

The Mission Is Gone, but the UN Is Staying: Liberia's Peacekeeping Transition

DANIEL FORTI AND LESLEY CONNOLLY



Cover Photo: Traditional Liberian dancers perform during a farewell for the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) organized by the NGO Liberia Crusaders for Peace in Monrovia. The ceremony included musical and cultural performances and messages expressing gratitude. March 27, 2018. UN Photo/Albert González Farran.

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Suggested Citation:

Daniel Forti and Lesley Connolly, "The Mission Is Gone, but the UN Is Staying: Liberia's Peacekeeping Transition," International Peace Institute, December 2018.

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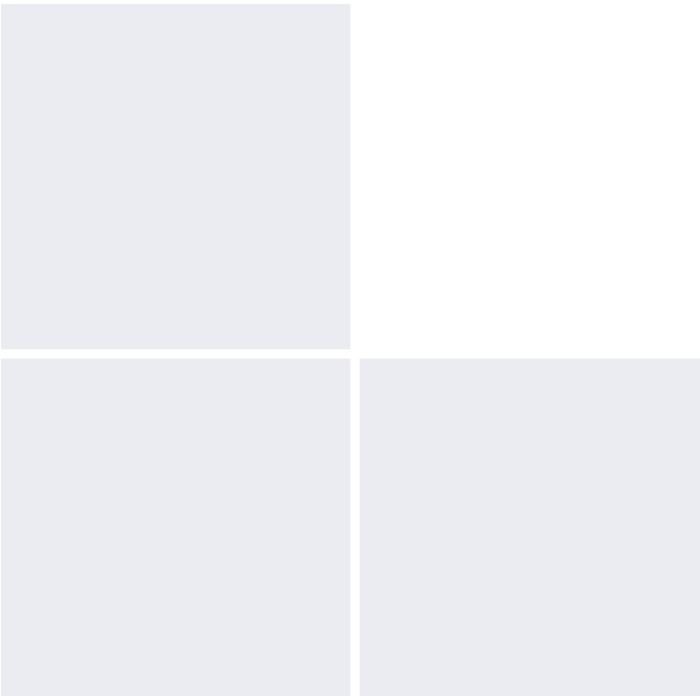
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the many UN officials, member states, Liberian officials, civil society organizations, and experts who shared their insights and perspectives during interviews conducted in New York and Monrovia. The authors are grateful to the individuals who provided feedback on earlier drafts of this report, including Jake Sherman, Andrew Dunbrack, Ellen Swedenmark, Margherita Capellino, and Jascha Scheele. The authors appreciate the dedicated efforts of Albert Trithart and Gretchen Baldwin during the revision phases, as well as the support from Laura Powers and Thong Nguyen for the background research and work on data visualization, respectively. All errors and opinions expressed are those of the authors alone.

IPI owes a debt of gratitude to its many donors for their generous support. This project was funded with the support of the government of Germany.



CONTENTS

Abbreviations	iii
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
History of UNMIL	3
Setting the Transition in Motion: Political and Operational Dynamics	4
AN EARLY FOCUS ON THE SECURITY OVER THE CIVILIAN TRANSITION	
THE 2016 STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT: BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR THE TRANSITION	
LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR SUSTAINING PEACE AFTER UNMIL	
SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 2333: A CONTENTIOUS COMPROMISE	
Planning the Transition (January–October 2017)	13
THE LIBERIA PEACEBUILDING PLAN: A STEP TOWARD NATIONAL OWNERSHIP?	
THE UNCT'S CAPACITY MAPPING: FILLING THE GAPS LEFT BY UNMIL	
THE SECRETARIAT'S PROCESSES FOR DECIDING LIBERIA'S FUTURE CONFIGURATION	
THE PEACEBUILDING COMMISSION: A FORUM FOR INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT	
INTEGRATED TRANSITION PLANNING IN THE FIELD	
The Dual Transition	22
LIBERIA'S 2017 NATIONAL ELECTIONS	
UN SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THE GOVERNANCE TRANSITION	
"THE LIBERIA MOMENT" AND UNMIL'S DEPARTURE	

Liberia's Next-Generation Country Team 28

THE EXPANDED RESIDENT COORDINATOR'S
OFFICE: TESTING A NEW MODEL

A GROWING ROLE FOR UNDP

UN AGENCIES, FUNDS, AND PROGRAMS
FINDING THEIR FOOTING

AN INDEPENDENT OHCHR OFFICE:
KEEPING THE FOCUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

COMPLEMENTARY SUPPORT FROM
MULTILATERAL PARTNERS

THE MULTI-PARTNER TRUST FUND:
AVOIDING THE FINANCIAL CLIFF

THE PEACEBUILDING COMMISSION IN A
POST-UNMIL LIBERIA

THE ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF UNMIL'S
WITHDRAWAL

Conclusions. 37

PLANNING AND COORDINATING THE TRANSITION

BRIDGING THE GAPS LEFT BY THE MISSION'S
DEPARTURE

NAVIGATING THE DYNAMICS IN NEW YORK

MANAGING LOCAL PERCEPTIONS

Abbreviations

AfDB	African Development Bank
AU	African Union
DPA	UN Department of Political Affairs
DPKO	UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ITF-LT	UN Integrated Task Force on the Liberia Transition
LTMPTF	Liberia Transition Multi-Partner Trust Fund
NEC	Liberian National Elections Commission
OHCHR	Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
PBC	UN Peacebuilding Commission
PBF	UN Peacebuilding Fund
RCO	Resident coordinator's office
SMC	Statement of mutual commitments
SRSG	Special representative of the secretary-general
UNCT	UN country team
UNDAF	UN Development Assistance Framework
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNMIL	UN Mission in Liberia
UNOCI	UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire
UNOWAS	UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel

Executive Summary

From 2003 to 2018, the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was ever-present throughout the country. The peacekeeping mission's work, and its transition from a mission to a non-mission setting, are considered positive examples of how the UN can support countries through conflict and post-conflict phases. Nevertheless, there are many lessons from UNMIL's transition that member states, UN officials, and international partners can learn in order to strengthen future UN peacekeeping transitions.

UNMIL's preliminary transition planning (from early 2010 to June 2016) demonstrated the necessity for the UN to balance and comprehensively integrate civilian and military transition planning. Initial efforts focused disproportionately on the security handover, driven by the rationale that Liberians need to ensure their own security before the UN can consider withdrawing its peacekeeping mission. As a result, planning for the civilian transition was not given the same level of focus and not appear to significantly guide subsequent planning once UNMIL received its final transition mandate.

Once UNMIL received this mandate in December 2016, the UN and Liberian government undertook numerous planning processes and exercises to anchor the transition. Two tools in particular shaped the transition: the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan, which was the first comprehensive peacebuilding planning framework mandated by the Security Council for a transition; and the capacity mapping exercise initiated by UN leadership in Liberia and led by the UN country team to map capacities and identify gaps that would be left by UNMIL's departure. While the Peacebuilding Plan identified the substantive priorities intended to drive the UN's work during the transition, the capacity mapping exercise assessed the extent to which the UN in Liberia could actually undertake those commitments post-UNMIL. Together, these concretely shaped transition planning processes at UN headquarters and in the field.

In September 2017, the Executive Committee decided, out of three options, that UNMIL would transition to a strengthened resident coordinator's office with a political, peace, and development

analysis unit, along with a stand-alone office for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)—a test case for the ongoing UN development reforms. The post-UNMIL country team configuration is also supported by multilateral partners, a multi-partner trust fund, and the UN Peacebuilding Office. Despite the innovation of this model, there are significant challenges ahead for this office in terms of sustaining the peace in the country.

In many regards, this can be considered a successful transition, and much can be learned from Liberia for future transitions. However, these successes do not guarantee that Liberia will be a successful case of effective peacebuilding and sustaining peace. It is imperative that member states and the UN Secretariat change their approach to transitions from racing against deadlines to instead viewing them as processes that begin well before a peacekeeping mission closes and continue for several years after the mission ends. By viewing transitions as long-term, multi-stakeholder activities, member states have the opportunity to ensure that future transition programs adopt integrated approaches that provide adequate political, operational, and financial mechanisms supporting changing UN presences on the ground. The following insights could help guide future UN transitions.

1. **Planning and coordinating the transition:** The UN confronted what amounted to a “triple transition”: to a new Liberian administration, a new UN country configuration in Liberia, and the impending UN development system reforms, which will be instituted beginning on January 1, 2019. The Liberia Peacebuilding Plan was an innovative but imperfect tool for supporting this process—praised by stakeholders in New York but questioned by their counterparts in Liberia. Moreover, the phased approach to the transition, while a valuable model, under-prioritized the civilian transition.
2. **Bridging the gaps left by the mission's departure:** The empowered resident coordinator's office is a useful transition model but did not receive the immediate capacity necessary to compensate for the substantive gaps left by the mission's departure. Moreover, the UN neither possessed the funding architecture to effectively

support the transition nor compensated for the closure of field offices and other mission presences outside of Monrovia.

3. **Navigating the dynamics in New York:** Security Council politics directly impacted the planning and sequencing of Liberia's transition, artificially forcing a deadline that did not reflect the complex realities of transitioning during an election period. At the same time, Liberia's concurrent position on the Security Council and Peacebuilding Commission agendas strengthened the transition by sustaining international engagement.
4. **Managing local perceptions:** Despite its best efforts, the UN struggled to communicate about the transition, fueling perceptions that the UN as a whole—not just the UN mission—was leaving. Moreover, the country team confronts residual grievances resulting from Liberians' perception that the transition has negatively impacted the country's economy.

Introduction

On March 30, 2018, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) completed its peacekeeping mandate, and by the end of June, the few remaining UNMIL staff had either been transferred to other missions or incorporated into the remaining UN presence in the country. After fifteen years of peacekeeping, the mission officially closed. In addition to UNMIL's departure, Liberia experienced a historic political transition when, on January 22, 2018, President George Weah was sworn into office in the "first handover of presidential power following an inclusive and competitive election since Liberia's establishment as a republic in 1847."¹

UN peacekeeping was an ever-present feature of Liberian society from 2003 until 2018. Walking hand in hand with the country as it emerged from a deadly civil war, UNMIL supported implementation of a comprehensive peace agreement, created an environment suitable for a new governance system, and helped shepherd new institutions responsible for security, public administration, and

socioeconomic development. The peacekeeping mission was a larger-than-life presence; its annual budget often exceeded that of the government. UNMIL's positive impact notwithstanding, UN peacekeeping is neither designed nor expected to be a permanent fixture in a developing post-conflict nation.

UNMIL's role in Liberia and the UN's transition from a mission to a non-mission presence are viewed as positive examples of UN peacekeeping, and Liberia's overall recovery since 2005 is often referenced as a post-conflict success story.² The UN's use of a peacebuilding plan and capacity mapping exercise have been highlighted as innovative tools during this transition period. Despite these innovations, there are many dynamics to study and learn from in order to strengthen future UN peacekeeping transitions.

This paper examines the process of Liberia's transition from a peacekeeping mission to a UN country team configuration. It focuses largely on the period beginning in July 2016 (following the formal handover of security from UNMIL to the Liberian government) through July 2018 (following the conclusion of UNMIL's substantive mandate and withdrawal process). The subsequent analysis identifies the political and operational dynamics that drove the transition, examines the policy processes and context within which the transition was executed, and assesses the ability of the UN's post-mission configuration to sustain peace in Liberia.

That analysis is based on desktop research, thirteen interviews in New York City, and twenty-seven interviews in Monrovia, Liberia. All interviews were conducted between July and September 2018 with representatives of international donors and development partners in Liberia, member-state representatives in New York, members of the UN Secretariat in New York, the UN country team in Liberia, civil society in New York and Liberia, and members of the government of Liberia.

This paper is part of a larger IPI project on UN transitions and is complemented by similar case studies on the transitions from UN mission to non-

¹ UN Security Council, *Special Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*. UN Doc. S/2016/168, November 15, 2016, p. 2.

² Ellen Johnson Sirleaf address to the 72nd United Nations General Assembly, September 19, 2017, available at www.africanews.com/2017/09/20/liberia-is-a-post-conflict-success-story-sirleaf-in-final-un-address/.

mission presences in Côte d'Ivoire and Haiti.

History of UNMIL

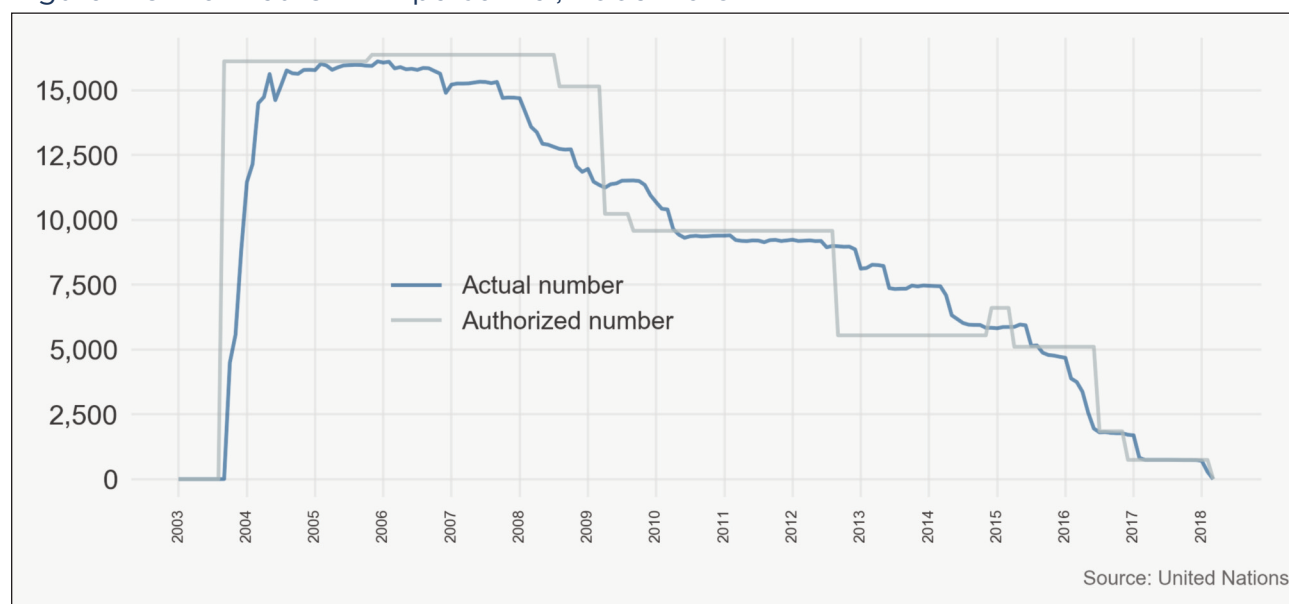
Violent civil conflict in Liberia—driven by political exclusion and ethnic polarization—lasted from 1989 to 2003 (with a temporary reprieve from 1997 to 2000). The UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) succeeded the UN Office in Liberia (UNOL) (1997–2003) and the UN Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) (1993–1997). Each UN mission worked to complement and backstop political and military efforts undertaken by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which led efforts to end Liberia's civil war.³

The 2003 Accra Peace Agreement requested the UN to deploy a multinational force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter to support Liberia's new transitional government and implementation of

the peace agreement.⁴ The UN Security Council authorized the creation of UNMIL through Resolution 1509 in September 2003.⁵ This resolution also transferred authority from the ECOWAS-led ECOMIL forces to UNMIL.

UNMIL played a critical role in countrywide stabilization efforts in Liberia, facilitating the shift from a transitional administration to one mandated by multiple elections, the establishment of the Liberian army and Liberian national police, and the beginning of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding. Following the successful conduct of national elections in 2005, the Security Council shifted UNMIL's substantive mandate toward rehabilitating and reintegrating ex-combatants, security sector reform, judicial reform, human rights support, and the consolidation of state authority.⁶

Figure 1. Uniformed UNMIL personnel, 2003–2018⁷



3 Comfort Ero, "UN Peacekeeping in West Africa," in *From Global Apartheid to Global Village: Africa and the United Nations*, Adekeye Adebajo, ed. (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), pp. 283–304.

4 Enforcement actions (including peace operations) authorized by the UN Security Council under Chapter VII are those that permit the use of armed force to respond to situations that the Security Council deems "threats to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression" and to maintain or restore international peace and security. United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, June 26, 1945, Chapter VII; UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 27 August 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Ghana to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, Annex: "Peace Agreement between the Government of Liberia, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia and the Political parties," UN Doc. S/2003/850, August 29, 2003, available at https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/LR_030818_Peace%20Agreement%20btwn%20GovLiberia%2CLURD%2CMODEL%20and%20the%20Political%20Parties.pdf.

5 UN Security Council Resolution 1509 (September 19, 2003), UN Doc. S/RES/1509.

6 "Liberia (UNMIL)," in *Annual Review of Global Peace Operations 2007*, Ian Johnstone, ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007), pp. 74–82.

7 Adapted from Global Peace Operations Review, "Uniformed Personnel on UNMIL (2003–2018)," NYU Center on International Cooperation (CIC), available at <https://peaceoperationsreview.org/featured-data#unmil>.

At its peak of over 16,000 deployed military and police personnel in 2006, UNMIL was the largest UN peacekeeping mission in the world (see Figure 1). On June 30, 2016, UNMIL completed the transfer of security responsibilities to Liberian authorities, in accordance with Security Council Resolution 2239 (2015). On March 30, 2018, UNMIL successfully completed its final substantive mandate—Security Council Resolution 2333—and the fifteen-year peacekeeping operation officially concluded its work. In its place, the UN left behind a UN country team (UNCT) comprised of a resident coordinator's office (RCO) and eighteen agencies, funds, and programs to continue peacebuilding and development work throughout the country.⁸

Setting the Transition in Motion: Political and Operational Dynamics

UNMIL's preliminary transition planning (from early 2010 to June 2016) demonstrated the necessity for the UN to balance and comprehensively integrate civilian and military transition planning. Initial efforts focused disproportionately on undertaking the security handover from UNMIL to the Liberian government. This focus was driven by the UN's rationale and logic for an effective transition: Liberians need to ensure their own security before the UN can consider withdrawing its peacekeeping mission. Thus, the security transition received significantly more high-level political engagement than the civilian transition. In addition, findings and recommendations from UNMIL's early civilian transition planning initiatives did not appear to significantly guide the UN's transition planning once UNMIL received its transition mandate in December 2016.

AN EARLY FOCUS ON THE SECURITY OVER THE CIVILIAN TRANSITION

Early discussions on the civilian transition first emerged in June 2009, nearly two years after the security handover process began. In a report presenting findings from an April 2009 technical assessment mission, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted that UNMIL and the UNCT "have initiated joint transition planning with a view to ensuring the country team could continue delivering programs in the absence of UNMIL logistical and transport assets."⁹ The report also established the 2011 national elections as an explicit benchmark for the transition.

Formal, coordinated transition planning on the civilian side began one year later. A June 2010 seminar organized by the Social Science Research Council brought together government and UN officials to discuss transition planning, drawing on experiences from earlier UN transitions.¹⁰ The seminar focused explicitly on security transitions but also provided valuable lessons for the broader peacekeeping transition.¹¹ This seminar fed into the formal launch of the transition process on July 15, 2010, when Liberia's National Security Council established a transition planning working group comprising government and UN officials.

The secretary-general alluded to the importance of integrating UNMIL with the UNCT in his August 2010 report. However, he referred to this within the "Delivering as One" framework—an initiative to "build on achievements to date, increase government ownership, deliver more coordinated, effective and efficient assistance to the country, and ensure a smooth UNMIL transition"—instead of a transition planning framework.¹² He mentioned that "[Delivering as One] provides a backdrop for planning the eventual transfer of some of the civilian-related

8 Sixteen agencies, funds, and programs continued their work following UNMIL's departure; two new ones (the resident coordinator's office and the independent office of OHCHR) were created following UNMIL's departure, bringing the total to eighteen. UNMIL, "UNMIL Completes Its Mandate in a Now Peaceful Liberia," Press Release No. 3003-18, March 30, 2018, available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/unmil-completes-its-mandate-now-peaceful-liberia>.

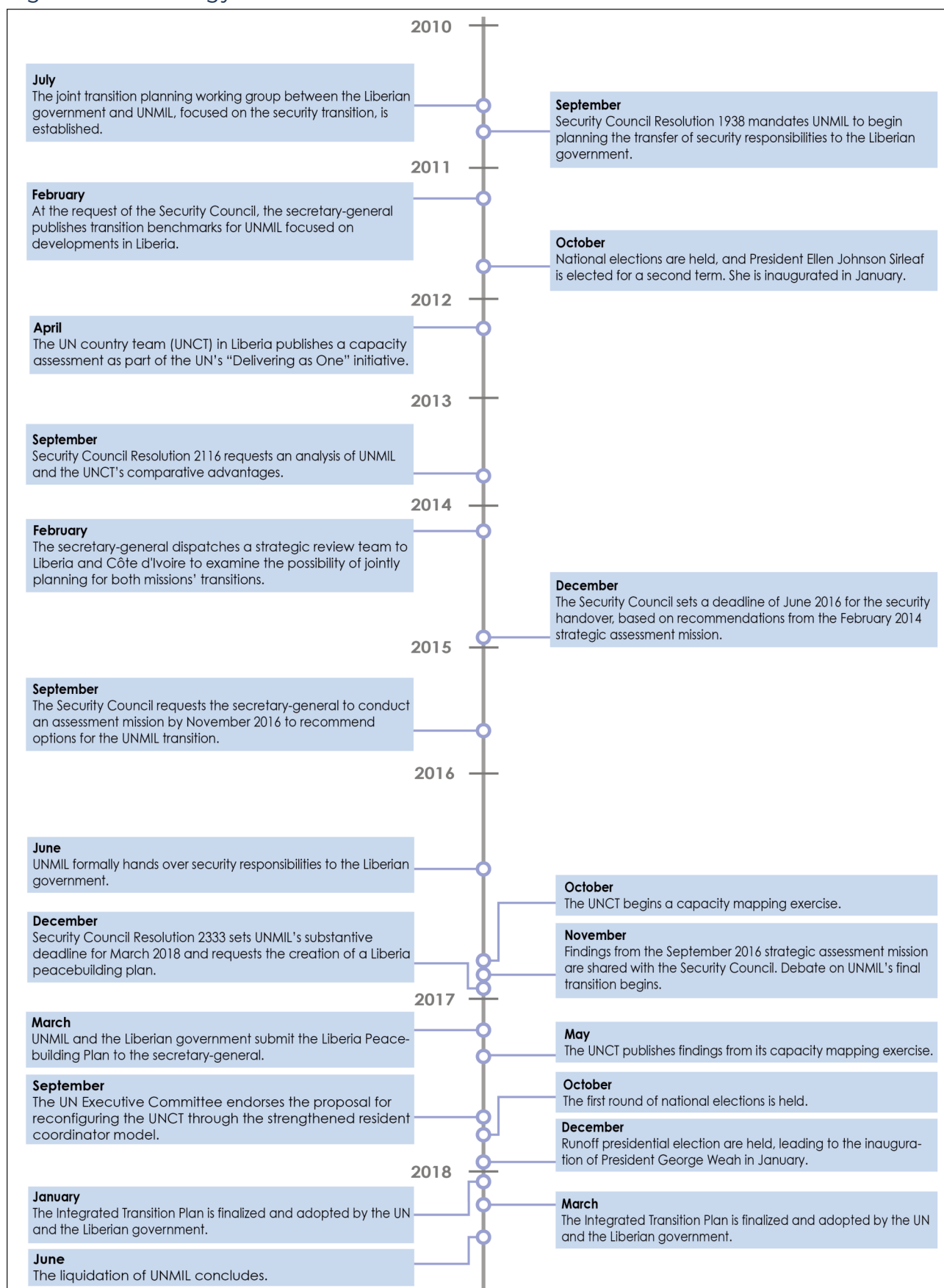
9 UN Security Council, *Special Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2009/299, June 9, 2009, para. 51.

10 UN Mission in Liberia, "Message from the Special Representative of the Secretary-General," *UN Focus* 6, No. 4 (June-August 2010), p. 2, available at <https://unmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unmilfocus24.pdf>.

11 These lessons included: "the importance of early planning based on a comprehensive understanding of the situation in the country, ensuring national ownership of the process, prioritizing security sector reform as the basis for a successful transition, involving civil society and key stakeholders, and keeping the population informed." UN Security Council, *Twenty-First Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2010/429, August 11, 2010, paras. 55 and 67.

12 United Nations in Liberia, *Delivering as One Fact Sheet*, 2011, available at <https://ims.undg.org/downloadFile/5498413047308>.

Figure 2. Chronology of the UN transition in Liberia



responsibilities of UNMIL to other UN entities.”¹³ He also emphasized that future reports on UNMIL would include regular updates on the transition planning process.¹⁴

Security transition planning accelerated when the Security Council provided a formal mandate for the process in September 2010 with Resolution 1938 (2010), which requested the secretary-general to prepare a “joint transition plan on the transfer of responsibility for internal security.”¹⁵ By referring only to the security elements, however, the council missed an opportunity to ground the civilian planning exercises already underway in a formalized process. The secretary-general’s February 2011 report provided the institutional framework for UNMIL’s security transition by outlining six core benchmarks and another four contextual benchmarks that would feature regularly in subsequent reports and Security Council mandates.¹⁶ While the contextual benchmarks spoke indirectly to conducive conditions for a civilian transition, there would be no other formal benchmarks from either the secretary-general or the Security Council during the transition process.

While progress on the security transition continued throughout 2011, the civilian transition does not appear to have received high-level attention from the Security Council or UN headquarters until after Liberia’s 2011 elections and the inauguration of its new government. Focus on the civilian transition resumed following the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2008 (2011), which mandated the secretary-general to deploy another technical assessment mission in February 2012 to assess progress on the security drawdown. Simultaneously, UNMIL undertook the cataloging of civilian tasks, while the UNCT

launched an internal capacity assessment, a precursor to the one it would conduct during the civilian transition process five years later. These processes formed part of the UN’s “Delivering as One” initiative in Liberia.

The report that followed these processes advanced the transition process in three clear ways. First, the secretary-general explicitly acknowledged the need to substantively expand the transition process beyond the security realm and requested a concurrent shift in UNMIL’s mandate.¹⁷ The report specifically requested reconfiguring UNMIL’s mandate to support the government in advancing strategic planning and management of the transition process, national reconciliation, constitutional reform, and decentralization.¹⁸ Second, the report proposed a deadline of mid-2015 for the partial withdraw of UNMIL’s military component, based on an agreement between UNMIL and the government. Third, it emphasized the capacity mapping’s conclusion that the “country team would probably not be in a position to assume most of the Mission’s civilian functions.”¹⁹

These findings were reflected in Security Council Resolution 2066 (2012), which codified UNMIL’s sequenced transition, with the drawdown of its armed component as the first stage. The resolution endorsed the secretary-general’s recommended three-phase, partial drawdown of UNMIL’s military and police forces between 2012 and mid-2015; encouraged UNMIL to strengthen its support to the Liberian government on new substantive priorities such as national reconciliation, constitutional reform, and decentralization; and mandated UNMIL to recruit qualified specialists to support the security sector transition. However, it did not include revised transition benchmarks.²⁰

13 UN Security Council, *Twenty-First Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2010/429, August 11, 2010, paras. 52–53.

14 *Ibid.*, para. 67.

15 UN Security Council Resolution 1938 (September 15, 2010), UN Doc. S/RES/1938, para. 5.

16 The core benchmarks include: completion and implementation of a strategy and plan for the handover of security responsibilities from UNMIL to national authorities; institutionalization of the national security architecture in line with the national security strategy; maintenance of law and order by national security institutions; enhanced national capacity to secure and control the borders; increased effectiveness of state authority throughout Liberia; and the conduct of peaceful, credible, and accepted national elections in 2011. The contextual benchmarks include: enhanced access to justice and effectiveness of the criminal justice system, progress on national reconciliation, enhanced government capacity to mitigate conflict factors, and progress toward improved public financial management. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2011/72, February 14, 2011, Annex 1.

17 UN Security Council, *Special Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2012/230, April 16, 2012, para. 65.

18 *Ibid.*; UN Country Team Liberia, “Capacity Assessments of UNCT Agencies—Liberia,” April 2012.

19 UN Security Council, *Special Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2012/230, April 16, 2012, para. 65.

20 UN Security Council Resolution 2066 (September 17, 2012), UN Doc. S/RES/2066.

Developments between 2013 and 2014 and the resulting recommendations from the Secretariat to the Security Council highlighted the transition process's progress as well as its shortcomings. Building off the requests put forward by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2116 (2013), the UN undertook three distinct reviews: a joint UNMIL-UNCT comparative advantages study,²¹ a joint strategic review of UNMIL and the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) led by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and an electoral needs assessment mission. UNMIL and the UNCT formed a joint working group on the transition and undertook three simultaneous internal transition planning processes focusing on the overarching security sector transition, the process for closing UNMIL offices outside Monrovia, and an internal drawdown plan considering the implications for national staff.²²

UNMIL and the UNCT's comparative advantages study exposed dynamics that would later shape UNMIL's civilian transition. As described by Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) Karin Landgren in March 2015, "The [comparative advantages] analyses to date show little to no overlap in Mission and Country Team activity. With few exceptions... the agencies funds and programs are not set up to fulfill mandated activities."²³ Reflecting on this study and later planning efforts, she also stressed the importance of a gradual transition and reconfiguration of the UN's in-country presence, the need for joint and integrated approaches between the UN mission and UNCT early in the process, and honest assessments about the impact of losing mission enablers on overall UN effectiveness.²⁴ Moreover, the months following the study provided UNMIL the first opportunity to conduct

internal and external consultations on what a successor to UNMIL might look like.²⁵

By contrast, the DPKO-led strategic review mission in 2014 focused heavily on the security transition. It recommended an accelerated timeline for completing the security handover by the end of 2016, a recommendation endorsed by the secretary-general. This accelerated timeline highlighted the importance of Liberia taking on all national security responsibilities well in advance of the 2017 elections to ensure the security transition would not interfere with or influence them.²⁶ However, the same logic of avoiding a "dual transition"—the peacekeeping transition and the government transition—would not carry over into UNMIL's final phase, as discussed below. The secretary-general also called for UNMIL to accelerate its support to Liberia's national reconciliation efforts, political processes, and elections and its provision of good offices well in advance of the transition, thus recognizing the mission was doing more than merely working with the security forces in the country.²⁷

While UNMIL's substantive mandates highlighted the peacekeeping mission's extensive and substantive civilian work, the transition related-language in Security Council Resolution 2190 (2014) underscored the council's overemphasis on the security handover compared with the civilian transition. For example, it requested the government of Liberia to formulate "a concrete plan, with timelines and benchmarks" for the security sector transition. The resolution again missed the opportunity to mandate UNMIL to consolidate and formalize planning for an eventual civilian transition.²⁸

With the Ebola outbreak in Liberia and

21 This study was framed as a follow-up to the 2012 capacity mapping exercise in order to identify the comparative advantages. The full study was not made public; its findings are briefly summarized in a report of the secretary-general to the Security Council. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Eighth Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2014/598, August 15, 2014, paras. 50-53.

22 Interview with former UNMIL official, New York, August 2018.

23 Karin Landgren, "End of Assignment Report—UNMIL," United Nations, March 2015 (report shared by author).

24 Ibid.

25 UN Security Council, *Twenty-Eighth Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2014/598, August 15, 2014, para. 60; Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, July 2018; Interview with former UNMIL official, New York, August 2018.

26 UN Security Council, *Twenty-Eighth Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2014/598, August 15, 2014, para. 61.

27 Ibid., paras. 60-61.

28 UN Security Council Resolution 2190 (December 15, 2014), UN Doc. S/RES/2190.

neighboring countries throughout 2014 and 2015,²⁹ the Security Council suspended UNMIL's military drawdown and maintained existing force levels. The Ebola outbreak shifted the priorities of the mission from drawdown and civilian transition planning to emergency response. This was a calculated shift, as continuing UNMIL's withdrawal at the height of the outbreak would have fueled perceptions that the UN was abandoning Liberia during a time of need. In addition, UNMIL had some of the only transportation and aviation units in the country, which were providing vital support to the emergency response.³⁰ That said, given that the outbreak was most acute during Liberia's rainy season (May–December 2014), it would have been logistically difficult for UNMIL to continue drawdown efforts in remote areas of the country anyway. The drawdown resumed four months later, as authorized by Security Council Resolution 2215.

UNMIL's transition during this period was facilitated by the Security Council's authorization of a quick reaction force, a valuable burden-sharing security mechanism. This inter-mission cooperation arrangement between UNMIL and UNOCI was mandated to temporarily reinforce UNMIL if Liberia's security situation deteriorated rapidly.³¹ Building on recommendations from the earlier joint UNMIL-UNOCI assessment, the Security Council later endorsed the quick reaction force and mandated it to support UNMIL and Liberia during the mission's drawdown in extreme circumstances.³²

The secretary-general's two reports on UNMIL in 2015 similarly afforded little attention to documenting, analyzing, or recommending planning for the civilian transition, even as informal, technical planning continued. The only

explicit reference was in his August 2015 report, where he observed, "The conclusion of the security transition should trigger a reimagining of United Nations Engagement in Liberia," and committed to recommend successor options for UNMIL to the Security Council following the completed security handover.³³

The subsequent Security Council Resolution 2239 (September 2015) marked the first time the body formally engaged the question of a post-UNMIL presence for the UN in Liberia. In this resolution, the council formally requested the secretary-general to conduct an assessment mission "to consider the possible withdrawal of UNMIL and transition to a future United Nations presence... in order to provide recommendations to the Security Council by 15 November 2016."³⁴

THE 2016 STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT: BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR THE TRANSITION

The transfer of security responsibility from UNMIL to the Liberian government took place in June 2016, when the UN formally handed over core security tasks and withdrew 2,350 troops and 553 police personnel. This marked the completion of the transition's first phase, as mandated by Security Council Resolution 2239 (2015) and the joint UN-Liberia security transition plan.³⁵ Shortly thereafter, attention shifted quickly to questions about the UN's post-peacekeeping future in the country.

Despite the various internal planning initiatives between 2009 and 2016, the UN Secretariat's strategic assessment mission from August 29 to September 8, 2016, represented the first tangible evidence of high-level political and policy engagement with the civilian transition. For the interim period of August–December 2016, the Security Council passed Resolution 2308 to roll over

29 The Ebola virus swept across Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone between March 2014 and December 2015. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported 10,666 cumulative cases of infection in Liberia and 4,806 deaths between March 2014 and May 2015, the date when the Liberian government declared the country "Ebola-free." A 2016 study from the World Bank estimated the outbreak's economic impact on Liberia at approximately \$300 million. The UN's response to the Ebola outbreak was undertaken by UNMIL and the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER). More information can be found in: US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "The Cost of the Ebola Epidemic," Report No. CS263539-C, 2016; and Ali Zafar, Cyrus Talati, and Errol Graham, "2014-2015 West Africa Ebola Crisis: Impact Update," World Bank, May 10, 2016.

30 Adam Lupel and Michael Snyder, "The Mission to Stop Ebola: Lessons from UN Crisis Response," International Peace Institute, February 2017.

31 UN Security Council Resolution 2162 (June 25, 2014), UN Doc. S/RES/2142, paras. 32-33.

32 Security Council Resolution 2295 authorized transfer of the quick reaction force from UNOCI to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization in Mali (MINUSMA). UN Security Council Resolution 2295 (June 29, 2016), UN Doc. S/RES/2295, para. 41.

33 UN Security Council, *Thirtieth Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2015/620, August 13, 2015, para. 82.

34 UN Security Council Resolution 2239 (September 17, 2015), UN Doc. S/RES/2239, para. 18.

35 UN Security Council, *Thirty-Second Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2016/706, August 12, 2016, paras. 37-54.

UNMIL's existing mandate until December 31, 2016. This resolution affirmed the Security Council's intent to engage with the upcoming recommendations from the strategic assessment mission and requested an update on modalities for transferring the quick reaction force.

The strategic assessment mission and the resulting secretary-general's report were watershed junctures in transition planning for Liberia. Some of the analyses and recommendations served as cornerstones for the UN's implementation of the civilian transition. However, political dynamics within the Security Council and operational planning would ultimately drive the sequencing of critical transition deadlines and processes, somewhat divorcing them from on-the-ground realities in Liberia.

The assessment's first recommendation encouraged the Security Council to adopt a mandate for UNMIL that would sharpen the mission's role in consolidating peace.³⁶ It also proposed that the council continue authorizing UNMIL as a Chapter VII mission until June 30, 2018, noting the importance of ensuring that national security institutions could "maintain stability independent of the peacekeeping operation... particularly in the context of the 2017 elections."³⁷ The report stated clearly that the country's election dynamics would be challenging: the 2017 elections were scheduled to result in the first handover of presidential power through an inclusive and competitive election in the country's history. Combined with high levels of administrative centralization within Liberia's executive branch, this meant the elections were set to be highly contested. The funding and logistical challenges facing Liberia's National Elections Commission (NEC) further raised the prospects of election-related disputes.³⁸

In line with this recommendation, the strategic assessment mission put forward three options for the Security Council, designed in the context of the quick reaction force's capability to provide support to Liberia if necessary:

1. Withdrawal and establishment of a successor

peacekeeping mission: Under this option, the UN would establish a new peacekeeping mission for the transition period, maintaining military and police advisory capacity (21 soldiers and 100 police). It would also provide a physical and operational headquarters for the temporary deployment of uniformed personnel from other peacekeeping missions. With short timelines and a sensitive political context, the secretary-general advised against this option.

2. **Status quo:** This option entailed maintaining UNMIL's authorized strength based on the parameters set in Resolution 2239. While describing this as the least disruptive option, the secretary-general cautioned that it might undermine public confidence in national institutions because UNMIL would still appear to provide security support after the security handover.

3. **Drawdown:** Under this option, the UN would withdraw battalions and related enablers by March 2017, leaving twenty-eight military personnel (fourteen advisers and fourteen observers) and two formed police units. The secretary-general recommended this option because he anticipated it would minimize the disruption of UNMIL's services and signal the UN's continued political support to Liberia.

The range of options presented (and their implications) exposed challenging dynamics for the transition process. The strategic assessment team included technical experts in political, military, human rights, and development issues, had strong in-country leadership from SRSF Farid Zarif (who succeeded Landgren in August 2015), and communicated widely with domestic interlocutors at all levels. However, participants in the strategic assessment mission observed that DPKO (the lead department) confronted opposing pressures: while the Liberian government pushed for UNMIL to stay as long as possible, some Security Council members urged UNMIL to withdraw as quickly as possible.³⁹ More complex peacekeeping missions (for example those in the Central African Republic,

36 UN Security Council, *Special Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2016/968, November 15, 2016, para. 51.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., paras. 7-9.

39 Interviews with UN Secretariat officials, New York, July 2018; Interviews with UNDP officials, New York, July 2018.

Mali, and South Sudan) were straining the department's resources, and officials surmised that resources from UNMIL could be employed more effectively elsewhere.⁴⁰ These pressures would be reflected in the Security Council's deliberations.

The report also offered the first substantive guidance on how the UN Secretariat would initiate the civilian transition process. The secretary-general committed the UNCT to a new capacity mapping exercise to assess whether it had enough expertise and resources to address Liberia's priorities for consolidating peace after UNMIL's departure. However, this commitment made no reference to the 2012 capacity assessment exercise or the 2013 comparative advantages study, exposing either that little progress had been made in addressing the gaps these exercises had identified or that their work had not been engaged. Directly referencing the UN's sustaining peace framework, the secretary-general encouraged the UN's joint transition planning group to develop a "concrete and time-bound plan" for the transition framework, which would ultimately become Liberia's Integrated Transition Plan.⁴¹

The report also encouraged the UNCT to conduct more joint programming with UNMIL on mandated tasks and suggested that the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) could develop a transition package for the country.⁴² Encouraging the UN to consult with the new Liberian government, the secretary-general recommended deferring final decisions on the post-mission setup pending a joint assessment. Each of these recommendations would become important later in the transition process.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR SUSTAINING PEACE AFTER UNMIL

The UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) played an important role during UNMIL's tenure and helped ground the transition. Liberia's engagement with the PBC began in May 2010 when it was first placed on the body's agenda at the request of the

Liberian government. The PBC's Liberia Configuration was chaired by Jordan until April 2012, when Sweden took over.

In November 2010, the Liberian government and the PBC jointly adopted a "statement of mutual commitments (SMC) on peacebuilding in Liberia," which identified tangible peacebuilding priorities, each with specific commitments for both the government and the PBC. As the closest the UN had to a binding agreement with the Liberian government, the SMC strived to promote accountability and set shared expectations. Liberia's SMC underwent five progress reviews between 2010 and 2017 and was formally revised in 2016, creating space for adaptation according to shifting dynamics and national priorities.

Revisions to Liberia's SMC in 2016 offered early indications of the PBC's interest in and focus on the UN transition. Adopted in April (months before the 2016 strategic assessment mission), the revised SMC emphasized "dual transition" dynamics while carving out a role for the PBC in supporting the transition process. It explicitly identified the 2017 elections and upcoming discussions about the UN's future presence in Liberia as important to consider when setting the country's peacebuilding priorities.⁴³ The PBC committed to specific strategic objectives for Liberia's transition, including to convene multi-stakeholder fora in advance of the Security Council's deliberations on Liberia and to support national and international peacebuilding efforts.⁴⁴

As chair of the Liberia Configuration, Sweden's ambassador to the UN, Olof Skoog, fulfilled the PBC's commitment to the first of these strategic objectives by co-convening a multi-stakeholder forum with the Liberian government on October 20, 2016. Bringing together over 100 stakeholders, the deliberations aimed to identify peacebuilding priorities during the transition and beyond UNMIL's drawdown.⁴⁵ The PBC also convened two

40 Interviews with UN Secretariat officials, New York, July 2018.

41 The Integrated Transition Plan was a new innovation for the UN system and will be examined later in the report.

42 This initiative built on several years of cooperation between UNDP and DPKO's Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) on the Global Focal Point for Police, Justice and Corrections program. More information can be found at www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/democratic-governance-and-peacebuilding/rule-of-law--justice--security-and-human-rights/global-focal-point-for-police--justice--corrections.html.

43 UN Peacebuilding Commission, *Statement of Mutual Commitments on Peacebuilding in Liberia*, UN Doc. PBC/10/LBR/1, April 19, 2016, p. 2.

44 Ibid., pp. 8-9.

45 Jim Della-Giacoma and Gizem Sucuoglu, interview with Ambassador Olof Skoog, December 15, 2016, available at <https://peaceoperationsreview.org/interviews/olof-skoog-sweden-is-preparing-for-an-active-two-years-on-the-council>.

expert-level meetings on transitions: the first sought to identify lessons learned from previous UN transitions in Burundi, Sierra Leone, and Timor-Leste; the second focused on contemporary transitions in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, and Liberia.⁴⁶ The Swedish embassy in Monrovia coordinated much of this work on the ground.

The conclusions from these discussions were subsequently taken up by the PBC in New York, with the goal of generating recommendations for the Security Council. In his report to the Security Council, the deputy permanent representative of Sweden highlighted the peacebuilding priorities identified during these consultations, including national reconciliation, land reform, rule of law and access to justice, youth engagement, economic challenges, and the 2017 national elections.⁴⁷ He also indicated the importance of the UN continuing to provide good offices following the closure of UNMIL, as well as of having sufficient capacity and resources to undertake its peacebuilding responsibilities.⁴⁸

This in-country and New York-based convening helped sustain attention on Liberia. Sweden's dual role as chair of the PBC's Liberia Configuration and an incoming member of the Security Council helped direct the council's attention to the broad range of issues facing Liberia and to consider the implications of UNMIL's transition, the elections, and subsequent peacebuilding priorities.⁴⁹

The extent to which the Security Council and PBC cooperated effectively in the run-up to Resolution 2333 is debatable. While Ambassador Skoog, as chair of the Liberia Configuration, was invited to present to the council and engage in informal deliberations, it is unclear to what extent this influenced the outcome. As described by Skoog one week prior to the resolution:

The [PBC] is unique in its working methods, because

it can actually work with countries and meet with different stakeholders from the countries on its agenda. This sort of working method is lacking in the way the Council works. However, the PBC will never be completely relevant, if the Council is not ready to take on its advice or listen to it, even if it is not exactly what every member of the Council wants to hear.⁵⁰

SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 2333: A CONTENTIOUS COMPROMISE

Security Council dynamics shaped the contours of Liberia's transition. The membership's month-long negotiations for a mandate renewal were intense, compared with other such processes. By December 2016, Security Council members unanimously agreed that UNMIL was ready to close; however, decisions on when and how to transition appeared to be driven more by political dynamics within the council than by operational realities in Liberia.⁵¹

Deep divisions subsequently emerged over the speed and intensity of UNMIL's drawdown. During the December 2, 2016, Security Council meeting on the secretary-general's report and the strategic assessment mission's recommendations, Liberia's ambassador to the UN asked the council to extend UNMIL's mandate for one additional year. He referenced the sensitive political period surrounding the upcoming elections and asserted that UNMIL offered "a brand of confidence" to the Liberian people.⁵²

As penholder on the Liberia file, the United States argued for a longer time horizon for the mission's closure. Internal debates within the US administration exemplified the complexities of such dynamics: the US mission to the UN advocated closing UNMIL without delay, while the State Department favored a go-slow approach.⁵³ President Johnson Sirleaf successfully lobbied National Security Advisor Susan Rice to adopt a position aligned with the strategic assessment

46 Those meetings were "The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Lessons Learned from Previous Transitions" (October 7, 2016) and "The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Role of the Peacebuilding Commission in Mission Drawdown" (November 21, 2016), respectively. They are documented in the *Report of the Peacebuilding Commission on Its Tenth Session*, UN Doc. A/71/768-S/2017/76, January 27, 2017, pp. 11-12.

47 UN Security Council, *Provisional Record of the 7824th Meeting of the UN Security Council*, UN Doc. S/PV.7824, December 2, 2016, pp. 5-6.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

49 Gizem Sucuoglu and Lesley Connolly, "Sustaining Peace in Security Transitions: The Liberian Opportunity," *IPI Global Observatory*, January 30, 2016.

50 Della-Giacoma and Sucuoglu, interview with Ambassador Olof Skoog.

51 Interviews with UN Secretariat officials, New York, July 2018.

52 UN Security Council, *Provisional Record of the 7824th Meeting of the UN Security Council*, UN Doc. S/PV.7824, December 2, 2016.

53 Interview with UN diplomats, New York, August 2018 and October 2018; Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, July 2018.

mission's Option 2 (status quo).⁵⁴ This position was that UNMIL should gradually draw down, staying in a streamlined form until after the elections to provide election-related support and rapidly deploy military enablers if needed.⁵⁵

In sharp contrast, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom all disagreed that UNMIL should be extended as a Chapter VII mission through June 2018, the underlying premise of the strategic assessment mission's recommendations. They instead argued for a much speedier drawdown as envisioned in Option 1 (withdrawal) and the creation of a light, streamlined advisory mission under Chapter VI of the UN Charter.⁵⁶ They asserted that the successful security transition proved that UNMIL's military component was no longer warranted, that the situation in Liberia did not constitute a threat to international peace and security, and that the financial resources devoted to UNMIL could be transferred to other missions.⁵⁷ In addition, they feared that UNMIL's continued presence in the country would foster dependency and complacency on the part of Liberia's national security institutions.⁵⁸

Difficult negotiations culminated in the adoption of Resolution 2333 (2016), UNMIL's last mandate renewal. With twelve affirmative votes and three abstentions,⁵⁹ the Security Council extended UNMIL's substantive mandate "for a final period until March 30, 2018." It set a deadline of April 30, 2018, to withdraw all civilian and uniformed personnel (except those required to support the liquidation process, whose deadline was set for June 30, 2018).⁶⁰

Having three abstentions on a mandate renewal

vote is exceedingly rare, especially considering that France, the UK, and the US did not vote in lockstep, underscoring the sharp substantive divisions among the Security Council members. Members expressed divergent reasons for their votes. Russia argued that "it is unacceptable to extend the mandate under Chapter VII... in circumstances where Blue Helmets are anticipating exclusively peacebuilding tasks."⁶¹ France argued that the fifteen-month extension would further ingrain Liberia's "culture of dependency on the Blue Helmets" and that peacekeepers in Liberia constitute a waste of personnel and helicopters. The UK argued against UNMIL's task of protecting civilians because there was no active conflict in the country.⁶²

Nonpermanent members voted in favor of the resolution for different reasons.⁶³ These included the Liberian government's explicit request for UNMIL's extension, the mission's constructive role in consolidating peace, and the importance of UNMIL's support in the run-up to the 2017 national elections. However, these same countries decried the mandate negotiation process and starkly noted the lack of compromise and negotiation between the substantive positions of the US (as penholder) and other countries.⁶⁴

UNMIL's final substantive mandate included the protection of civilians, reform of justice and security institutions, human rights protection and promotion, public information, and the protection of UN personnel. It also endorsed two critical components of Liberia's transition: the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan and the UNCT capacity mapping exercise. These were the core mechanisms

54 This option entailed maintaining UNMIL's authorized strength based on the parameters set in Resolution 2239. While describing this as the least disruptive option, the secretary-general cautioned that it might undermine public confidence in national institutions. See UN Doc. S/2016/968.

55 Interview with UN diplomat, New York, August 2018; Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, July 2018.

56 This option called for the UN to maintain military and police advisory capacity (21 troops and 100 police respectively) and provide a physical and operational headquarters for the temporary deployment of uniformed personnel from other peacekeeping missions. With short timelines and a sensitive political context, the secretary-general hedged against this option. See UN Doc. S/2016/968 and Security Council Report, "Liberia: Vote on the Future of the UN Mission," December 22, 2016, available at www.whatsinblue.org/2016/12/vote-on-a-council-resolution-on-future-of-the-un-mission-in-liberia.php.

57 Interview with UN diplomat, New York, August 2018; Security Council Report, "Liberia: Vote on the Future of the UN Mission."

58 Interview with UN diplomat, New York, August 2018; UN Security Council, *Provisional Record of the 7824th Meeting of the UN Security Council*, UN Doc. S/PV.7824, December 2, 2016.

59 France, Russia, and the UK all abstained.

60 UN Security Council Resolution 2333 (December 23, 2016), UN Doc. S/RES/2333, para. 10.

61 UN Security Council, *Provisional Record of the 7851st Meeting of the UN Security Council*, UN Doc. S/PV.7851, December 23, 2016.

62 Ibid.

63 The nonpermanent members of the Security Council in December 2016 were Angola, Egypt, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal, Spain, Ukraine, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

64 UN Security Council, *Provisional Record of the 7851st Meeting of the UN Security Council*, UN Doc. S/PV.7851, December 23, 2016.

that would guide the Liberian transition. How these mechanisms took root within the UN system and throughout Liberia offer valuable insights for future transition processes.

Planning the Transition (January–October 2017)

The UN and the Liberian government undertook numerous planning processes and exercises to anchor the transition. The Security Council's request for a Liberia peacebuilding plan, for example, was the first time the body mandated a comprehensive peacebuilding planning framework for a transition.⁶⁵ This section examines key dynamics during the transition and considers its various political, policy, and operational dimensions. It first examines two critical tools that shaped the transition: the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan and the UNCT capacity mapping exercise. It then examines transition planning processes at headquarters and in the field.

THE LIBERIA PEACEBUILDING PLAN: A STEP TOWARD NATIONAL OWNERSHIP?

Originally an idea from the US government, the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan was conceived to help form a bridge between peacekeeping activities and nationally owned and driven peacebuilding activities. In principle, its creators envisioned it as an important mechanism for mobilizing international support for a transition process. It aimed to formally recognize that the substantive and operational demands following a peacekeeping mission require comprehensive and integrated planning by a wide range of stakeholders. The plan was mandated by Resolution 2333, which:

requests the Secretary-General prepare a report for the Security Council within 90 days of the adoption of this resolution that sets out a well-developed

peacebuilding plan to direct the role of the United Nations system and other relevant partners, including multilateral and bilateral actors, in supporting Liberia's transition, [and] emphasizes in this regard the important convening role of the Peacebuilding Commission in the process of developing this plan.⁶⁶

Resolution 2333 also endorsed the ongoing UNCT capacity mapping exercise initiated in October 2016 (though it did not reference earlier planning exercises such as the 2012 capacity assessment exercise, as discussed below). The resolution's text explicitly recognized that the capacity mapping exercise would likely expose the UNCT's "gaps in capabilities" to undertake UNMIL's core substantive tasks related to human rights monitoring, the rule of law, national reconciliation, and security sector reform. However, the extent of these capacity gaps would only be realized following the formal completion of the capacity mapping exercise in May 2017.

Drafting of the Peacebuilding Plan began on January 3, 2017, two weeks after the resolution's adoption.⁶⁷ UNMIL and the government of Liberia quickly agreed upon a process for developing the document. They also established a five-person reference group, including officials from UNMIL, the UNCT, the government's Liberia Peacebuilding Office,⁶⁸ the Swedish embassy, and the National Civil Society Council of Liberia; UNMIL and the Peacebuilding Office served as co-penholders.⁶⁹ In addition, representatives of the European Union, ECOWAS, and the African Union (AU) provided inputs, while a joint team comprising staff from the UN's Peacebuilding Support Office and the World Bank visited Monrovia in February 2017 to support the drafting process.⁷⁰ The reference group drew from the Security Council and General Assembly's dual resolutions on peacebuilding and sustaining peace (Resolutions 2282 and 70/262), Liberia's medium- and long-term development strategies (the *Agenda for Transformation 2012–2017* and

65 Michael Lund, Lisa Lange, Jane O. Yeobah, and Andrew Dunbrack, "Mapping UNCT Technical and Operational Capacities to Support the UN Commitments in the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan," United Nations in Liberia, May 2017, p. 3.

66 UN Security Council Resolution 2333 (December 23, 2016), UN Doc. S/RES/2333, para. 13.

67 Jingfu Chen, Josh Jorgensen, Paul P. Mathew, and Myrian Smith, "Inclusive National Ownership in UN Peace Operation Transitions—Liberia," Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, Fall 2017, p. 21.

68 The Liberia Peacebuilding Office, located within the Liberian government's Ministry of Internal Affairs, was established in 2009 to drive the government's peace and reconciliation programming. The Peacebuilding Office served as the in-country secretariat for the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) from 2009 until 2016.

69 Interview with Liberian government official, Monrovia, July 2018; Interview with UNCT officials, Monrovia, July 2018.

70 UN Security Council, Letter Dated 4 April 2017 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council, UN Doc. S/2017/282, April 4, 2017, p. 3; UN Peacebuilding Configuration, *Review of Progress in the Implementation of the Statement of Mutual Commitments on Peacebuilding in Liberia*, UN Doc. PBC/11/LBR/2, May 1, 2017, p. 18.

Liberia Rising: Vision 2030), and the country's *Strategic Road Map for National Healing, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (2013–2030)*.

Following the creation of an initial draft, SRSG Zarif convened two formal consultations with Liberia's political parties to receive input and secure political buy-in, as well as one formal consultation with Liberian civil society organizations.⁷¹ Liberia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Zarif jointly submitted the final draft of the plan to the secretary-general and the under-secretary-general for peacekeeping operations on March 20, 2017. It was formally shared with the Security Council on April 4.

The Liberia Peacebuilding Plan offers a high-level, strategic overview of the peacebuilding priorities for Liberia's transition period. It broadly highlights the unaddressed causes of conflict while also identifying specific substantive areas that should drive the UN's work between 2017 and 2020, divided across two phases. The Office of the SRSG assumed responsibility for monitoring implementation of Phase I, while the resident coordinator's office in the new UNCT configuration would monitor implementation of Phase II (see Box 1).

The Liberia Peacebuilding Plan made a positive contribution to the transition. It represented a preliminary attempt to outline the inputs, processes, and outcomes needed for a successful UN transition. Specific issues raised in the plan would become important later in the transition, including the need for integrated communications strategies and the importance of predictable, sustainable financing post-UNMIL. According to members of the reference group, the Peacebuilding Plan helped produce a coherent, shared picture of the challenges confronting Liberia at a critical moment.⁷² As described by Yacoub El Hillo, the current resident coordinator and UNMIL's former deputy SRSG/resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator, the Peacebuilding Plan serves as "a

reaffirmation of commitments" made by the Liberian government and its international partners, framed explicitly within the sustaining peace agenda.⁷³

Another strength of the Peacebuilding Plan is that the final document received buy-in and support from all Liberian political parties. The consultations convened by SRSG Zarif ensured that the plan remained relevant after the governance transition. In addition, the plan held symbolic value within the Security Council and the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC): it was a clear reference point for guiding UNMIL's transition and drawing political attention.

The Peacebuilding Plan also posed challenges during the early transition period. Several emanated from the language negotiated by the Security Council. First, the ninety-day deadline for a "well-developed" peacebuilding plan was ambitious, at best. Because the idea emerged directly from the mandate renewal negotiations, UNMIL leadership, the UNCT, the Liberian government, and the UN Secretariat were not informed about it, and all stakeholders scrambled to meet the deadline.⁷⁴ The ninety-day timeframe made it difficult for UNMIL and the Liberian government to undertake widespread, inclusive consultations with civil society.⁷⁵ Further, as it started right before Christmas and New Year's, the timeframe was considerably shorter in practice.

Second, the mandate's operative language did not reference (explicitly or implicitly) Liberia's existing domestic or international peacebuilding and development-related frameworks. As a result, the Peacebuilding Plan would ultimately overlap with other policy documents, resulting in competing reference points among Liberian government officials and UN staff. Specifically, the Peacebuilding Plan detracted attention from Liberia's *Agenda for Transformation (2012–2017)*, a broad-based, nationally owned development plan, contradicting the notion that international initia-

71 Interview with Liberian government official, Monrovia, July 2018; Chen, Jorgensen, Mathew, and Smith, "Inclusive National Ownership in UN Peace Operation Transitions—Liberia," pp. 21–23.

72 Interviews with UNCT officials, Monrovia, July 2018; Interview with diplomats in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018; Interview with Liberian government official, Monrovia, July 2018.

73 Interview with UN Resident Coordinator Yacoub El Hillo, Monrovia, July 2018.

74 Chen, Jorgensen, Mathew, and Smith, "Inclusive National Ownership in UN Peace Operation Transitions—Liberia."

75 Interview with UN diplomat, New York, July 2018; Interviews with diplomats in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018; Interviews with civil society organizations in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018; Chen, Jorgensen, Mathew, and Smith, "Inclusive National Ownership in UN Peace Operation Transitions—Liberia."

Box 1. Sustaining peace and securing development: The Liberia Peacebuilding Plan (March 2017)**Guiding principles:**

- Inclusive national ownership
- Strategic peacebuilding priorities
- Establishment of a consensus-based approach to conflict sensitivity
- Consolidation and reaffirmation of commitments
- Ensuring the transparent, timely and predictable use of aid
- Strategic communications

Phase I (April 2017–March 2018)

Objective: Ensure a successful transition and embed durable national capacities critical for sustaining peace before UNMIL's departure

- Peace consolidation priorities
 - Promoting inclusive and peaceful elections in 2017
 - Peace, security, and rule of law
 - Economic transformation
 - Governance and public institutions
 - Crosscutting issues
- Supporting the political and administrative transfer of power following the 2017 elections
- Managing the withdrawal of UNMIL and transition to the UN country team
- Communicating the process of change to the government and people of Liberia

Phase II (April 2018–December 2020)

Objective: Integrate longer-term peacebuilding priorities into development frameworks necessary to ensure ongoing support to national efforts to mitigate, prevent, and manage risks of conflict

Envisioned priorities include:

- Strengthening the UNCT's communication, coordination, and convening role
- Preventing conflict and supporting the formulation of a new national peace policy
- Protecting human rights and supporting national human rights institutions
- Supporting key governance-related peacebuilding priorities
- Addressing persistent poverty
- Supporting the 2018 national census
- Building human development through inclusive economic growth, high-quality education, robust health-care systems, infrastructure development, entrepreneurship, and community livelihoods for women and youth

tives should be driven by national priorities.⁷⁶ As a result, it added to overarching policy confusion and was not explicitly driven by what was most needed in Liberia at the time. As one Liberian government official asked, "How do you prioritize the priorities?"⁷⁷

Third, Resolution 2333 made no explicit reference to the earlier formal or informal planning work UNMIL had done on the civilian transition, including the 2012 capacity assessment exercise, implying that this process would start from scratch.

Finally, the Security Council's request for a

⁷⁶ Republic of Liberia, "Agenda for Transformation: Steps toward Liberia Rising 2030," Governance Commission of the Republic of Liberia, 2012, available at https://governancecommissionlr.org/doc_download/AfT%20document-%20April%2015,%202013.pdf?a4705305cd27e04fb1f66830e7e0ef9d=NzE%3D.

⁷⁷ Interview with Liberian government official, Monrovia, July 2018.

peacebuilding plan to guide the UN and other relevant partners (rather than the Liberian government) caused confusion as to the purpose of the plan as well as who was to drive its implementation.⁷⁸ Upon first hearing of the Security Council's request for a peacebuilding plan, the Liberian government expected that it would lead the drafting process and thus shape the plan's scope and thrust.⁷⁹ Liberian officials also anticipated that the plan would serve as a framework for mobilizing resources, attached to a budget with funding commitments from international partners.⁸⁰ Following clarification from New York and UNMIL, however, it became clear that the plan was intended to guide and coordinate non-Liberian actors (namely the UN and international partners), thus delaying the process and creating confusion.⁸¹

An additional challenge was the absence of clarity about the purpose of the Peacebuilding Plan. On the one hand, the document is framed as an overarching analysis of key peacebuilding priorities, while on the other, it focuses on the UN transition, in a sense constituting an early draft of the Integrated Transition Plan.⁸²

These factors all contributed to the widely held perception that the Peacebuilding Plan was a top-down framework driven from New York. The plan remained relevant in New York in part because it served as a substantive anchor for member-state and Secretariat officials during the early stages of the transition. In addition, its origins in a Security Council mandate and the explicit call for PBC engagement in drafting the plan aligned with the emerging policy agenda of a multi-stakeholder, integrated approach to UN transitions. In Liberia, however, the Peacebuilding Plan soon registered as just another overarching policy framework.

The Peacebuilding Plan's two-phase design contributed unintentionally to additional challenges. Phase I was designed with clear priorities, interventions, and milestones. Phase II, on the other hand, does not include the same level of

detail. This is because the UN anticipated integrating the Phase II priorities into the scheduled joint review of the Peacebuilding Plan, the statement of mutual commitments, the new government's development agenda, and the new UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for Liberia. While there is value to an integrated peacebuilding approach, elaboration on details for Phase II is entirely dependent on the speed with which the other policy frameworks can be finalized. In this context, Phase II is more challenging to monitor and, to some extent, has become overshadowed by other frameworks and dynamics.

THE UNCT'S CAPACITY MAPPING: FILLING THE GAPS LEFT BY UNMIL

The UNCT-led capacity mapping exercise, initiated by UN leadership in Liberia following the strategic assessment mission, was the second analytical component of the UN's transition process. While the Peacebuilding Plan identified the substantive priorities intended to drive the UN's work during the transition, the capacity mapping exercise assessed the extent to which the UN in Liberia could actually undertake those commitments post-UNMIL. Conducted from October 2016 to May 2017, the exercise aimed to "present a clear capacity baseline of the UNCT within the context of the Peacebuilding Plan, UNMIL's withdrawal and [Security Council Resolution] 2333, and identify gaps to inform transition planning."⁸³

The exercise analyzed the capacities of UNMIL and the eighteen UN agencies, funds, and programs with a presence in Liberia at the time, including the UN Development Programme (UNDP), to which the capacity mapping team concluded that the "vast majority" of UNMIL's substantive responsibilities would fall.⁸⁴ Juxtaposed against the priorities outlined in the Peacebuilding Plan, this exposed the significant programmatic, financial, personnel, and operational investments

78 Interview with UNCT officials, Monrovia, July 2018; Interview with diplomats in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018.

79 Ibid.

80 Interview with UNCT Officials, Monrovia, July 2018; Interview with UN diplomats, New York, July 2018.

81 Chen, Jorgensen, Mathew, and Smith, "Inclusive National Ownership in UN Peace Operation Transitions—Liberia," p. 22.

82 Interview with UNDP officials, New York, July 2018.

83 Lund, Lange, Yeobah, and Dunbrack, "Mapping UNCT Technical and Operational Capacities to Support the UN Commitments in the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan," p. 3.

84 Ibid., p. 39.

Box 2. UNCT capacity mapping exercise (May 2017)**Strategic context for transition in Liberia**

- Public perception challenges
- Significant decline of technical capacity in the areas of peace, security, and rule of law
- Absence of logistics and infrastructure provided by UNMIL
- A new government will have different expectations of the UN

Critical observations

- The 2017 Peacebuilding Plan is ambitious—the UNCT must adapt to fulfil its commitments
- Business model considerations
- Political acumen and influence
- Monrovia-centric presence
- Calibration of programming priorities in light of Ebola
- Reduction in development resources
- Lack of substantial capacity on partnership building

needed to reshape the UNCT following the peacekeeping mission's withdrawal. It also underscored the attention necessary to manage the UN's transition in a fluid and tense election environment and a context where the UN peacekeeping mission had been omnipresent.

The exercise identified a range of critical challenges facing the new UNCT (see Box 2). Conservative estimates figured that UNMIL's withdrawal would contribute to the loss of 239 staff positions (including 108 national staff positions) related to work on peace, security, and the rule of law.⁸⁵ As a result, UNMIL's departure was expected to leave the UNCT without capacity for political analysis, information management, and provision of good offices—all important for ensuring substantive cohesion and effectiveness across UN programming and for navigating the UN's relationships with the Liberian government and international partners. The analysis highlighted six broad categories of capacity deficits: specialized support in reconciliation, decentralization, land reform, and constitutional reform; political liaison and political economy advisers; national development planning and donor coordination advisers; youth experts; gender experts; and macroeconomic

policy experts (all noted as priorities within the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan).⁸⁶

Operational considerations included the rapid closure of UNMIL's field presence outside of Monrovia and the anticipated losses of UNMIL's logistics, transportation, and engineering capabilities. These would directly impact both the UNCT's potential programming and Liberia's efforts to decentralize and effectively deliver public services. The analysis also recognized UNMIL Radio (discussed below) as a critical operational and communications tool both during and after the UN transition; the exercise encouraged the UN to engage the government and regional partners to determine a viable handover and sustainability plan.

The exercise featured a blunt assessment about the financial cliff facing Liberia following UNMIL's departure. During UNMIL's tenure, the international community supported Liberia financially, either directly through aid flows or indirectly through assessed contributions to the peacekeeping mission. Bilateral aid to Liberia between 2003 and 2016 (the most recent data) averaged approximately \$687 million per year, with a total of \$9.6 billion transmitted during that period.⁸⁷ Assessed

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

⁸⁷ Authors' calculations, using data sourced from the International Development Statistics Online Database, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, available at www.oecd.org/dac/stats/idsonline.htm.

contributions to UNMIL from UN member states totaled approximately \$7.45 billion between 2003 and 2018.⁸⁸

Two factors lay behind the impending financial cliff: the elimination of program funding provided by UNMIL and decreased bilateral aid from governments that viewed UNMIL's closure as a pretext for reducing it. Juxtaposed against donor fatigue and an international environment where development and humanitarian aid is stretched thin across multiple crises, concerns about declining financial support to development were front and center. Moreover, while UN peacekeeping operations are financed through assessed contributions from member states, the UNCT would rely predominantly on project-based funding sources. Due to all these factors, the UNCT would be expected to complete much of UNMIL's peacebuilding work with far fewer resources.

The capacity mapping exercise and its findings made a crucial contribution to the transition process. By presenting an objective, in-depth assessment of what the UNCT could and could not reasonably accomplish after the transition, it helped crystallize what additional resources the UN would urgently need after UNMIL. Starting in March 2018, many of the report's preliminary recommendations would feed into the reconfigured UNCT, including the expanded resident coordinator's office (RCO), the free-standing presence of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and personnel UNDP deployed from its SURGE roster. From one outsider's perspective, the process of conducting the exercise also helped improve collaboration between the UN Secretariat, UNMIL leadership, and the UNCT.⁸⁹ While capacity mapping exercises are long-standing tools within UNDP and UNDAF, Liberia was one of the first places they supported a substantive transition framework like the Peacebuilding Plan and a broader peacekeeping transition process.⁹⁰

THE SECRETARIAT'S PROCESSES FOR DECIDING LIBERIA'S FUTURE CONFIGURATION

Planning processes in UN headquarters to support the transition in Liberia accelerated considerably following the Security Council's adoption of Resolution 2333. In January 2017, newly appointed Secretary-General António Guterres placed "UN transitions" on the agenda of the Executive Committee as a recurrent topic every six months to ensure the UN leadership's consistent engagement with and oversight of the transitions in Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti, and Liberia.⁹¹

Following a request from the Executive Committee, DPKO led an interagency process to outline possibilities for a reconfigured UN presence in Liberia. Select findings from the UNCT capacity mapping exercise guided the options put forward: the resulting paper frankly assessed that the UN would be asked to continue addressing the root causes of Liberia's conflict, recommended that the UN in Liberia retain capacities for providing good offices and political analysis, and acknowledged the importance of maintaining independent human rights monitoring capacity.

Keeping these dynamics in mind, the options paper put forward three possible configurations, following consultations with stakeholders in Liberia and within the UN Secretariat:⁹²

1. A special political mission that included a stand-alone OHCHR office;
2. A satellite office of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) with a stand-alone OHCHR office; and
3. A strengthened resident coordinator's office (RCO) with a political, peace, and development analysis unit, along with a stand-alone OHCHR office.

The Executive Committee formally endorsed the third option—a strengthened RCO—in its

88 Authors' calculations using UN General Assembly resolutions; UN, "Liberia Multi-Partner Trust Fund Terms of Reference," 2017, p. 5.

89 Interview with diplomat in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018.

90 Interview with UNDP official, New York, July 2018.

91 The Executive Committee is a principal-level committee for the UN Secretariat, established by Secretary-General Guterres in January 2017 and tasked with supporting the secretary-general in "taking decisions on issues of strategic consequence requiring principal-level attention across all pillars of our work." United Nations, *Interoffice Memorandum—Establishment of an Executive Committee*, January 3, 2017, available at www.un.int/sites/www.un.int/files/Permanent%20Missions/delegate/establishment_of_an_executive_committee.pdf.

92 Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, July 2018.

September 2017 meeting.⁹³ While the other options offered innovative ideas for addressing Liberia's transition, this was the only feasible one. Regarding the first option, establishing a special political mission in Liberia would have required the Security Council to keep Liberia on its agenda and fund the mission with assessed contributions. Discussions with diplomats and UN Secretariat officials made clear that the Security Council had no interest in doing so.⁹⁴

Regarding the second option, although UNOWAS plays a valuable role supporting political processes throughout West Africa (including in Liberia during the 2017 elections), it did not have the necessary personnel or operational resources to establish a full-fledged satellite office.⁹⁵ Furthermore, UNOWAS officials determined its value lay in supporting ongoing political processes and providing good offices; conducting the day-to-day engagement needed in Liberia would have fallen outside its mandate.⁹⁶

The expanded RCO concept, which will be discussed later in the paper, was a marriage of need and context. Secretary-General Guterres and his team were in the midst of conceptualizing reforms to the UN development system during this same time. Recognizing the value of expanded political leadership for UN heads in non-peacekeeping settings, they saw the expanded RCO model as a trial run for the reinvigorated resident coordinator system and next generation of UNCTs.⁹⁷ However, there was a disconnect between this discussion and the practicalities of the funding and capacity needed to ensure this model would succeed in practice.

DPKO, the Department of Political Affairs

(DPA), and UNDP established the UN Secretariat's Integrated Task Force on the Liberia Transition (ITF-LT) as a sub-working group of the larger task force in November 2017.⁹⁸ The ITF-LT was mandated to oversee implementation of the UN Executive Committee's decision on Liberia and to support the implementation of this new UNCT model during the transition.⁹⁹ The three UN departments co-chaired the ITF-LT until March 2018; following UNMIL's closure, they converted it into the Inter-Agency Task Force on Liberia, which has met consistently since April 2018.

Participants in the ITF-LT highlighted the forum's value to the transition process: it ensured that UN headquarters provided a strategic, coherent direction for Liberia's transition, brainstormed policy options for the UN Secretariat, and helped coordinate between UNMIL, the UNCT, the UN Secretariat, the PBC, the PBF, and international partners.¹⁰⁰ Planning between UNMIL, the UNCT, and the UN Secretariat functioned well in part because of UNMIL's leadership, which remained open to diverse sources of policy input and support from across the UN system.¹⁰¹

DPKO, UNDP, and DPA's joint project on UN transitions provided another institutional vehicle to strengthen processes for Liberia's transition.¹⁰² Liberia was one of the project's five priority countries, so it supported UNMIL officials in planning and executing the transition.¹⁰³ Overarching support included the deployment of a transition specialist, who was involved in developing the Integrated Transition Plan by bringing to the fore the critical peacebuilding gaps that result from mission drawdown or closure.¹⁰⁴

93 Executive Committee Decision 2017/88.

94 Interview with UN diplomats, New York, July and August 2018. Interviews with UN Secretariat official, New York, July 2018.

95 Interview with UN Secretariat officials, New York, July 2018.

96 Ibid.

97 UN Economic and Social Council, *Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 71/243 on the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations System (QCPR)*, December 2017, available at www.un.org/ecosoc/en/node/3553102.

98 Participants in the ITF-LT included DPA, UNDP, and DPKO as rotating co-chairs, along with representatives from the Department of Field Support, Development Operations Coordination Office, Executive Office of the Secretary-General, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OHCHR, Peacebuilding Support Office, UN Development Group, and UNOWAS.

99 UN Secretariat, "Terms of Reference: ITF on the Liberia Transition (ITF-LT), November 2017-March 2018," October 2017.

100 Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, July 2018; Interview with UNDP official, New York, July 2018.

101 Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, July 2018.

102 The project began in 2014 with the support of the Swedish government.

103 The other four priority countries were Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Haiti. Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, August 2018.

104 Jups Kluyskens, "Evaluation of the UNDP/DPKO-DFS/DPA Project on UN Transitions in Mission Settings," United Nations, December 13, 2017.

The project also provided surge capacity and conducted expert field visits to carry out the UNCT capacity mapping exercise and facilitate a transition-planning workshop. These interventions drew attention to and enabled conversation on the transition from both a planning and a programmatic perspective.

THE PEACEBUILDING COMMISSION: A FORUM FOR INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Following the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2333, the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) quickly assumed the responsibility of being the primary forum for international engagement on the UNMIL transition. From January 2017 until the formal end of the peacekeeping mission's substantive mandate in March 2018, the PBC's Liberia Configuration convened at least five times at the ambassadorial level and four times at the expert level; undertook at least three visits to Liberia (two at the level of the configuration's chair and another at the expert level); supported the implementation of the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan; and published the first review of the revised statement of mutual commitments in 2017. By comparison, the Security Council met only three times on the situation in Liberia, received three reports from the secretary-general (one being the formal transmission of the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan), and issued two presidential statements and two press releases. Much of the configuration's work was due to the leadership and commitment of Sweden to support the transition in Liberia.

The PBC's engagement strengthened the Liberia transition process in three ways. First, the Liberia Configuration played an important role in monitoring implementation of the Peacebuilding Plan. It supported the Liberian government, UNMIL, and the UNCT during the drafting process by convening an experts meeting in New York in January 2017 and dispatching a mission led by the Peacebuilding Support Office to support national consultations in February 2017.¹⁰⁵

The PBC has a greater role monitoring imple-

mentation of the Peacebuilding Plan due to the linkages between the plan and the statement of mutual commitments. The review of the Peacebuilding Plan's Phase I and expansion of Phase II is also expected to encompass the final review of the 2016 statement.¹⁰⁶ This review process is intended to facilitate agreement on priority activities and financing required for Phase II, arrangements for monitoring and evaluation, and options for "a framework for mutual accountability." During Phase II, the PBC, as the central UN body sustaining attention on Liberia, is expected to convene regular progress meetings.¹⁰⁷ This process, which is expected to be completed by the end of 2018, aims to promote greater cohesion and integration between the two complementary frameworks. It is clear, however, that this process should have begun well in advance of UNMIL's closure so that Phase II of the Peacebuilding Plan (scheduled to begin in April 2018) could remain on schedule.

Second, as a bridging and advisory body, the PBC offered unique convening power within the UN system and provided an interactive forum for the members of the Security Council, the Liberian government, and UN Secretariat officials to engage regularly on Liberia's transition. Unlike Security Council meetings where only one individual formally represents their institution, PBC configuration meetings create space for multiple officials to deliberate and offer their own expertise. Liberia Configuration meetings over the course of 2017 featured inputs from the SRSG and both deputy SRSGs, various government ministers from Liberia, representatives from the Peacebuilding Support Office, and international partners. This format encouraged more systematic interaction between member states and UN officials, allowing experts to respond to questions posed during the discussions.

The Liberia Configuration meetings also provided space for officials to delve deeper into the UN transition's political and technical dynamics. The Liberia Configuration's ambassador-level meetings focused on implementation of the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan, preparations for the 2017

105 UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 7 April 2017 from the Chair of the Liberia Configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2017/322, April 7, 2017.

106 UN Liberia and Government of Liberia, *Sustaining Peace and Securing Development: Liberia Peacebuilding Plan*, March 20, 2017, p. 21.

107 Ibid.

national elections, and the UNMIL drawdown. These open discussions helped member states understand the transition's complexities and promoted a shared understanding of progress and challenges. For example, the meetings crystallized the notion that Liberia's transition was a critical test case for how the UN transitions when peacekeeping missions draw down and how the UN can help implement a Security Council-mandated peacebuilding plan.¹⁰⁸

Third, Liberia's position on the PBC's agenda kept international attention on the country and on the transition. Waning political and financial engagement remains one of the most urgent concerns during peacekeeping transitions. A transition mandate from the Security Council gives competing signals. On the one hand, the end of a UN peacekeeping mission is an explicit message that the country is comparatively secure, stable, and ready for development support. On the other hand, it can unintentionally signal that the country no longer warrants international attention. With Liberia already a long-standing agenda item on the PBC, the body was well equipped to continue mobilizing international attention. Specifically, the Liberia Configuration facilitated sustained advocacy by UNMIL leadership for setting coherent peacebuilding priorities, avoiding the financial cliff for both Liberia and the UN presence there, and providing sufficient resources to address the capacity gaps identified in the UNCT capacity mapping exercise.

However, only a few stakeholders in Liberia, specifically the UN and international partners, highlighted the work or impact of the PBC. Those that did often referred to the PBC and the PBF as funding vehicles for UN programs or civil society activities. One diplomat based in Liberia emphasized that visits by the chair of the Liberia Configuration offer little value: the short duration of each visit, combined with the prepared remarks delivered by each stakeholder during their meetings, limit the honesty and frankness of engagements.¹⁰⁹

INTEGRATED TRANSITION PLANNING IN THE FIELD

UNMIL served as the in-country anchor for transition planning. Through close collaboration with the UNCT—facilitated by SRSZ Zarif and deputy SRSZ El Hillo—its planning processes critically examined both the substantive aspects of the transition as well as the operational requirements needed to facilitate a smooth drawdown and handover. While planning for the civilian transition occurred intermittently prior to the adoption of Resolution 2333 in December 2016, it is unclear to what extent this influenced how UNMIL launched its planning in January 2017.

Strong integration between UNMIL and the UNCT at the country level supported a coherent planning process. Internal transition frameworks attempted to align with UN best practices, Liberia's national development frameworks, and the guidance emerging from the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan and the capacity mapping exercise. Deputy SRSZ El Hillo served as the interface between UNMIL and the UNCT during the planning process. Over the course of 2016 and 2017, UNMIL and the UNCT formed four transition working groups focused on the Liberian political transition, residual peacebuilding priorities (including rule of law, security sector, and justice programs), resources and assets handover, and communications.¹¹⁰ Moreover, an integrated team on operations management and security helped cover the entire spectrum of transition-related issues.¹¹¹ Supported by transitions specialists seconded by UN headquarters, the committees' work fed into the broader frameworks and processes to creating the Integrated Transition Plan.

The Integrated Transition Plan, formally called *The Government of Liberia, UN and Partners Transition Plan*, was developed in the second half of 2017 and aligned with the substantive priorities identified in the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan. Part I of the plan focused on the Liberian government's transition (analyzed below), while Part II drove the UN's transition process. Part II assigned lead UN

108 UN Peacebuilding Commission, *Ambassadorial-Level meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission Liberia Configuration, 13 September 2017: Chair's Summary*, September 13, 2017, p. 4.

109 Interview with diplomat in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018.

110 Meeting of heads of UN agencies, funds, and programs in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018.

111 Ibid.; Interview with UNDP Official, New York, July 2018.

agencies to assume joint responsibility over each of the Peacebuilding Plan's priorities before and after UNMIL's closure. In addition to the Integrated Transition Plan, UNMIL prepared a comprehensive schedule for its departure and drafted policy papers on substantive issues for the UNCT and the new government (including on macroeconomics, security, and governance).¹¹²

Although UNMIL undertook significant programmatic work on peacebuilding priorities, its programming was often insufficiently integrated with that of the UNCT. One exception, however, was the UNDP-UNMIL joint program entitled "Strengthening the Rule of Law in Liberia: Justice and Security for the Liberian People (2016–2019)" (see Box 3). This program allowed for integrated planning between the mission and UNCT and took into account the need to continue engaging on rule of law issues after the withdrawal of UNMIL. While not necessarily the only joint initiative between UNMIL and the UNCT prior to the transition, it was heralded as a success and could serve as a model for further joint planning and programming ahead of transitions.

Despite this coherent, integrated planning process, important questions emerged about when the transition planning commenced, with one

report highlighting that earnest planning only started between April and May 2017.¹¹³ According to El Hillo, the UNCT attempted to negotiate with the Liberian government to allow it to retain some of UNMIL's field sites following the transition. However, the UNCT could not raise sufficient funds to take over the field sites, thus impacting the extent to which it could successfully undertake its work.¹¹⁴ This points to the lack of consideration of the funding needed to support the UN presence on the ground in the conceptualization of this new model.

The Dual Transition

Liberia's transition quickly earned the moniker of a "dual transition." Within the span of six months, the country underwent two radical and transformative processes: the transition from the peacekeeping mission to a new UN configuration and the transition from the Johnson Sirleaf government to a new administration. That these two nearly simultaneous processes were peaceful and orderly is a significant accomplishment for the Liberian people, the UN, and the international community. Nonetheless, the overlapping transitions amplified the complexities and stakes inherent to each.

Box 3. Joint UNDP-UNMIL programming during the transition

The UNDP-UNMIL joint program "Strengthening the Rule of Law in Liberia: Justice and Security for the Liberian People (2016–2019)" aims at strengthening the "different Liberian justice and security institutions, and building capacities at the grassroots level to ensure access to justice for local communities, with a specific focus on the needs of women and girls."¹¹⁵ It further states that "the program will rely on and strengthen coordination and cooperation with and between national counterparts, supporting national ownership and nationally-driven sustainable processes."¹¹⁶ This project has, from its inception, been carried out in "collaboration with the Judiciary, the Ministry of Justice and other principal national counterparts as they take forward the national rule of law reform process."¹¹⁷ The program is unique in that it partners with both UNDP and UNMIL, thus drawing on the expertise and resources of both and fulfilling the notion of "delivering as one" to enhance justice and security for the Liberian people.

¹¹² Interview with UN country team officials, Monrovia, July 2018.

¹¹³ Chen, Jorgensen, Mathew, and Smith, "Inclusive National Ownership in UN Peace Operation Transitions—Liberia," p. 23.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Resident Coordinator El Hillo, Monrovia, July 2018; Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, November 2018.

¹¹⁵ UNDP and UNMIL, *Strengthening the Rule of Law in Liberia: Justice & Security for the Liberian People (2016–2019)*, 2016, p. 6.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

LIBERIA'S 2017 NATIONAL ELECTIONS

As the first peaceful and democratic handover of executive power in seventy-three years, the 2017 national elections were a turning point in Liberia's history. The international community consistently framed successful elections as the culmination of over a decade of UN peacekeeping.

Yet the high stakes created an atmosphere of anxiety for Liberians and the UN alike. Liberia's centralized governance system enables the president to appoint nearly 90 percent of all executive branch officials—over 3,000 positions that could be doled out among supporters and allies.¹¹⁸

Nonetheless, the Security Council's political compromise in Resolution 2333 mandated UNMIL to withdraw by March 30, 2018. This unintentionally and unnecessarily increased the difficulties of the UN transition and raised tensions during the election cycle.¹¹⁹ Liberia's National Elections Commission (NEC) published key election dates nearly six months before the mandate renewal negotiations, of which the council would have been well aware.¹²⁰ With the first round of elections scheduled for October 10, 2017, any potential runoff for the presidency was likely to occur weeks, if not months, later—a consideration the council seemingly neglected in deciding the final transition date.

Due to the date of withdrawal, UNMIL suffered from the perception that it was aligned with and supportive of President Johnson Sirleaf and her government, signaling, to some, the UN's lack of confidence in any successor government. The withdrawal date also heightened fears over security and public expectations that UNMIL would ensure calm throughout the election period. These dynamics all underscored that Security Council members were driven to close UNMIL by political

and financial imperatives independent of the potential impact on Liberia's elections.

The UN's 2013 Policy on Transitions in the Context of Mission Drawdown or Withdrawal anticipated the challenging dynamics of a transition overlapping with elections. Describing triggers for UN transitions, the policy observes, "UN mission drawdown and withdrawal processes do not always occur in conducive environments and the UN's ability to plan for and implement UN transitions will be affected by the nature and timing of the trigger."¹²¹

The elections took place in a competitive and fragmented environment as twenty candidates ran for president and twenty-six registered political parties competed for all seventy-three seats in the country's House of Representatives (through a first-past-the-post system). Over 1.5 million Liberians voted during the first round of elections on October 10, 2017; George Weah and Joseph Boakai received the two largest vote totals (38.4 and 28.8 percent, respectively).¹²² Because neither candidate received more than 50 percent of the vote, a runoff election was held on December 26, which George Weah won with 61.5 percent.¹²³

The UN supported the election in four ways: providing good offices, coordinating among international actors, guaranteeing security, and providing technical support to the NEC through UNDP. In terms of good offices, SRSG Zarif served as a critical interlocutor between Liberia's political parties, the outgoing administration, and international partners in Monrovia. Weekly meetings with President Johnson Sirleaf, combined with regular and extraordinary engagements with the leaders of Liberia's political parties, promoted an environment conducive to open and constructive dialogue among the main political actors.¹²⁴ During the runoff, Zarif relied on political support from

118 Interview with Liberian government official, Monrovia, July 2018; Ibrahim Al-bakri Nyei, "Decentralizing the State in Liberia: The Issues, Progress and Challenges," *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 3, No. 1 (2014).

119 See the discussion on UN Security Council dynamics earlier in this paper.

120 Liberian National Elections Commission, "Press Release: Release of Key Election Dates," June 17, 2017, available at www.necliberia.org/others.php?&7d5f44532cbfc489b8db9e12e44eb820=NzQ2.

121 UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, *Policy on UN Transitions in the Context of Mission Drawdown or Withdrawal*, UN Doc. PK/G/2013.21964, February 4, 2013, p. 2.

122 Liberian National Elections Commission, "2017 Presidential & Representative Election Results—December 26, 2017 Election Runoff Results," December 26, 2017, available at www.necliberia.org/results2017/national.html.

123 Liberian National Elections Commission, "2017 Presidential & Representative Election Results," October 10, 2017, available at www.necliberia.org/results2017/.

124 Interview with diplomats in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018; Interview with Resident Coordinator El Hillo, Monrovia, July 2018; Interview with UNDP officials, New York July 2018; UN Mission in Liberia, "The Story Of UNMIL [Book]: Engagements with Political Parties in Advance of 2017 Elections," March 30, 2018, available at <https://unmil.unmissions.org/story-unmil-book-engagements-political-parties-advance-2017-elections>.

UNOWAS SRSRG Mohammed Ibn Chambas and former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo (a member of the secretary-general's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation).¹²⁵ Through well-established relationships with Liberia's political leaders, Zarif ensured that political tensions emerging from legal challenges to the elections did not manifest themselves in outright rejection of the election's legitimacy or calls for violent protests.

In addition, UNMIL coordinated with the AU Liaison Office in Liberia and the Office of the Special Representative of the President of the ECOWAS Commission in Liberia to ensure the international community spoke with one voice. Building on the ECOWAS-guaranteed Farmington River Declaration signed by Liberia's political parties in June 2017, these partners regularly issued joint statements reinforcing this commitment to a free, fair, and peaceful process.¹²⁶ In addition, ECOWAS supported the government and UNMIL in establishing the Election Situation Room as part of the Liberia Elections Early Warning and Response Group. This temporary platform brought together the UN, regional organizations, international partners, and civil society organizations to jointly monitor election dynamics and issue early-warning reports.¹²⁷ This united approach became all the more crucial to defuse tensions following petitions to the Liberian Supreme Court over the voters roll in November 2017.¹²⁸ The Liberian Youth Peace Declaration emerged as another

concrete initiative from the joint partnership: under the auspices of the UN, AU, and ECOWAS in advance of the runoff, youth leaders from the twenty-six registered political parties affirmed their continued support to free, fair, and peaceful elections.¹²⁹

Although UNMIL only offered security support in extreme circumstances, Liberians perceived it as a valuable security guarantor during the election period. This perception emerged due to a combination of UNMIL's role reducing gender-based violence and concerns about the efficacy of Liberia's security institutions.¹³⁰ Independent research conducted by the SCORE Project highlighted in early 2017 that "people are expressing the need for UNMIL presence, which relates directly to perception that UNMIL is a significant actor for provision of security and acts as deterrence for potential conflict and violence."¹³¹ Civil society organizations highlighted that communities outside of Monrovia expressed concerns about potential security vacuums following UNMIL's complete drawdown, and the election period exacerbated these concerns.¹³² In this light, UNMIL's symbolic presence during the elections contributed to perceptions that the elections would be peaceful, even if the Liberian government was responsible for nationwide security while the mission's security forces were stationed only in Monrovia and its immediate surroundings.

125 UNMIL, "Liberia Presidential Run-Off Elections: Interview with Former President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria," December 30, 2017, available at <https://unmil.unmissions.org/liberia-presidential-run-elections-interview-former-president-olusegun-obasanjo-nigeria-0>; Interviews with UN Secretariat officials, New York, July 2018; UN Security Council, *Final Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2018/344, April 13, 2018, p. 2.

126 Liberian Governance Commission, "Press Release," June 6, 2017, available at https://governancecommissionlr.org/pg_img/Farmington%20river%20declaration%20%20press%20release.pdf; UNMIL, "Joint Statement by AU, ECOWAS and UNMIL on the Occasion of the Official Commencement of Electoral Campaign by Political Parties and Candidates on 31 July 2017," July 31, 2017; UNMIL, "Joint Statement by the African Union Liaison Office in Liberia (AULOL), Office of the ECOWAS Commission in Liberia and United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL)," November 10, 2017; Interviews with diplomatic community in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018; Interviews with UNCT officials, Monrovia, July 2018.

127 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), "Liberia 2017—Run Off Election: Preliminary Declaration," December 28, 2017, available at www.ecowas.int/liberia-2017-run-off-presidential-election/; West-African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)—Liberia, "Press Statement Introducing Elections Situation Room Liberia Elections Early Warning & Response Group (LEEWARG) West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP-Liberia)," October 9, 2017.

128 Supreme Court of Liberia, *Decision on Joseph N Boakai and James Emmanuel Nuquay v. National Elections Commission-Bill Of Information*, December 21, 2017, available at <http://judiciary.gov.lr/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/JOSEPH-N-BOIKAI-AND-JAMES-EMMANUEL-NUQUAY-V.-NATIONEL-ELECTIONS-COMMISSION-BILL-OF-INFORMATION1.pdf>.

129 Forum for Political Party National Youth League, *Liberian Youth Peace Declaration*, December 1, 2017, available at https://unmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/scanned_version_of_signed_youth_declaration.pdf; Interview with Liberian civil society organization, Monrovia, July 2018.

130 Interview with Liberian academic, Monrovia, July 2018; UNMIL and UNDP, "SCORE Liberia Draft Policy Brief: Improving the Readiness for UNMIL's Departure," 2017, available at www.scoreforpeace.org/files/publication/pub_file/46/Policy%20Brief_Liberia_UNMIL%20Departure_Final.pdf.

131 The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index is a project that aims to evaluate conflict transformation through quantitative and qualitative assessments of social cohesion and reconciliation in a given society. SCORE conducted research in Liberia in 2016 and 2018. More information about their work can be found on their website: www.scoreforpeace.org.

132 Interview with Liberian civil society organization, Monrovia, July 2018; Interviews with Liberian government officials, Monrovia, July 2018; Meeting of heads of UN agencies, funds, and programs in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018; Interview with Liberian academic, Monrovia, July 2018.

UNDP's technical support focused on building the capacity of Liberia's National Elections Commission (NEC) and core electoral stakeholders to conduct transparent and credible elections. Specific interventions focused on strengthening training tools and methods, helping the NEC introduce a modern administrative system and produce a new voter register, and enhancing civic education. Through its Electoral Support Program, UNDP supported 395 training sessions for 17,777 polling staff, trained electoral magistrates to deal with electoral complaints, and supported training for 7,200 security officials to enhance electoral policing.¹³³ All these activities aimed to help the NEC consolidate its reputation and authority, contributing to greater institutional trust in the electoral system and democratic process.¹³⁴

The UN's constructive role notwithstanding, interlocutors inside and outside of Liberia consistently highlighted the unnecessary burden of sequencing the drawdown simultaneously with a national election of such significance. With a final drawdown deadline scheduled just two months after the January 2018 inauguration, the UN unintentionally fueled perceptions that UNMIL was abandoning Liberians.¹³⁵ Conducting the two transitions simultaneously forced UNMIL to devote significant energy to supporting the Liberian government as it undertook its own transition.

UN SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THE GOVERNANCE TRANSITION

The UN made significant efforts during its own transition to support Liberia's handover of political and administrative power—a core task identified in the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan. Tangible efforts to kick-start the governance transition began in October 2016. Liberia's Governance Commission,

an independent body created following the 2003 Accra Peace Agreement, developed an extensive roadmap on the governance transition to guide the Johnson Sirleaf administration in its final year.¹³⁶ The document examines the status of selected transition issues, suggests actions needed, and offers recommendations in eleven broad areas covering both substantive and administrative tasks.¹³⁷ The Liberia Peacebuilding Plan, published five months later, offers a broad overview of anticipated international support to the governance transition for both the outgoing and the incoming administrations and directly ties to administrative tasks outlined in the government's plan.¹³⁸

These two frameworks, to some extent, dovetailed in Part I of Liberia's Integrated Transition Plan. Jointly developed by the UN and the Liberian government (with the Governance Commission as penholder), the plan provided a comprehensive and in-depth roadmap for a successful handover of political and administrative power. It was divided into three phases (outgoing administration, transitional period between elections and inauguration, and new administration) and by implementing partner (such as the UN and donors). Establishing policy frameworks for transferring executive power was imperative for the UN, because neither the Liberian constitution nor supplementary domestic frameworks offered formal guidance on administrative transitions in the executive.¹³⁹

The Integrated Transition Plan largely focused on core administrative tasks: (1) writing handover notes for new government officials; (2) passing transition-related legislation; (3) development a plan to implement this legislation; (4) putting together an assets database; (5) reviewing procurement practices and policies on transferring assets;

133 UNDP, "Support to Elections Programme," available at www.lr.undp.org/content/liberia/en/home/operations/projects/democratic_governance/support-to-elections.html.

134 Ibid.

135 Interview with UNCT officials, Monrovia, July 2018; Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, July 2018; John H. T. Stewart, "Does President Sirleaf Intend to Cheat in the October 10, 2017 Elections?" *Liberian Listener—Editorial*, October 5, 2017, available at www.liberianlistener.com/2017/10/05/does-president-sirleaf-intend-to-cheat-in-the-october-10-2017-elections/;

136 Liberian Governance Commission, "Managing Democratic Transition in Liberia: 2016-2018," Monrovia, October 2016, available at [www.governancecommissionlr.org/pg_img/MANAGING%20DEMOCRATIC%20TRANSITION%20IN%20LIBERIA%202016-2018%20202%20\(1\)-Copy.pdf](http://www.governancecommissionlr.org/pg_img/MANAGING%20DEMOCRATIC%20TRANSITION%20IN%20LIBERIA%202016-2018%20202%20(1)-Copy.pdf).

137 The selected issues are identified as the following: constitutional reforms, decentralization, civil service and public sector reforms, public financial management and economic governance reforms, protecting public assets, effective asset declaration, land reforms, strengthening community policing, strengthening reconciliation, the 2017 elections, and post-election transitions management.

138 UN in Liberia and Government of Liberia, *Sustaining Peace and Securing Development: Liberia Peacebuilding Plan*, March 20, 2017, p. 14.

139 Presidency of Liberia, *Executive Order 91: Establishing the Joint Presidential Transition Team of 2017*, December 25, 2017, available at www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/Executive%20Order%2091.pdf.

(6) reforming the civil service; (7) passing pending legislation (including bills on land rights, local governance, and domestic violence); and (8) communicating on the transition.¹⁴⁰ To support these tasks, the UN and international partners framed their support to the Liberian government as advocating for and providing good offices in service of peace consolidation and reconciliation, facilitation and convening of relevant stakeholders, and coordination on joint communications strategies for the transition.

A coherent and collaborative Integrated Transition Plan ensured a comparatively smooth and orderly administrative transition in January 2018. While the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan provided substantive guidance on transition priorities, Phase I of the Integrated Transition Plan offered a complementary framework for administrative issues. Strong ownership by the Liberian government through the Governance Commission ensured coherence with previously identified national priorities and a commitment to meaningful engagement with all of Liberia's political parties.

Despite their inclusion in the Integrated Transition Plan, the UN nonetheless struggled to navigate the complexities of the governance transition. Context-specific political dynamics between the outgoing and incoming administrations contributed to a drawn-out transition. Campaigning against corruption in government, Weah and his Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) party mobilized grassroots support on the expectation that their election would mark a decisive break from the previous administration.¹⁴¹ Moreover, this campaign unfolded in a country with a weak civil service and highly centralized executive power and in an election where the opposing candidate was the vice president. As a result, Weah's administration would comprise officials who were new to government and would

require additional time and support to familiarize themselves with the administrative and bureaucratic underpinnings of governance. These dynamics were compounded by ongoing personnel and administrative changes resulting from UNMIL's transition, where UN officials changing portfolios had to simultaneously establish contacts with new officials in the government.¹⁴²

"THE LIBERIA MOMENT" AND UNMIL'S DEPARTURE

Final preparations for UNMIL's departure comprised three steps: the mission's overall liquidation and closure of offices, implementation of a joint strategic communications plan explaining the UNMIL transition, and convening of "The Liberia Moment" international conference.

UNMIL's liquidation comprised distinct but interrelated processes, including the closure of field sites, the transfer and disposal of records, asset disposal, and the phasing out of human resources. The UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services conducted three audits in 2018 and determined that UNMIL adequately planned and executed these core liquidation functions.¹⁴³ Comparatively minor recommendations for the drawdown and liquidation process urged UNMIL to focus on disposing of paper records more quickly, better monitoring the transfer of assets to other UN missions, and strengthening mechanisms for dialogue with the UN in Liberia's Field Staff Union, among other tasks.¹⁴⁴

Closure of UNMIL field sites and the reconfiguration of the remaining UN presence in Liberia was an important operational and symbolic step of the UN transition. While UNMIL gradually reduced its presence outside of Monrovia in 2016 and 2017, this process accelerated considerably during UNMIL's final months. UNMIL closed thirty-four sites in fiscal year 2015/2016, another twenty-eight in 2016/2017, and twenty-two from December 13,

140 "The Government of Liberia, UN and Partners Transition," December 2017 (sourced from Liberian government official).

141 Coalition for Democratic Change, "CDC's Manifesto," available at <http://cdcliberia.org/cdc/150-2/>; Dagbayonoh Kiah Nyanfore II, "Analysis of the George Weah Cabinet," *The Patriotic Vanguard*, April 10, 2018; Transparency International, "Reform and Policy Recommendations for Incoming Weah Administration in Liberia," January 19, 2018; "George Weah: From Football Star to Liberia President," *Al Jazeera*, December 29, 2017.

142 Interview with UNCT official, Monrovia, July 2018.

143 UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, *Audit of Phasing Out of Human Resources in the United Nations Mission in Liberia During the Drawdown Period*, Internal Audit Division Report No. 2018/015, March 22, 2018; UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, *Audit of Assets Disposal in the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, Internal Audit Division Report No. 2018/020, March 29, 2018; UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, *Audit of Liquidation Planning in the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, Internal Audit Division Report No. 2018/067, June 22, 2018.

144 Ibid.

2017, to May 18, 2018; only two sites remained under UN control on the final liquidation deadline of June 30.¹⁴⁵

In terms of strategic communications, the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan and Integrated Transition Plan explicitly frame this as a stand-alone objective and task, and the Security Council received updates on UN communications efforts through the secretary-general's reports. Three interrelated aspects of strategic communications on the transition can be assessed: the message, the messengers, and the medium.

First, in terms of the message, UNMIL and the UNCT put forward concise messages to Liberians: "Liberia's institutions are ready to assume responsibility for [their] own country, and UNMIL is leaving but the UN is staying."¹⁴⁶ However, messages about the timing of UNMIL's withdrawal and the post-peacekeeping setup were still unclear to Liberians nearly three months after the end of the peacekeeping mandate. Civil society organizations emphasized that many Liberians outside of Monrovia remained unaware of the UN's reconfigured presence and only knew that the peacekeeping mission was gone. One civil society representative explained how the UN's message was more nuanced and "sophisticated" than it appeared on the surface.¹⁴⁷ From 2003 to 2016, UNMIL's troops and civilian officers formed an ever-present part of Liberia's landscape, often serving as *de facto* administrators in place of the state. While UN agencies, funds, and programs worked alongside and in support of UNMIL during this period, their image and branding became synonymous. As a result, Liberians felt UNMIL's sudden absence—a feeling reinforced by the limited contact they had with UN staff after March 2018.

Second, in terms of the messengers, the UN relied on a constellation of Liberian and interna-

tional actors to disseminate its transition messages as widely as possible. Public information campaigns included senior leadership from the Liberian government and UNMIL, officials from the AU and ECOWAS offices in Liberia, UNMIL civil affairs officers, national civil society organizations, and traditional leaders.¹⁴⁸ These campaigns employed a range of dissemination methods, including newspaper advertisements and articles, radio programs and commercials, town hall events, speeches, and peace caravans.¹⁴⁹ UNMIL and the government of Liberia also convened a large meeting framed as a "Turnover Program" that was supplemented with smaller fora bringing together UNMIL, the government, and civil society organizations.¹⁵⁰

Third, in terms of the medium, UNMIL Radio emerged as one of the mission's most valuable assets and a symbol of an effective transition process. At full capacity, UNMIL radio operated twenty-four hours a day with programming in multiple languages, reached approximately 75 percent of the country, and engaged 80 percent of the population.¹⁵¹ Considered a cornerstone of the international community's engagements with Liberians, UNMIL leadership worked to ensure that UNMIL Radio would remain in the country following the end of the peacekeeping mission, and it was ultimately handed over to ECOWAS.¹⁵²

Symbolically concluding UNMIL's operations in Liberia made a valuable contribution to the transition. The "Liberia Moment" international conference on March 23, 2018, represented the formal transition from the peacekeeping mission and kick-started the international community's post-UNMIL engagement with Liberia.¹⁵³ UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed and the chair of the PBC's Liberia Configuration, Swedish Ambassador Skoog, led the UN delegation to

145 Ibid.

146 Chen, Jorgensen, Mathew, and Smith, "Inclusive National Ownership in UN Peace Operation Transitions—Liberia," p. 25.

147 Ibid., p. 32; Interview with Liberian civil society organization, Monrovia, July 2018.

148 UN Security Council, *Final Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2018/344, April 13, 2018, p. 11; UN Security Council, *Thirty-Third Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2017/510, June 16, 2017, p. 13.

149 Chen, Jorgensen, Mathew, and Smith, "Inclusive National Ownership in UN Peace Operation Transitions—Liberia," pp. 26–27.

150 Interview with Liberian civil society organization, Monrovia, July 2018.

151 UN Mission in Liberia "UNMIL Radio," available at <https://unmil.unmissions.org/unmil-radio>.

152 UN Security Council, *Thirty-Third Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2017/510, June 16, 2017, p. 14.

153 The conference's full title was "The Liberia Moment: From Peacekeeping to Sustaining Peace, Pro-Poor Inclusive Development and Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals."

Liberia, marking a preliminary engagement between the UN community and the new Liberian administration. Their engagement in both the conference and the side events with local communities underscored the connection between peacebuilding and sustainable development, while creating space for senior UN leadership to gain firsthand insight into the importance of sustained international attention on the country.¹⁵⁴

President Weah's remarks at the "Liberia Moment" conference outlined his government's development agenda as well as his proposals to align the nascent national development agenda, Phase II of the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan, and other international cooperation agreements.¹⁵⁵ However, the Liberian government was not able to formally present its development agenda at the conference—perhaps too great an expectation for a government barely two months into its term. It thus could not translate the various agreements into concrete development support or a framework for mutual accountability. The conference also represented a formal handover from UNMIL to the UNCT, offering valuable symbolic messages to Liberians, UN staff, and the broader international community. The psychological impact of this formal handover should not be underestimated, as it affirmed that the UN would continue supporting the country politically.

Liberia's Next-Generation Country Team

In July 2017, the Executive Committee concluded that the follow-on UN presence to UNMIL would entail a strengthening "of UNCT capacities, including by reviewing UNDP's Country Office

capacity, ensuring the sustainability of OHCHR's presence, immediately establishing a Multi-Partner Trust Fund to support transition efforts, and further support by the Regional UNDG Team."¹⁵⁶

Due to the convergence in timing of these changes in Liberia and the UN development reforms, Liberia is seen as the first test of the new UNCT model.¹⁵⁷ The central pillar of these reforms is an empowered resident coordinator and next generation of the UNCT. This model should be tailored to the needs of the country and "built on the United Nations Development Assistance Framework and finalized through open and inclusive dialogue between the host Government and the United Nations development system."¹⁵⁸

The structure of the post-peacekeeping UN configuration in Liberia upholds much of this vision. There is a strengthened resident coordinator's office (RCO) led by a resident coordinator at the level of assistant secretary-general (Yacoub El Hillo, the former UNMIL deputy SRSG/resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator), and, as of January 1, 2019, a separate UNDP resident representative.¹⁵⁹ It also includes a Political, Peace and Development Unit, which is supported by two peace and development advisers deployed by the Joint UNDP-DPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention.¹⁶⁰ Further, an OHCHR office was recently established in Liberia, filling the human rights gap left by UNMIL.¹⁶¹

This section further examines this post-transition structure, highlighting some of the challenges being faced by the UN on the ground, the UN's relationship and engagement with the government and regional partners, and the role of UN headquarters. As Resident Coordinator El Hillo

154 Presidency of Liberia, "President Weah Calls for Inclusion of Local Voices in Reconciliation Process," March 23, 2018.

155 Ibid.; Government of Liberia, United Nations, and World Bank, "Communiqué—The Liberia Moment: From Peacekeeping to Sustaining Peace, Pro-Poor Inclusive Development and Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals," March 23, 2018.

156 UNDP, "UNDP Mission Report: Supporting Peaceful Transitions and Sustainable Development Pathways in Liberia," September 2017.

157 UN General Assembly Resolution 72/279, UN Doc. A/RES/72/279, June 1, 2018.

158 Ibid.

159 As per UN General Assembly Resolution 72/279, the reformed resident coordinator role is incorporated as part of the development system reform as a means of creating "a dedicated, independent, impartial, empowered and sustainable development-focused coordination function." The resident coordinator has been separated from the resident representative of UNDP. Note that the delinking will officially take place in January 2019. Until then, the resident coordinator is fulfilling the resident representative/resident coordinator role.

160 The Joint UNDP-DPA Programme for Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention was developed in 2004 and has engaged in more than sixty countries to provide support to national stakeholders, UN resident coordinators, and UN country teams to strengthen national and local capacities for conflict prevention. The joint program deploys peace and development advisers to missions as a key conflict prevention tool. In 2017, there were forty-eight such advisers worldwide. The program has been praised as an innovation supporting countries in transition to build capacities for peace. More information is available in the UNDP's "Joint UNDP-DPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention—Annual Report 2016," May 13, 2017.

161 UNDP, "UNDP Mission Report: Supporting Peaceful Transitions and Sustainable Development Pathways in Liberia," September 2017.

emphasized, Liberia is perceived as a peacekeeping and transition success story. It is not yet, however, a successful case of peacebuilding and sustaining peace, and still needs the support of the international community.¹⁶²

THE EXPANDED RESIDENT COORDINATOR'S OFFICE: TESTING A NEW MODEL

UNMIL SRSG Zarif's role in providing good offices on behalf of the UN was invaluable to Liberia's peaceful elections and governance transition. While UNMIL's withdrawal was a positive achievement, the country still confronted complex, deep-seated political and social challenges that drove the conflict decades earlier. These dynamics necessitated sustained high-level political engagement from the UN and therefore created the opportunity to expand the RCO. Stakeholders in Liberia emphasized that the UN's good offices function was valued and needed post-UNMIL, a point similarly emphasized in the UNCT capacity mapping exercise. Thus, the decision to keep the deputy SRSG/resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator in this role was welcomed by the government of Liberia and the international donor community.¹⁶³

In this new structure, Resident Coordinator El Hillo plays a bridging role between the government of Liberia and the international community, continuing UNMIL's role in offering support and advice. El Hillo is working to encourage dialogue among and advocate to the highest level of leadership in the government, the international community, the private sector, and civil society. This includes supporting them in identifying politically sensitive issues and sharing analysis. The RCO provides "policy and political advice [to the Resident Coordinator] on peace consolidation, support liaison at the decentralized level in peace consolidation, national reconciliation and social cohesion; democratic governance; human rights protection; and rule of law and assure the reach of

the counties."¹⁶⁴

The RCO includes a Political, Peace and Development Unit intended to fill the gap in conflict and context analysis left by UNMIL. This unit is intended to support the resident coordinator in his good offices role, feed into the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), maintain "contacts with political and civil society networks, [and] maintain communication with senior officials in government and the international community."¹⁶⁵ Many interviewees affirmed the necessity and utility of this new function. However, while the unit is supposed to include five staff, as of July 2018 it was staffed with only two peace and development advisers. In order to facilitate this transfer of political knowledge and retain institutional memory, a senior UN political affairs official from UNMIL was appointed as one of the two advisers. However, the impact was comparatively limited due to the slow establishment of the office.¹⁶⁶

Capitalizing on the skills and advantages this set-up provides, however, requires both financial and substantive support, which at present are critical gaps.¹⁶⁷ As of July 2018, the RCO had secured financial support only until the end of the year. Sweden is currently providing funding for the two peace and development advisers. Norway funded the deployment of a gender adviser from January to July 2018 and is currently providing funding for the chief of political affairs, head of the Political, Peace and Development Unit, twelve UN volunteers, the political affairs specialist, the field liaison specialist, and the three national officers until December 30, 2018. The UN Development Operations Coordination Office is providing funding for the personal assistant to the resident coordinator until December 2018.¹⁶⁸ These financial lifelines lifted some pressure off the resident coordinator to fundraise until the end of 2018. However, there are serious unanswered questions about where the funds will come from in 2019, especially as the

162 Interview with Resident Coordinator El Hillo, Monrovia, July 2018.

163 Interview with UNCT official, Monrovia, July 2018.

164 UN in Liberia, "Resident Coordinator a.i. Transition Update for Liberia," July 9, 2018 (provided by UN Peacebuilding Support Office official).

165 UNDP, "UNDP Mission Report: Supporting Peaceful Transitions and Sustainable Development Pathways in Liberia," September 2017.

166 Interview with UNCT official, Monrovia, July 2018.

167 Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, July 2018.

168 UN in Liberia, "Resident Coordinator a.i. Transition Update for Liberia," July 9, 2018.

development system reforms will start to take effect, ending the resident coordinator's official control over UNDP's programmatic funds.¹⁶⁹

The implications of these reforms will only be felt well into 2019, but their likely effect is significant. Previously, the resident coordinator (as the in-country UNDP resident representative and resident coordinator) reported directly to UNDP headquarters in New York. With the separation of these positions, the resident coordinator now reports directly to the UN Secretariat (through the Development Operations Coordination Office overseen by the deputy secretary-general), while a separate resident representative reports to UNDP headquarters. Despite the release of "delinking guidelines" to all resident coordinators,¹⁷⁰ as of July 2018 there was still a lack of clarity on the direct implications this change will have on the UNCT's long-term programmatic responsibilities and direction.

Confusion over the implications of the reforms have made it difficult for the UN to set a clear agenda in Liberia. The need for the government and post-transition UN entity to address the root causes of the conflict and sustain the peace is widely acknowledged and discussed. Currently, there are many peace and conflict analysis processes, including the SCORE initiative, various fragility assessments from actors such as the World Bank, and analyses by international donors and development partners. Moving forward, however, the entire UNCT and its development and donor partners need to align these initiatives and develop a coherent, shared country analysis centered on priorities set by the government. By having one common analysis to work off of, the UNCT will be able to better develop a central vision of sustaining peace that threads throughout its work and that bridges peace and development activities. Such a vision should include clear, attainable goals that are inclusive of development and peacebuilding and

that the UN, the Liberian government, civil society, regional organizations, international financial institutions, investors, and trade partners can work together to achieve.¹⁷¹

Lack of clarity on Liberia's development strategy has also been a challenge for the RCO. The new government launched its development plan—the Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development—on October 17, 2018, nearly seven months after the "Liberia Moment" conference. Delays in the plan's development and dissemination further placed the UNCT in programmatic limbo because it was mandated to align its priorities with those of the government. In addition, the 2013–2017 UNDAF was extended until the end of 2019, as the UN was revising the UNDAF structure as part of the development reforms. The new UNDAF template is still unclear, and the resulting delays and lack of clarity left a gap in the UNCT's strategic programming during the first months of the transition—a critical time for consolidating peace.

The RCO confronts additional challenges coordinating with the new administration, international development partners, and international donors. Even though the current resident coordinator was already based in Liberia, the new government has created a challenge for engagement because of its skepticism of international support as well as the new staff's lack of familiarity with UN engagement. Many within the international development and donor community also emphasized that, at least initially, they did not have the same level of interaction with the UNCT and resident coordinator as they had with the mission, likely due to new processes being set up and the change of staff.¹⁷² They urged the UNCT to be a "louder and more visible and active voice for the people, as well as the government, to promote people-centered policies."¹⁷³ They also encouraged the UNCT to better communicate its strategy and vision of a

169 Interview with UNDP official, New York, July 2018.

170 UN General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary-General on Revised Estimates Relating to the Resident Coordinator System Under Section 1, Overall Policymaking, Direction and Coordination*, UN Doc. A/73/424, (October 12, 2018).

171 Center on International Cooperation, IPI, and Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, "Applying Sustaining Peace Workshop 1: Sustaining Peace and Peace Operations Mandates: The Liberian Transitions," December 14, 2016, available at www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ASP-Workshop-1-Report.pdf.

172 As of November 2018, the UN and international partners have instituted a common forum to provide opportunities for regular, systematic engagement between the UN in Liberia and donors. At the time of writing, the authors cannot comment on the effectiveness of this initiative. This information comes from interviews with diplomats in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018.

173 UNDP, "UNDP Mission Report: Supporting Peaceful Transitions and Sustainable Development Pathways in Liberia," September 2017.

post-mission Liberia and to better fulfill its role coordinating funding and priorities among donors.

A GROWING ROLE FOR UNDP

While planning for the UNMIL drawdown, the UN recognized that UNDP would assume larger programmatic responsibilities following the transition, particularly in addressing crosscutting issues such as youth exclusion, human rights, climate change and the environment, and economic and health risks.¹⁷⁴ Many of these connect to broader structural issues such as “land, decentralization, reconciliation, constitutional reform and economic diversification.”¹⁷⁵ In order for the UNCT to continue addressing these issues, “the RCO will need to harness the technical capacity of UNDP and other relevant UNCT members to navigate analysis and response to early warning and the transition from fragility.”¹⁷⁶

In order to plan for this transition, UNDP's Liberia office reassessed its capacities, assets, and gaps. This strategic review revealed potential gaps in crucial areas such as political liaison, national development planning, donor coordination, youth, gender, and macroeconomic policy. As a result, UNDP temporarily deployed sixteen staff members from its SURGE roster for three to six months, with expertise in areas such as governance, gender, economic development, and strategic planning.¹⁷⁷ This short-term support has filled some of the gaps while UNDP develops a new country program aligned with the government's Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development and UNDAF. Nonetheless, as of July 2018, UNDP had not sufficiently planned how to mitigate the impact of UNMIL departing and faced challenges assuming this programmatic role.¹⁷⁸ UNDP must increase its capacity in order to remain strategically positioned and relevant and to fulfill programmatic needs.

First, however, UNDP needs to define its vision. As outlined above, development of this vision has been delayed by the lack of a new UNDAF.¹⁷⁹ As of November 2018, it was also unclear who would be UNDP's resident representative and if there would be a UNDP country director (UNDP's de facto second-in-command when the resident coordinator was also the UNDP resident representative). In addition, it is unclear how the relationship between UNDP and the RCO will develop, considering that UNDP is still the largest UN entity in the country and, unlike the RCO, has significant funding. UNDP and the UN Development Operations Cooperation Office released guidance to assist with this relationship, and discussions within the UNCT are ongoing. The outstanding questions concern how to coordinate engagement with the international development and donor community as well as with the government of Liberia around these evolving dynamics.¹⁸⁰ However, the full implications of these changes, as with the withdrawal of UNMIL, are unlikely to be felt until well into 2019.

UN AGENCIES, FUNDS, AND PROGRAMS FINDING THEIR FOOTING

All the UN agencies, funds, and programs in Liberia have consolidated in the former UNMIL complex. Prior to UNMIL's transition, they were spread across fourteen buildings in Monrovia.¹⁸¹ Recognizing the financial and operational burden associated with this configuration and understanding the importance of a united UN presence after the mission's departure, the capacity mapping exercise proposed that all agencies, funds, and programs move into the UNMIL headquarters.¹⁸² Under the leadership of Resident Coordinator El Hillo and the UNCT's Operations Management Team, twenty-one UN entities and

174 Interview with Liberian government official, Monrovia, July 2018.

175 UNDP, “UNDP Mission Report: Supporting Peaceful Transitions and Sustainable Development Pathways in Liberia,” September 2017, New York.

176 Ibid.

177 Interview with UNDP official, New York, July 2018.

178 Interview with UNCT official, Monrovia, July 2018.

179 Ibid.

180 Interview with UNDP official, July 2018, New York.

181 Interview with Resident Coordinator El Hillo, Monrovia, July 2018.

182 Lund, Lange, Yeobah, and Dunbrack, “Mapping UNCT Technical and Operational Capacities to Support the UN Commitments in the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan,” pp. 25-26

international organizations based in Monrovia had formally co-located as of July 2018.¹⁸³ According to the RCO, this helped integrate UN programming, harmonize administrative processes, and improve service delivery, with cost savings of over \$1 million per year (see Table 1).

While many agencies, funds, and programs have undertaken strategic reviews to inform their programming post-UNMIL, others asserted that their strategic frameworks or projects did not need to change. Many already had multiyear strategies in place, and their substantive and operational priorities did not change because of the transition.¹⁸⁴ What has changed, however, is the support these entities receive and their presence outside the capital.

A key issue is the lack of the logistical and operational support services previously provided by UNMIL, such as aviation, engineering capabilities, and transport services.¹⁸⁵ During the Ebola outbreak, UNMIL was able to respond with such haste due to the assets it had. Some are concerned that the UNCT would not be able to respond in the same manner to a similar emergency, and the government also lacks the necessary resources to

do so.¹⁸⁶ In addition, without the transportation services UNMIL offered, the UNCT is unable to implement and deliver programming to development partners and government counterparts outside of Monrovia to the same extent as UNMIL.¹⁸⁷

Added to this is the issue that with the drawdown of UNMIL, the UN will have a much smaller presence in Liberia. The UN went from ninety-seven field presences in 2015 down to two as of June 30, 2018. This issue was raised during the planning of the transition, and it was suggested that the UN would shift to having “one UN presence in three hubs,” which would “be crucial not only for service delivery but also visibility and confidence building.”¹⁸⁸ Despite the commitment to develop these hubs, these had not been instituted as of July 2018, and the only UN entities with a presence outside Monrovia were the World Health Organization (WHO), UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and UNICEF.¹⁸⁹ Some mentioned that regional presences should be considered as part of the UNDAF, but it was unclear when this would take place or who would finance these hubs.¹⁹⁰

Table 1. Annual cost savings from co-location of UN agencies, funds, and programs in Liberia¹⁹¹

Spending area	Cost before co-location	Cost after co-location	Amount saved	Percent saved
Rental	\$1.269 million	\$1.150 million	\$0.119 million	9.3%
Operating costs	\$2.973 million	\$2.057 million	\$0.916 million	30.8%
Total	\$4.242 million	\$3.207 million	\$1.035 million	24.39%

183 Those involved in the co-location were: the resident coordinator's office, UNDP, the UN Department for Safety and Security, the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, UN Women, UNHCR, OHCHR, the UN Office for Project Services, the Food and Agriculture Organization, UNAIDS, the UN Industrial Development Organization, UNESCO, the UN clinic, the UN Population Fund, the International Organization for Migration, the African Union, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, and the Cities Alliance. UN in Liberia, “Resident Coordinator a.i. Transition Update for Liberia,” July 9, 2018.

184 Interview with UNCT official, Monrovia, July 2018.

185 UNDP, “UNDP Mission Report: Supporting Peaceful Transitions and Sustainable Development Pathways in Liberia,” September 2017; Interview with UNCT official, Monrovia, July 2018.

186 Interview with UNICEF official, Monrovia, July 2018.

187 UNDP, “UNDP Mission Report: Supporting Peaceful Transitions and Sustainable Development Pathways in Liberia,” September 2017.

188 Ibid.

189 Interview with UNCT official, Monrovia, July 2018.

190 Interview with UNDP official, Monrovia, July 2018.

191 Those involved in the co-location were: the resident coordinator's office, UNDP, the UN Department for Safety and Security, the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, UN Women, UNHCR, OHCHR, the UN Office for Project Services, the Food and Agriculture Organization, UNAIDS, the UN Industrial Development Organization, UNESCO, the UN clinic, the UN Population Fund, the International Organization for Migration, the African Union, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, and the Cities Alliance. UN in Liberia, “Resident Coordinator a.i. Transition Update for Liberia,” July 9, 2018.

AN INDEPENDENT OHCHR OFFICE: KEEPING THE FOCUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

The monitoring, protection, and promotion of human rights was one of UNMIL's defining tasks. While Liberia made progress institutionalizing core human rights standards following the end of its conflict, it confronts challenges related to sexual and gender-based violence, land rights and access, and equal access to justice.¹⁹² In addition, Liberians continue to grapple with the damaging legacy of decades of violence, exacerbated by an incomplete process of transitional justice and the unimplemented recommendations of Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹⁹³ Liberia's Independent National Commission on Human Rights, which emerged from the 2003 peace agreement, was only operationalized in 2010 and faces logistical and equipment deficits. UNMIL's Human Rights and Protection Section played a significant role in strengthening Liberia's national human rights capacities while providing independent expertise and monitoring support.

To fill this gap left by UNMIL's departure, an independent OHCHR office was instituted on April 1, 2018, as specified in the Executive Committee decision of July 2017 and based on the recommendation of the capacity mapping exercise. This office is mandated to provide independent expertise, institutional support, and capacity building to government offices and civil society organizations alike.¹⁹⁴ It currently has seven staff, comprising both substantive and operational/administrative personnel, with an authorized capacity of eleven.¹⁹⁵ The PBF is providing funding to this office until the end of 2019, which provides a sense of security that allows it to plan longer-term substantive support to Liberian stakeholders and institutions. The office has also started mobilizing funding to complement the PBF's money and to

support continuous operations beyond 2019.¹⁹⁶

COMPLEMENTARY SUPPORT FROM MULTILATERAL PARTNERS

In the context of the changes underway throughout the UNCT, support from multilateral partners plays an even larger role in Liberia's ongoing transition period. The World Bank and the African Development Bank (AfDB) drive long-term development financing and infrastructure support, while the AU and ECOWAS provide political support to strengthen the RCO's efforts to provide good offices.

The World Bank and AfDB are two of the most significant international donors to Liberia. They align their development assistance programs to the country's development frameworks, thereby complementing the UNCT's development objectives. The World Bank's Liberia Country Partnership Strategy, covering 2013 to 2017, was an agreement with the government on the specific role the bank would play in addressing sources of fragility and conflict in pursuit of sustainable growth and poverty reduction.¹⁹⁷ To support the new administration, the World Bank will refine its priorities. The AfDB supports Liberia, a country it classifies as "in transition," through three financing mechanisms with resources from twenty-four donor countries.¹⁹⁸ Its broader development approach is to increase trade between Liberia and neighboring countries while encouraging greater private sector investment in the country, including through support to small and medium enterprises and microfinance.¹⁹⁹ Both the World Bank and the AfDB provide budgetary support to the new government and are working with it to develop and operationalize the national development plan.²⁰⁰

Infrastructure, especially the lack of viable road networks, remains a central challenge in Liberia. UNMIL provided road maintenance to ensure its

192 UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, *Human Rights Committee: Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of Liberia*, UN Doc. CCPR/C/LBR/CO/1, August 27, 2018.

193 Interview with member of the Liberian Independent National Human Rights Commission, Monrovia, July 2018.

194 OHCHR, "New UN Human Rights Office Continues Work in Liberia," May 17, 2018.

195 Resident Coordinator of Liberia, "Transition Update for Liberia," PBC Meeting, New York, July 9, 2018.

196 Ibid.

197 World Bank, "Liberia Country Partnership Strategy for the period FY2013-FY2017," July 1, 2013.

198 The three financing windows are the AfDB, the bank's African Development Fund (ADF), and the bank's Nigerian Trust Fund (NTF). Interview with diplomat in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018.

199 African Development Bank, "Liberia Economic Outlook," available at www.afdb.org/en/countries/west-africa/liberia/.

200 Interview with diplomats in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018.

troops could move throughout the country. The mission's departure exposed this gap, and the government does not yet have the capacity to fill it. Viable road networks are critical to improve access to local markets, educational institutions, hospitals, and other social services critical to economic growth and development.²⁰¹ Both the World Bank and the AfDB are channeling resources into strengthening Liberia's infrastructure, as evidenced by the World Bank's Liberia Road Asset Management Project and the AfDB's road projects in southeastern Liberia.²⁰²

As the UN presence in Liberia scaled down, the AU and ECOWAS strengthened their engagement with and support to both the government of Liberia and the UNCT in terms of governance and good offices. The AU has moved into the Pan-African House, and ECOWAS is in an adjacent building. There is close alignment between the UN, AU, and ECOWAS in terms of political engagement, as well as on norms and policies on governance and reconciliation. The UN clearly understands the central role the regional partners play in the country in the long term.²⁰³

ECOWAS is also filling programming gaps outside of Monrovia. One of its focuses is monitoring how the Liberian government responds to current and future political risks. ECOWAS is also continuing earlier work promoting community dialogue and reconciliation to defuse tensions and improve relations between communities, as well as working to strengthen local structures for peace, including training youth leaders on conflict management.²⁰⁴ ECOWAS has the ability to reach a wide audience in the country through ECOWAS Radio (formerly UN Radio) and is widely seen as an ally to the UN likely to be present in the country for an extended period of time.

THE MULTI-PARTNER TRUST FUND: AVOIDING THE FINANCIAL CLIFF

UNMIL's transition required the UN and bilateral partners to fundamentally recalibrate how they provided financial support to Liberia. UN officials acknowledged during the capacity mapping exercise that Liberia would encounter a "financial cliff" following UNMIL's closure. To financially support the new UNCT as it took on peacebuilding and development priorities, the Executive Committee mandated the creation of a trust fund. The Liberia Transition Multi-Partner Trust Fund (LTMPTF) was established in 2017 as the "United Nations system's principal financing mechanism for supporting programs designed to sustain peace in Liberia following UNMIL's withdrawal."²⁰⁵ It was expected to serve as a "predictable funding-coherent programming nexus to align financing streams with program and policy objectives embedded in the Liberia peacebuilding plan and future development cooperation frameworks."²⁰⁶ It was also intended to act as a platform to "strengthen coordination, evaluation, planning and communication among several actors including government, international cooperation agencies and NGOs."²⁰⁷

Efforts to establish and capitalize this fund demonstrate innovative ways to mitigate the impact of the financial cliff. The fund is designed to receive contributions from both traditional and nontraditional sources, including governments, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, the private sector, and philanthropic organizations. While it encourages unrestricted funds, donors can earmark which outcomes they aim to support.²⁰⁸

The UN designed the LTMPTF to fund both peacebuilding and development projects. Between 2018 and 2020, it was expected to fund programs

201 World Bank, "Improved Road Network in Liberia Boosts Trade and Commerce," February 13, 2017.

202 Interview with diplomat in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018.

203 Ibid.

204 Ibid.

205 UNDP, "UNDP Mission Report: Supporting Peaceful Transitions and Sustainable Development Pathways in Liberia," September 2017.

206 United Nations in Liberia, "Liberia Multi-Partner Trust Fund Terms of Reference," 2017.

207 Ibid.

208 Ibid.

addressing conflict triggers and immediate risks outlined in Phase II of the Peacebuilding Plan while laying the groundwork for addressing Liberia's structural challenges.²⁰⁹ Starting in 2020, the fund is anticipated to focus exclusively on supporting Liberia's Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.²¹⁰

The LTMPTF differs from the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) in clear ways. It is dedicated exclusively to Liberia, while the PBF provides support to at least forty countries.²¹¹ In addition, the PBF can only fund UN entities and, in specific cases, civil society organizations. Its priorities are set by its Executive Committee and do not directly involve officials from the countries where the funds will be deployed.²¹² The priorities of the LTMPTF, on the other hand, are set by its steering committee (comprising both Liberian and UN officials), with the result that the Liberian government has comparatively greater ownership over approved projects.²¹³ The LTMPTF has the flexibility to fund both national bodies, including the government, and international organizations working in Liberia, including UN entities.²¹⁴

Despite its potentially valuable role supporting Liberia's transition, the LTMPTF has encountered some early challenges. Currently, it is headed by a coordinator, who is supported by a strategic planning specialist, monitoring and evaluation analyst, and finance specialist who are mandated to operationalize the fund. However, while the policies and processes to fund international actors are fully operational, those for national actors are not. There is criticism that this fund should have been operationalized much earlier (with some suggesting as much as two years prior to the transi-

tion date) to capitalize on the attention Liberia received while still on the Security Council's agenda.²¹⁵ For example, the Executive Committee could have emphasized the need for the fund when discussing UNMIL's remaining presence on the ground in Liberia to encourage international donors to commit to it early.

The late operationalization of the PBF, combined with donor fatigue, has resulted in a slow start for the LTMPTF. The funding needed has not come in.²¹⁶ As of July 2018, the PBF is the only entity that has provided funding to the LTMPTF (\$5 million), falling well short of the estimated \$130 million required to fund Phase II of the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan.²¹⁷ Members of Liberia's diplomatic community highlighted that they are not clear on the value in channeling funds through the LTMPTF compared with bilateral aid channels.²¹⁸

This also reflects member states' inconsistent priorities. Donor countries with embassies in Monrovia are waiting to see the new government's priorities before committing further funds, and many refuse to provide budgetary support to the UNCT during the transition period.²¹⁹ While the PBF and LTMPTF are currently oriented to address Liberia's conflict triggers and risks, these international partners argue that financial support should be shifted to projects that support structural change in the country to meet development goals.²²⁰ These priorities differ from the transition-related peacebuilding projects articulated by member states in New York, as envisioned in the original conception of the LTMPTF. Moreover, many international partners want to fund programmatic activities rather than the UNCT's urgent administrative and staffing requirements.

209 Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, September 2018.

210 Ibid.

211 The PBF has committed \$5 million to the LTMPTF for 2018, and several projects are currently under review for possible funding later in the year.

212 United Nations, *Secretary General Peacebuilding Fund Strategic Plan 2017-2019*.

213 United Nations in Liberia, "Liberia Multi-Partner Trust Fund Terms of Reference," 2017.

214 Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, July 2018.

215 Ibid.

216 Interview with UNCT official, Monrovia, July 2018.

217 Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, September 2018; Ambassadorial discussion of the PBC Liberia Configuration, "Chair's Summary," November 21, 2017.

218 Ibid.

219 Interview with diplomat in Liberia, Monrovia, July 2018.

220 Interview with UN Secretariat official, New York, September 2018.

Therefore, international partners need more clarity on the role of the LTMPF, and donors need to enhance coordination with each other and with the fund. In addition, the resident coordinator needs to continue mobilizing funding for the LTMPF as well as for UN agencies, funds, and programs in Liberia. The RCO will need to demonstrate how these funds support progress on specific peace and development challenges without necessarily having immediate results to show.

THE PEACEBUILDING COMMISSION IN A POST-UNMIL LIBERIA

In order for the UNCT to be successful, international development partners will need to give sustained attention to Liberia's development priorities. The PBC can play a valuable, complementary role in this. The PBC offers a space where member states can discuss structural and operational prevention priorities under the principle of national ownership, even for countries not on the Security Council or PBC's formal agendas. The PBC's Liberia Configuration offers many opportunities to continue these discussions post-UNMIL under the chairmanship of Sweden.

Beyond the Security Council, the PBC should also engage with other organs of the UN, especially ECOSOC and the General Assembly, to better communicate Liberia's progress on sustaining peace, consolidating the transition, and advancing development priorities. In line with this, the PBC can provide space in New York for voices from the field on progress and challenges in Liberia, as it did prior to the transition. The PBC should also push for Phase II of the Peacebuilding Plan to address the root causes of violence in Liberia and encourage the UN system to continue working together to address peace and development holistically.²²¹

In terms of resource mobilization, the PBC could conduct a stakeholder mapping to identify resource and attention gaps for future peacebuilding activities to guide UN policymakers in New York.²²² It could also support the LTMPF by providing space for discussions on the fund, the role it is envisioned to play, and how international donors could support it.

THE ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF UNMIL'S WITHDRAWAL

The UN transition brought to the fore Liberia's structural economic challenges, including a revenue base heavily reliant upon commodity and natural resource exports,²²³ limited domestic food production, high levels of inflation and debt, and reliance on the US dollar.²²⁴ These challenges long predated UNMIL's withdrawal but gained public prominence following the new government's inauguration and the peacekeeping transition.²²⁵

There is an established body of literature evaluating the economic impact of UN peacekeeping operations on host-country economies.²²⁶ Recent research unpacks the specific impact of UN peacekeeping withdrawals. Peacekeeping missions function as "large-scale economic interventions" in post-conflict societies, and their withdrawals are economically disruptive and can cause growth to collapse.²²⁷ A 2016 study specifically examined the economic impact of UNMIL. It determined that UNMIL's spending improved economic outcomes for Liberians in the short term but not necessarily in the long term. It emphasized that many Liberian businesses depended exclusively on foreign spending and UNMIL-generated demand. The authors concluded,

There is little reason to think that UNMIL's eventual complete withdrawal will be any less economically

221 Statement by the chair of the PBC Liberia Configuration to the Security Council, April 19, 2018.

222 Center on International Cooperation, IPI, and Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, "Applying Sustaining Peace Workshop 1: Sustaining Peace and Peace Operations Mandates: The Liberian Transitions."

223 Rubber and iron ore are the country's primary commodity exports; agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting contribute approximately 70 percent of real GDP. John Baffoe and Rees Mwasambili, *Liberia Country Note*, African Development Bank, January 2018.

224 Ibid.

225 Interview with UNCT official, Monrovia, July 2018.

226 For examples, see: Michael Carnahan, William Durch, and Scott Gilmore, "Economic Impact of Peacekeeping—Final Report," UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, March 2006, available at https://buildingmarkets.org/sites/default/files/economic_impact_of_un_peacekeeping_march_2006.pdf; William Durch, "The Economic Impact of Peacekeeping: An Update," in *Economic Impacts of Crisis Response Operations: An Underestimated Factor in External Engagement*, Walter Feichtinger, Markus Gauster, and Fred Tanner, eds., (Vienna, Austria: National Defense Academy, 2010), pp. 159-189; Brandon Ernst, Rajeev Sooreea, Gigi Gokcek, and Diara Spain, "The Economic Impacts of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Growth Versus Level Effects," *International Journal of Public Policy* 10, No. 3 (2014), pp. 100-117.

227 Bernd Beber, Michael Gilligan, Jenny Guardado, and Sabrina Karim, "Challenges and Pitfalls of Peacekeeping Economies," July 2016, available at www.nyu.edu/projects/beber/files/Beber_Gilligan_Guardado_Karim_PK_Economy.pdf.

disruptive than other mission drawdowns. UNMIL exemplifies the challenges that [the authors] suspect underpin the negative relationship between withdrawals and the host country's rate of economic growth.... In fact, one reason why approval rates [for UNMIL] are high might be that respondents recognize that their economic livelihoods depend on UNMIL's continued presence.²²⁸

This issue was highlighted in *The Government of Liberia, UN and Partners Transition Plan*, which noted "the departure of UNMIL is predicted to result in a further slump in the local domestic economy."²²⁹ One month earlier, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) raised the same concern.²³⁰ Government officials, representatives of civil society organizations, and members of the diplomatic community unanimously underscored that the country was undergoing significant economic challenges. However, stakeholders held a range of perspectives on the extent to which UNMIL's transition impacted the economic downturn.

Some blamed the UNMIL transition exclusively for the country's economic challenges. Others said the current economic decline would have occurred regardless of whether UNMIL continued its work. Even more argued that there was a more complex interplay, with the peacekeeping transition likely exacerbating existing trends. Anecdotal evidence pointed to decreased occupancy rates at hotels, increased vacancies in apartments, lower revenue for restaurants and stores, job losses for low-skilled nationals who had previously worked for UNMIL, and higher inflation rates due to decreased circulation of US dollars in the formal economy. Regardless of its actual extent—which is unlikely to be known for many years—there is a widely rooted public perception that UNMIL's transition impacted the country's economic standing. While not necessarily a core responsibility for the UNCT, these dynamics ultimately factor into the UN's development programming as well as Liberians' broader perceptions of the new UN presence in the country.

Conclusions

Transitions from mission to non-mission settings exemplify how the UN strives to integrate its work on peace and development. UN transitions are critical moments to consolidate gains and strengthen the relationship between peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and development.²³¹ Secretary-General Guterres has recognized UN transitions as critical to the organization's work, having placed them as a recurring item on the Executive Committee's agenda in January 2017.²³²

Transitions from mission to non-mission settings also speak to the broader goals of contemporary UN reform processes. Efforts to strengthen and adapt UN peacekeeping, restructure the UN peace and security architecture, and reconfigure the UN development system all strive to improve system-wide integration, accountability, and effectiveness. These reform processes also aim to bring the UN closer to the people it serves. The dynamics and processes intended to drive UN transitions all speak directly to these ideals and goals.

Liberia and the UNMIL transition embody many of the substantive and operational dynamics confronting the UN's peace and security work. Liberia's peaceful and orderly transition will likely serve as a guidepost for future UN peacekeeping transitions. The following conclusions offer insights into the experiences and lessons from the UNMIL transition.

PLANNING AND COORDINATING THE TRANSITION

1. Liberia is undergoing a triple, not a double, transition.

While Liberia's experience is commonly referred to as a "double transition," the country is in fact undergoing a "triple transition": the governance transition, the UN peacekeeping transition, and the transition to the reformed UN development system. These processes occurred nearly simultaneously, with little examination of their interplay.

228 Ibid., p. 27.

229 "The Government of Liberia, UN and Partners Transition," December 2017, p. 2. Sourced from Liberian government official.

230 International Monetary Fund, "Seventh and Eighth Reviews under the Extended Credit Facility Arrangement, and Request for Waiver of Nonobservance Of Performance Criteria—Press Release; Staff Report; And Statement By The Executive Director For Liberia," Country Report No. 17/348, November 2017.

231 UN Security Council Resolution 2282 (April 27, 2016), UN Doc. S/RES/2282; UN General Assembly Resolution 70/262 (April 27, 2016), UN Doc. A/RES/70/262.

232 He has done so both as a thematic issue and as a country-specific file.

Examples abound of how the resulting unintended dynamics exacerbated an already challenging process. Risk analyses of Liberia's elections failed to consider either the impact of a presidential runoff or the implications of having to reestablish relationships between a new government and new UN configuration. The UN's decision to ensure leadership continuity through Resident Coordinator El Hillo helped mitigate these dynamics.

While the decision to use the model of the next-generation UNCT was a positive innovation on paper, it did not receive the immediate administrative and financial support needed to ensure a smooth transition. Furthermore, the impending development system reforms, set to begin in January 2019, leave the new configuration further in limbo. Given these complexities, one could ask whether Liberia's transition environment was the right place to pilot this model. That the transition was nonetheless peaceful speaks highly to the leadership of the Liberian government and the UN and reflects the commitment of the Liberian people to the transition's success.

2. Liberia's Peacebuilding Plan was an imperfect tool for supporting the transition process.

Despite near universal praise for the Liberia Peacebuilding Plan from UN stakeholders in New York, there is still much to learn about applying this tool in future transitions. In New York, the Peacebuilding Plan was presented as a framework that crystallized the transition's substantive trajectory and sustained attention on Liberia.

However, stakeholders throughout Liberia highlighted how the plan caused substantive redundancies, was rushed into creation through a top-down process, and was not clearly understood by the Liberian government (initially) or by the majority of Liberians. In addition, because of the differences in analytical depth and specificity between Phase I and Phase II, the plan's relevance and impact on the ground decreased as soon as Phase II began. These dynamics raise questions about who the primary audience was for the Peacebuilding Plan, with the implication that the international community benefited more from the plan than Liberians did. While Liberia was, broadly speaking, the right environment with the right circumstances for coordinated, systematic, and

collective peacebuilding efforts, this will not be true for all countries transitioning from peacekeeping operations.

3. The sequencing of key activities impacted how the Liberian transition unfolded.

The order in which different UN actors undertook important activities had both positive and negative impacts on the transition. The phased approach to the transition (with a successful security handover preceding the final withdrawal) rightfully recognized UNMIL's importance in strengthening Liberia's security sector institutions and UNMIL's role as a guarantor of security. This offers an interesting model for future transitions.

However, the lack of consideration of the civilian transition created challenges for the mission. While the capacity mapping exercise and the Peacebuilding Plan were important operational tools for advancing the civilian transition process, the Security Council and the UN system could have initiated these processes earlier so that the council could have considered their findings prior to setting the final transition deadline. More informed assessments could also have improved understanding of the transition among member states, making them more likely to provide sufficient political, operational, and financial support at earlier stages.

BRIDGING THE GAPS LEFT BY THE MISSION'S DEPARTURE

4. The empowered RCO is a useful transition model but does not sufficiently compensate for substantive capacity gaps.

While the empowered RCO model is at the heart of the UN development reforms and was not framed explicitly as a transition tool, it was an invaluable and innovative feature of UNMIL's transition. The UNCT capacity mapping exercise unequivocally stated that UNMIL's departure, including that of the SRSG, would leave a gap in political analysis and engagement. By providing the new RCO with the necessary mandate and resources to fill this gap (including the Political, Peace and Development Unit), the UN ensured that it could streamline conflict sensitive analysis throughout the UNCT's work and continue providing advice to Liberia's political actors and diplomatic community. The RCO is one part of the broader UN configuration throughout the country, but it faces significant

financial and capacity gaps. In order for this new model to be successful, financial support for and capacity within the office must accompany the decision to use it.

5. The UN did not have the funding architecture in place to effectively support Liberia's transition.

The absence of predictable, long-term funding for the new UNCT in Liberia is an urgent problem. It is also reflective of a broader challenge confronting the UN: the system is not set up to effectively provide the necessary financial support during transitions from mission to non-mission settings. Huge disparities exist between how peacekeeping missions are funded (through annually assessed contributions) and how non-mission settings are funded (through voluntary, largely project-based funding). While these business models have long been part of the UN system, transitions require sustained, coordinated, and predictable funding for core peacebuilding tasks, especially during the initial months.

The Liberia Transition Multi-Partner Trust Fund (LTMPF) was an innovation intended to help bridge these gaps. However, lack of clarity among international partners (including their shift in funding approaches from peacebuilding to development) and a short timeline for operationalization limited the LTMPF's impact when it mattered most. International partners want to fund programmatic activities rather than the UNCT's urgent administrative and staffing requirements. Donors in Liberia have many questions regarding the LTMPF and its added value, especially in the context of choosing between bilateral aid, the LTMPF, and the PBF. Startup delays left the PBF as the only funder of the LTMPF during the transition's initial months.

Beyond the LTMPF, extraordinary funding measures from the UN and international partners are the only lifelines supporting the empowered RCO in 2018. With the UN development system reforms ongoing, the RCO remains in limbo in terms of clarity on medium-to-long-term funding. These challenges are exacerbated by changes to the UN Development Assistance Framework's (UNDAF) structure as well as the delayed release of

the Liberian government's new development agenda. As a result, the new UN configuration was unable to hit the ground running and continues to confront programming and operational uncertainties.

6. Liberia's transition did not address how best to maintain the UN presence outside Monrovia.

The new UNCT's Monrovia-centric presence remains one of the transition's biggest weaknesses. In many ways, UNMIL served as a *de facto* state administration across Liberia: it was a clear, visible presence that supported the provision of basic services and guaranteed security.

Although closing field presences is one of the primary components of UN drawdowns, there was no systematic evaluation or handover process to substantively consider the extent to which the new UN configuration should remain present beyond the capital. Apart from projects by the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and a small cadre of national UN volunteers, all of the UN's work is now based in Monrovia. The UN's virtual withdrawal from Liberia made people feel less secure and counteracted the strategic messaging that "UNMIL is leaving but the UN will stay."²³³ As the UNCT will only meaningfully revisit the issue during the next UNDAF negotiations, the UN missed a critical opportunity to sustain its support throughout the country.

NAVIGATING THE DYNAMICS IN NEW YORK

7. Security Council politics directly impacted the planning and sequencing of Liberia's transition.

Compromises for the sake of political expediency resulted in the final transition deadline of March 30, 2018, which placed UNMIL's transition within Liberia's election period. This alignment amplified the election's political stakes, required the mission to exert significant effort to support the electoral process, and gave the changing UN team limited time to acclimate to the incoming administration.

Moreover, the Security Council's disproportional

233 Chen, Jorgensen, Mathew, and Smith, "Inclusive National Ownership in UN Peace Operation Transitions—Liberia," p. 25.

tionate focus on early planning for the security transition came at the expense of similar planning for the civilian transition. While mission-level planning for both processes accelerated in 2010, the Security Council's subsequent resolutions focused exclusively on evaluating and benchmarking the security transition. By not requesting more information about proposals for the civilian transition, the council did not provide a foundation upon which long-term planning processes could be built. As a result, detailed, earnest focus on the civilian transition only took root following the security handover in June 2016. Time frames and deadlines for the transition were set before the political and operational assessments were completed and their implications understood by council members. These decisions had considerable implications for the country and caused increasing frustration among UN staff on the ground.

8. Liberia's concurrent position on the Security Council and Peacebuilding Commission agendas strengthened the transition by sustaining international engagement.

Not all countries that host peacekeeping missions are featured on the PBC agenda. Liberia, as one of the few countries considered by both the PBC and the Security Council, benefitted strongly from the PBC's support during the transition. While the Security Council established the transition's broad framework (processes and deadlines), the PBC served as a forum for continued engagement. Through its multidisciplinary and multi-partner convening powers, as well as the valuable political engagement of the chair of the Liberia Configuration, the UN engaged with the transition more frequently and in greater depth. Post-UNMIL, the PBC has an even more important role sustaining attention on Liberia.

MANAGING LOCAL PERCEPTIONS

9. Despite its best efforts, the UN struggled to communicate about the transition.

"UNMIL is gone, but the UN is staying." This clear, succinct refrain summarized the UN's public messaging during the transition. But despite this effort, the transition prompted confusion throughout the country. Part of the challenge was that the distinction between the mission and UN agencies, funds, and programs was blurred: most

UN entities worked in conjunction with UNMIL peacekeepers, leading many citizens to associate them all with peacekeepers despite their distinct functions. This challenge was amplified by the gradual closure of UN field presences outside of Monrovia, which fueled perceptions that the UN was leaving.

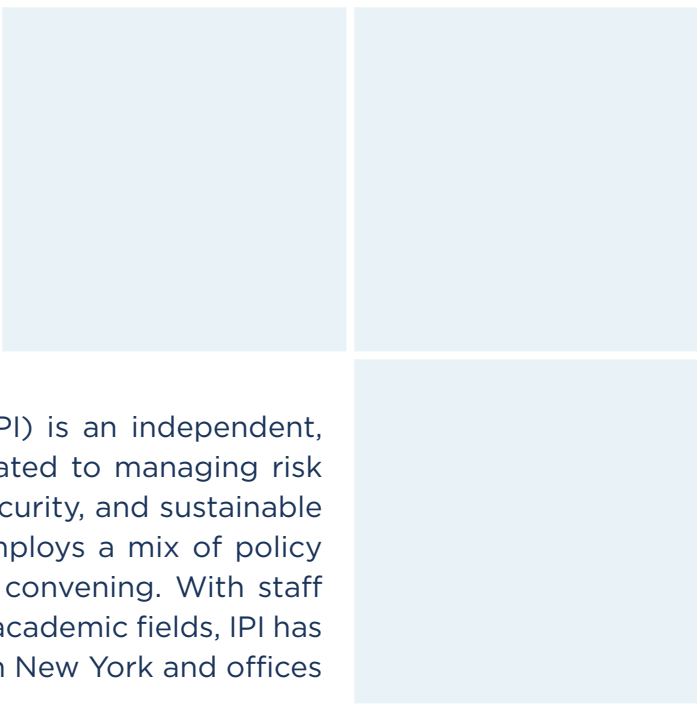
Despite these challenges, UNMIL Radio was a useful tool for the UN and partners alike during the transition. It broadcast throughout the country, allowing messages to be spread widely. In its new configuration as ECOWAS Radio, it offers an opportunity to the agencies, funds, and programs to continue engaging with those outside of Monrovia.

10. Perceptions of the transition's impact on the Liberian economy factor into the UNCT's new operational environment.

Objectively assessing the extent of the transition's economic impact on Liberia's economy is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, Liberians strongly believe that UNMIL's withdrawal did in fact negatively impact the country's macroeconomic conditions—a view supported by earlier academic research. The UNCT now confronts these residual grievances. Leaving them unaddressed may further exacerbate already challenging dynamics for the UN's medium-term development programs throughout Liberia.

* * *

In many regards, UNMIL and its transition to a non-mission configuration can be considered successful, and much can be learned from Liberia for future transitions. However, these successes do not guarantee that Liberia will be a successful case of effective peacebuilding. It is imperative that member states and the UN Secretariat change their approach to transitions from racing against deadlines to instead viewing them as processes that begin well before a peacekeeping mission closes and continue for several years after the mission ends. By viewing transitions as long-term, multi-stakeholder activities, member states have the opportunity to ensure that future transition processes adopt integrated approaches that provide adequate political, operational, and financial mechanisms supporting changing UN presences on the ground.



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