necessary evil” which galvanized the Security Council to properly address the challenges facing UNAMSIL and ultimately to transform the mission.[iii] The Security Council responded with a detailed reassessment of the operation, leading to a massive increase in troops and a restructuring and expansion that would make UNAMSIL the largest UN peacekeeping operation up to that point. Resolution 1299 (19 May 2000) increased UNAMSIL’s troop cap to 13,000, and Resolution 1313 (4 August 2000) set military strengthening and restructuring into motion, as well as emphasizing a robust response to any rebel attacks. By resolution 1346 (30 March 2001), UNAMSIL’s troop capacity was raised to its maximum, 17,500, to enforce a new ceasefire agreement established in Abuja on 10 November 2000. UNAMSIL’s rebirth was a significant organizational milestone, as well. Previously isolated from the UN Country Team, UNAMSIL became a pioneering example of the integrated mission structure, uniting the UN presence in Sierra Leone and thereby facilitating a smoother transition after the exit of UNAMSIL in 2005.

UNAMSIL’s recovery was significantly aided by the long-term bilateral involvement of the United Kingdom in its former area of influence. The UK initially dispatched 1,200 troops in May 2000 to offer consular protection to British nationals through Operation Palliser, though this was soon reduced to 200 troops who focused on SSR activities. The kidnapping of 11 UK troops in August 2000 prompted a show of force through rescue mission Operation Barras, which Alex Bellamy and Paul Williams suggest was “a crucial turning point where the combined government, UN, and British forces gained the psychological upper hand over the rebels.”[iv] Britain remained engaged over the long-term in Sierra Leone, taking the lead in training security forces and improving accountability in the security sector.
Under the leadership of Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) Oluyemi Adeniji, the strengthened UNAMSIL was able to take a two-pronged approach to the conflict, maintaining negotiations with the RUF through contact groups while using the newfound strength and credibility of the mission's military force to raise the costs of defection or spoiler action. The Abuja agreement of November 2000 brought the government and the RUF to a ceasefire under UN monitoring and sought to achieve humanitarian access and DDR. Implementation was halting, however, until parties addressed the concentration of RUF troops in the Kambia region, where the RUF was staging cross-border attacks on Guinea. By promoting the disarmament of both RUF and pro-government militias in the area, UNAMSIL was able end the clashes with Guinea and focus RUF attention on compliance with the Abuja ceasefire. The Kambia Formula was agreed on 2 May 2001, bolstering DDR efforts elsewhere in Sierra Leone and dramatically accelerating the end of the conflict.[v]

By 2002, the fighting in Sierra Leone was declared over. Elections were held largely without incident in May 2002 with multi-faceted UNAMSIL support, including the registration of more than two million voters, voter education campaigns, and training for police operations surrounding the elections. A Special Court and Truth and Reconciliation Commission were also underway by this time. UNAMSIL helped build schools and infrastructure, contributing to positive public perceptions, and a public survey commissioned by DPKO from January-February 2005 found that 80% of Sierra Leoneans rated the disarmament process as good or very good, with a similar number agreeing that UNAMSIL attempted to resolve communities' problems.[vi] Notably, UNAMSIL remained in the country for another three years until December 2005, undertaking consultative processes with the UN Country Team and government to ensure continuity in peacebuilding activities and the prevention of relapse into conflict.

The United Nations Integrated Office for Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL) was authorized by resolution 1620 (31 August 2005) and began work in January 2006. It was later followed in October 2008 by the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL), authorized by resolution 1829 (4 August 2008) and lasting until March 2014.

UNAMSIL concluded its six-year operation having suffered 192 total deaths, largely among troops. Its total costs were approximately $2.8 billion.[vii] A range of countries contributed personnel to UNAMSIL, with Nigeria, India, and Pakistan dispatching the most troops by far; Bangladesh, Ghana, Guinea, Jordan, Kenya, Nepal, Russia, Ukraine, and Zambia were also significantly involved.[viii]

II. Key Issues, Insights, and Challenges Emerging from UNAMSIL

1. Troop-Contributing Country Dynamics and Regional Roles

ECOMOG had spent several years in Sierra Leone by the time of UNAMSIL’s creation, and public sentiment in West Africa looked favorably upon the sacrifices made by Nigeria. Some in Sierra Leone and the region felt UNAMSIL’s dispatch indicated an undervaluing of Nigeria’s contribution, an impression furthered by the selection of an Indian Force Commander to work with the Nigerian SRSG and Deputy Force Commander. A seemingly strong leadership team that combined a Force Commander from the ablest supplier of UN troops with an SRSG and Deputy Force Commander from a regional player with the best understanding of the situation on the ground instead faltered amidst accusations of exclusion on one side and Nigerian collusion with the RUF diamond trade on the other. UNAMSIL found it necessary to restructure the leadership following the departure of the Indian contingent, placing a Kenyan in the Force Commander role. Recognition of Nigeria’s previous contributions and its continued engagement were clearly needed, but the withdrawal of highly skilled Indian troops was unfortunate.

The early days of UNAMSIL were also impacted by differing understandings among troop-contributing countries of Resolution 1270’s new protection of civilians mandate. Not all troop contributors understood the structure of the mandate, even those troops re-hatted from ECOMOG, and the beginning of the
mission suffered from command and control issues and limited troop willingness to risk their lives to defend colleagues or civilians. A DPKO assessment found that re-hatting of ECOMOG troops caused more problems than it solved due to confusion over the new mandate, raising questions about re-hatting missions in the future.\[^ix\] To mitigate such issues, the Secretary-General hosted a meeting at UN headquarters on 23 August 2000 with the defense chiefs from troop-contributing countries concerning command and control, properly equipped troops, and the UNAMSIL mandate and rules of engagement, a useful practice that has since become standard.\[^xi\]

2. Potential Positive Impact of Sustained Bilateral Support

The United Kingdom played an important role in promoting Security Council engagement with Sierra Leone, and in the eventual salvaging of UNAMSIL even while its troops deployed outside of the UN mission structure. Although, like most other western countries, the UK was no longer a significant troop contributor to UN peacekeeping missions by this point, the model of deploying special forces for particular combat missions, under separate national command and control, within the context of a broader peacekeeping operation, was one that became standard over the following years. UK troop involvement included a three-fold mission to engage in SSR, support the peace process through backing to UNAMSIL and DDR, and prevention of the conflict diamond trade.\[^xi\] Operationally, the UK’s dispatch of troops and “over the horizon” operations displaying the UK’s capacity for force bolstered UNAMSIL efforts and secured the capitol of Sierra Leone, Freetown, enabling UN troops to broaden their patrols and execute their mandate. The UK was also a major driver in the SSR process, shaping the army and police forces – long sources of instability in Sierra Leone – into more professional and accountable institutions. As Bellamy and Williams note, “most observers argued that the operation was not inspired by a desire to further Britain's political or commercial interests in the narrow sense of these terms. This suggests that peace operations by individual states can be tolerated and even widely supported in certain contexts.”\[^xii\]


UNAMSIL’s restructuring following the May 2000 crisis strongly shaped the development of the integrated mission concept and multi-hatted Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG), as noted by Espen Barth Eide et al. in a 2005 report than can be considered the “last word” on UN integrated missions.\[^xiii\] The SRSG could focus on diplomatic activities while two DSRSGs oversaw the political/administrative and governance/stabilization portfolios. DSRSG Alan Doss, serving in the latter role, was an early example of the triple-hatted DSRSG who simultaneously acted as the Resident Coordinator (chief of in-country development activities) and the Humanitarian Coordinator (chief of in-country humanitarian relief activities). The integrated structure enabled UN agencies to communicate better with peacekeeping missions, and also created a single point of contact for donor countries.\[^xiv\] This improved coordination also aided a robust exit strategy and smooth transfer of UNAMSIL’s responsibilities.

4. Critical Role of an Inclusive and Planned Exit Strategy

An especially important benefit of the abovementioned integrated mission concept for UNAMSIL was that it enabled a methodical and well-prepared mission drawdown which gradually transferred UNAMSIL duties to UNIOSIL and the Government of Sierra Leone. Though the conflict ended and elections were successfully held in 2002, UNAMSIL remained for three more years, thereby supporting the hard work of SSR and peacebuilding that ensures that backsliding or relapse into conflict do not follow the mission’s departure. Consultations took place between UNAMSIL, the government, and UNDP and the UN Country Team, and UNAMSIL mandates were shaped into a benchmarking system that guided the drawdown and clarified the transferred responsibilities.\[^xvi\] Megan Price and Lina Titulaer have noted the utility of the continuity in UN Country Team leadership owing to the new triple-hatted DSRSG structure, which allowed
the DSRSG to remain as the Executive Representative of the Secretary-General of UNIOSIL and as the Resident Coordinator of the UN Country Team.\[xvi\]

5. UN and Bilateral Support to SSR

Sierra Leone’s corrupt, exclusionary, and patronage-centered security institutions were drivers of instability even prior to the arrival of the RUF in 1991. Where present, the military and police were distrusted, while their reach often did not extend to the nation’s peripheries. The Lomé Peace Agreement recognized the importance of a security sector that truly served the entire nation. The need for security sector reform was first formally addressed in a UN peacekeeping setting in resolution 1270 and is now an established part of high-level policy and practice in the Security Council and Secretariat, as well as in the AU.\[xvii\] UNAMSIL’s SSR work included training and education for Sierra Leone’s police forces, particularly as regards management and security leading up to the successful 2002 elections. The United Kingdom’s leadership role in SSR in Sierra Leone also illustrated the value of sustained bilateral engagement in a process that requires multiple years to build institutional capacity, a culture of service, and civilian oversight mechanisms.

6. Conflict Minerals, Regional Interference, and the Panel of Experts

UNAMSIL also holds lessons in the importance of addressing regional dynamics and conflict minerals as drivers of instability. The RUF was financed by continued profits from its control of diamond mines in country areas throughout much of the conflict. Among the several likely reasons for Charles Taylor’s backing of the RUF was the benefit he derived from the flows of illicit and conflict diamonds through Liberia. The Security Council recognized this in resolution 1306 (5 July 2000), banning trade in Sierra Leonean diamonds and authorizing a Panel of Experts to study the illicit arms and diamond trade in the country. The Panel’s report in December 2000 found that RUF diamond profits were $25-125 million, sustaining continued operations, and that most diamonds were exported through Liberia.\[xviii\] Alex Vines and Tom Cargill have praised the Panel’s work methods, noting that “in working so closely with international civil society groups and industry to both produce the report and lobby for action in Sierra Leone, experts also offered a model for future panels.”\[xix\] Noting “unequivocal” proof that Liberia trained and equipped the RUF, the Panel also suggested a global certification scheme for diamonds and an embargo on Liberia’s trade in diamonds. Shortly thereafter, Security Council resolution 1343 (7 March 2001) took note of the Panel’s findings and demanded that Liberia cease support for the RUF and involvement in the Sierra Leonean diamond trade.

7. Shortcomings in Peace Agreements and Risks of Non-compliance

The failure of the Lomé Peace Agreement (7 July 1999) which immediately preceded UNAMSIL’s arrival underlines the dangers of devising mission strategy based on a flawed or unenforceable accord. The Lomé agreement granted blanket amnesty to RUF fighters and invited them into government, yet the rebels had a poor record of honoring agreements. Even when the SRSG added a handwritten note to the agreement, on the Secretary-General’s orders, that excluded perpetrators of mass atrocity crimes from the amnesty, the agreement was seen as an affront to victims of the conflict and left the RUF in control of substantial weapons and diamond resources. Yuuf Bangura has damned the agreement as “a terrible injustice to victims” that “also reinforced a deeply held view by the rebels that gross atrocities can yield handsome political dividends.”\[xx\] UNAMSIL’s initial mandate, in turn, was oriented around neutrally supporting the implementation of this questionable agreement with the expectation that the RUF would perceive the UN as a neutral force.\[xxi\] Lomé provides a reminder that peacekeeping is a political process, and that the results of a peacekeeping operation are only likely to be as good as the process around which it centers.

8. DDR Challenges and the Gender Dimension
75,000 soldiers had been disarmed and demobilized by 2002, but progress was initially variable during UNAMSIL’s deployment. DDR was included as part of the Lomé Peace Agreement, with 18,000 fighters disarmed until the May 2000 crisis halted progress. After UNAMSIL was strengthened, DDR accelerated, particularly following the Abuja ceasefire agreement. In early phases of DDR, a disarming fighter had to report to a reception center with his or her weapon, a policy which failed to address a gender dimension to DDR: Many women in rebel or militia groups were not in combat roles or were not allowed to give up their weapons, thereby reducing their participation.[xxii] Post-Abuja DDR allowed groups of fighters to undergo the process, but the participation of female fighters here was limited by their fear of retaliation or stigma at reception centers with intimidating numbers of men, the result of which was that female fighters could not join programs to receive reintegration and training assistance.[xxiii] As in SSR and other long-term processes, DDR in the UNAMSIL context was also challenged by donor interest in short-term results,[xxiv] meaning that disarmament and demobilization were prioritized while reintegration lagged behind in a country already dense with unskilled and unemployed young men.

III. UNAMSIL Literature Review

Analyses and Scholarly Works


Bangura’s article, written in the same year as UNAMSIL’s near-implosion and subsequent restructuring, traces various policy failures near the start of the mission. Particular attention is given to the government’s failure to improve its security forces and security policy during the conflicts of the 1990s, as well as to shortcomings of the Lomé Peace Agreement.


As part of a longer article on non-UN peacekeeping operations undertaken by regional or individual state actors, Bellamy and Williams evaluate the motives and results of the UK’s deep involvement in Sierra Leone and the role that its military played in parallel with UNAMSIL. The authors find that Britain’s efforts were largely accepted and may potentially offer a positive model for individual states’ peacekeeping operations in certain contexts, with intriguing implications for former colonial powers.


This article studies UNAMSIL as an example of multidimensional peacekeeping that seeks not merely to end conflict but to build a more positive peace through peacebuilding and human security-centered efforts.


Ebo’s article focuses on post-conflict SSR efforts, including a survey of the history and “cultures” of various components of the security sector prior to reform. Ebo’s work traces specific measures by which SSR was undertaken, moving beyond train-and-equip exercises into the realms of governance, local ownership, and connections between security and development, which would later became part of the UN
approach to SSR. Ebo would later become chief of DPKO’s SSR Unit, bringing with him a perspective informed by UNAMSIL’s lessons.


The Eide report is known as the definitive assessment of the UN integrated mission structure, and for this reason is useful reading because it reflects the influence of the restructured UNAMSIL on subsequent mission design.


This article explores the history of SSR in Sierra Leone, taking a wide view of the components of the security sector to include defense sector reform and parliamentary oversight, justice reform, police reform, and intelligence coordination. Gbila’s piece includes detailed accounting of the UK’s involvement in restructuring the armed forces, as well as DDR efforts.


This article looks at the history of weak institutional underpinnings of the security sector in Sierra Leone as a cause for instability, and describes various phases of police reform undertaken largely under UK tutelage before, during, and after the conflict.


Olonisakin’s book, part of a series on UN peacekeeping by the International Peace Academy (now the International Peace Institute), provides a concise but highly detailed account of UNAMSIL and the conflict in Sierra Leone. The analysis covers historical and regional factors leading up to and complicating UN and ECOMOG intervention, various peace agreements and ceasefires, dynamics among mission leadership and troop-contributing countries as well as headquarters, specific issues such as SSR, DDR, and conflict diamonds, and mission drawdown. While its date of publication in 2008 does not enable the book to cover the full spectrum of mission handover and peacebuilding issues, it enables a well-rounded understanding of UNAMSIL’s legacy. A chronology of events, listing of key UN documents, and reproduction of relevant Security Council resolutions and peace agreement texts are helpfully included as an annex.


Price and Titulaer’s recent work provides an in-depth look at UNAMSIL’s drawdown. While framed around the role of UNDP and the UN Country Team, it necessarily covers the consultations and benchmarking processes successfully undertaken with the government and the political and development arms of the UN. The report is also useful for understanding the role of the triple-hatted DSRSG in unifying the UN in-country presence and facilitating the handoff of PKO duties.

Sesay and Suma’s report focuses on the connections between DDR and transitional justice activities in Sierra Leone. It includes attention to whether one or both processes were included in various ceasefire and peace agreements and also addresses DDR issues that uniquely affected women in each process. Ample information is also available on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Special Court for Sierra Leone.


DPKO’s Peacekeeping and Best Practices Unit published this evaluation of generalizable peacekeeping lessons from UNAMSIL shortly after the mission’s turnaround. It includes a range of analyses of positive and negative lessons concerning such issues as bilateral support, re-hatting of troops, troop preparedness, the integrated mission concept, and SSR. While lacking the long-term perspective possible with a more recent analysis, the report provides a window into UN thinking at the time of UNAMSIL’s deployment.


Vines and Cargill approach the efficacy of UN sanctions and their related Panels of Experts through a study of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Information on Sierra Leone is centered around Security Council and outside action that resulted in tighter regulation of the conflict diamond trade which had fueled the RUF’s assault. It also outlines the direct effect of the report of the Panel of Experts that investigated diamond and weapon flows through Liberia.

**Relevant Resolutions, Reports, and Agreements**

- **Abuja Ceasefire Agreement.** 10 November 2000.
- **Lomé Peace Agreement.** 7 July 1999.


Ibid., 53.


For a full account, see Funmi Ononisakin, *Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone: The Story of UNAMSIL* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008), 103.


Ibid., 184.


[xxi] Ibid., 574


[xxiii] Ibid., 14.

[xxiv] Ibid., 15.