

Government–donor relations in Sierra Leone: who is in the driving seat?*

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ABSTRACT

Since the cessation of conflict in 2002, Sierra Leone has experienced extraordinary levels of involvement from Western donors. Paradoxically, while relationships are often portrayed on the ground as strong with significant donor influence, our research shows considerable fluidity in individual and institutional relationships. The article disaggregates donor–government relations at various levels over a short but crucial period, 2010–16, asking in each case who occupies the driving seat. In so doing, the article interrogates the concept of ‘extraversion’, investigating to what extent government – and indeed donors – has space in which to manoeuvre and how and why government and donors act as they do in this space. The period 2010–16 is of particular interest due to extreme iron ore price volatility and the Ebola epidemic of 2014–15. The article adds much-needed critique and empirical evidence to the debate on donor influence and ‘extraversion’.

SETTING THE THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL SCENE

This paper is concerned with Western donor–Government relations in Sierra Leone, which are longstanding, dating back in their current form to the end

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of the war in 2002 and even before that, extraordinarily intense, and complex. The relationships have been remarkably and consistently described by opposing actors on the ground as ‘strong’, ‘positive’, ‘permissive’, having ‘influence’ and playing a ‘big role’ (vis-à-vis donors) and being ‘open door’ and expressing ‘appreciation’ (vis-à-vis government) across a wide range of interlocutors (Donor, GoSL and NGO officials 2016 Int.).¹ These viewpoints are, however, starkly juxtaposed with fluctuating relationships across donors, ministries, personalities and indeed time, particularly within the period of this study. It is precisely this stark juxtaposition and the question of who is in the driving seat which are under critical investigation here.

The paper is concerned with the relationships between a considerable range of Western donors and the many and varied players in the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) over time. Hence, it is better, although much more complex, to think of a constantly evolving topography of relationships rather than one that is static. The paper thus aims to disaggregate and map these relationships. It must also be noted that a disproportionate amount of the discussion, although not most of the interview material, emerges from the country’s largest bilateral donor – the UK Department for International Development (DFID) – given its key role in the period addressed in the article and before. Other Western agencies are, however, compared in their relationship with GoSL and with each other. The article is not meant to measure the long-term efficacy of the projects, which is beyond its scope, but to document the processes. Such an approach is nonetheless important in that it helps us understand the complex nuances involved in government–donor relations, and their implications for future engagement.

During fieldwork in 2016 and using other interview material collected from 2010 onward, the authors capture a wide range of experiences and opinions from heads and senior staff of the main Western donor agencies, including DFID, EU and the World Bank, and consultants and advisors supporting donors; government representatives, senior officials and advisors from several departments including health, finance and justice; and heads and senior staff from international and domestic NGOs involved in, or monitoring the transactions. During 2016, 25 people were interviewed, including four from domestic NGOs, six from international NGOs, five from GoSL, three advisors to GoSL, and seven from foreign governments and agencies. A total of 14 of the 25 were Sierra Leonean, including three of the six from international NGOs and two of the three advisors. This group is supplemented by material from interviews of similar personnel in 2010, 2011 and 2019. All interviewees were identified through contacts and snowballing and were most often heads of agencies or departments and so straddled policy areas. Note that all interviews were semi-structured and conducted anonymously in order to allow the expression of views. Identifiers in the article are equally anonymised: sometimes quite narrowly, e.g. GoSL department head; and sometimes quite broadly when assertions were made by several interlocutors, e.g. donor and GoSL officials. All interviews took place in Freetown.

Looking at the period 2010–16 presents a tight chronological and political focus – the All People’s Congress (APC) led by President Ernest Koroma provided government during all of this short period – but at the same time neatly encompasses all of the key shifts related to the increase and collapse of iron ore production and prices, the Ebola crisis, and Post-Ebola Recovery, and indeed the Chinese presence, which have impinged on the relationships. It does not, however, preclude a historical understanding of the relationship, which is outlined below. The intensity of the processes during this period in Sierra Leone suggests that the conclusions are not immediately transferrable to other countries, except that many small African countries face highly fluctuating structural conditions and the article’s conclusions are most likely useful as a way of thinking through donor–government relations generally.

The article rests on the question of whether there is space in which African actors can operate vis-à-vis Western donors and vice versa, and what is done within that space and why. During the 1970s, the idea of ‘dependency’ was developed in which African nations were seen as at the mercy of the international system. Seemingly little could be done by African governments in the face of extreme imbalances in economic power from core to periphery, and in any case African leaders were merely a *comprador bourgeoisie* in league with outsiders (Arrighi & Saul 1973; Bernstein 1973). The two extreme oil price hikes of the 1970s fuelled the argument. Western nations were, further, deliberately ‘underdeveloping’ Africa (Rodney 1972). Although countries, such as South Korea, Singapore and Botswana, made the leap out of the periphery, the argument continues to raise its head concerning the many, such as Sierra Leone, which are left behind (Taylor 2016). Hence, within this argument, the structural imbalances of finance, capacity and power give today’s Western actors – and in this case donors – a serious upper hand and severely restrict African room to manoeuvre.

However, it has been suggested that the difference in the ‘miraculous’ developmental experience of East Asia and that of much of Africa is better explained by more successful government state-led policies rather than any structural conditions (Chang 2006). Equally, but with far less economic progress, the notion of extraversion questions the one-sidedness of structural conditions and the limited agency and autonomy assigned to the periphery. It stresses the usage of dependency: ‘the creation and the capture of a rent generated by dependency’ (Bayart 2000: 222). Within ideas of extraversion, Africans have leverage and strategies of handling outsiders from around the world and one can see historical and contemporary expertise (Bayart 2000; Cooper 2002; Clapham 2006; Taylor 2009). The Cold War era showed non-aligned African governments adept at playing off East and West to the material benefit of their regimes. The post-Cold War era of aid, conditionalities on aid and economic and political liberalisation has had its casualties in African politics but many leaders and governments learned quickly to ‘adjust to adjustment’, utilise the bargaining power present in the international need for success stories, and reap the benefits of apparent or partial compliance with aid imperatives (Chabal & Daloz 1999: 122).

The notion has, however, been criticised for downplaying the ‘historicity of the specific insertion of Africa in the world’ (Ricard 2017: 506) and a lack of regard for its potentially destructive relationships (Lindsay 2014). It has also been accused of being ‘sweeping’ in nature and thus lacking empirical depth and attention to perturbations over time (Peiffer & Englebort 2012: 361), gaps that this article will contribute to filling. By investigating government–donor relationships in Sierra Leone, both the plausibility and purposes of African agency and the structural and conceptual limits of extraversion can be interrogated. In other words, how much space do GoSL and donors have, what do they do with it, to what extent can extraversion strategies work within (fluctuating) structural confines, and does extraversion explain all that is done within the carved-out space?

Some have indeed noted that there is space, albeit circumscribed, for African actors. On the government side, similar to the above, there is the cynical but rather effective approach employed by African governments to attract Western aid in exchange for limited and unsustainable levels of reforms (Treisman 2007; Muhumuza 2008; Abouassi 2010), and alternatively, there may be active or passive resistance for political and/or cultural reasons (Young 2002; Fanthorpe 2006; Richmond 2010; Brown 2013). On the ground, however, it is not that simple. Most officials, wherever they are in government, face multiple and shifting stresses and incentives. In Sierra Leone, a small state where donors have indeed had more sway, there are pressures to follow many donor lines, contrary pressures to be seen to be resistant to other donor lines, and obligations – in what is still to a significant degree a patron–client system – to patrons above and to ethno-regional support bases, family, kith and kin below (Conteh 2016). Presidential, ministerial and lower echelon actions at any one time reflect a calculation concerning these shifting imperatives and thus explain to a considerable degree the level of success or failure of any given reform and the overall limited returns of aid programmes (Harris 2013: 153–7; Tavakoli *et al.* 2014: 6–7).

Political negotiations over aid have been usefully delineated into what is decided by government, what is a compromise and what is reluctantly accepted (Whitfield 2009). Western donors thus have considerable sway but there is also a finite space in which they can operate. On the donor side, the immense effort which has been expended in refining and re-refining the modus operandi and conditionalities of aid shows a strong commitment to an ideological impetus. The continued alignment with liberalism as the underpinning driver of development, despite limited historical or contemporary evidence, is remarkable in its zeal (Young 2002; Paris 2010; Gallagher 2011).² There are mitigating factors such as institutional and personal career interests and there are those who instead see national interests at work (Rimmer 2003; Easterly 2006). For instance, the UK is one of the few major countries to spend 0.7% of its GDP on aid but in 2016, Minister for International Development, Priti Patel, championed using aid to pave the way for trade deals (BBC News 2016); and in 2018 Prime Minister Theresa May said she was ‘unashamed’ about ensuring

Britain also benefits from its aid spending (BBC News 2018). However, despite a ‘crisis in confidence’, Western efforts are remarkably resilient and strikingly still thoroughly connected to liberal reform (Cooper 2007). Notably, though, the space to implement any of these measures has limits and donors are also forced to make their compromises and reluctant acceptances; again, territory that this article will investigate.

Finally, there are indeed many in government who can be seen to pay lip-service to liberal reform in an arena where choice is restricted but there are equally some who are ideologically committed, which is firmly outside of the realm of extraversion. Many African ministries and departments are undergoing reform pushed by very small numbers of committed indigenes, sometimes rather jarringly referred to as ‘technocrats’ (Harris 2013: 154–5). There are also a few African governments, such as in Ethiopia and Rwanda (Furtado & Smith 2009; Hayman 2009), which have taken an ideological stance against certain liberal reforms and there are a small number of actors in Sierra Leone who take similar views and suggest an alternative policy.

The article breaks down the relationships in Sierra Leone and puts empirical flesh on the bones of the extraversion debate. It investigates reasons for African actions and tests the salience and the limits of the concept of extraversion in explaining Sierra Leonean imperatives in the face of donor requirements. It considers the ideas of passive and active resistance, notions of political survival and cultural protection, and degrees of control in the relationship on the Sierra Leone government side, while also investigating imperatives, negotiation stances and degrees of control on the donor side. It investigates the notion that there are ‘red lines’ that each side say they will not cross and to what extent they are successful. In addition, it also disaggregates, at institutional and personal levels, not just government–donor relations but also intra-government and donor–donor relations in the Sierra Leonean context. Importantly, it adds the possibility in some policy areas of the convergence of government and donor thinking. Finally, it looks at how the space opens and closes over time and through changing conditions.

Hence, in what is seen as one of the more stable, cooperative and positive donor–government relationships in Africa, even the Sierra Leonean environment has many potentially unstable facets on both sides of the fence. Close relations with the UK date back to a relatively smooth decolonisation in 1961. Contacts drew down somewhat during the 1970s and 1980s under President Siaka Stevens, but were significantly reinvigorated from the start of the Tony Blair UK government in 1997 (Kargbo 2006). In the midst of the civil war, the UK diplomatically, financially and finally, in 2000, militarily backed the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. It is less of a surprise then that the 10-year assistance deal was signed at the end of the war in 2002, that the UK to a greater extent ran the immediate post-war government, and that UK assistance continues until today and indeed spearheaded the fight against Ebola and the Post-Ebola Recovery. UK national interests in this process include the pre-empting and preventing of

future crises for which its assistance would be needed. One might also consider the UK punching above its weight in the global arena leading to key roles in Afghanistan and Iraq, but from the 'ethical foreign policy' of the UK Foreign Minister at the time, Robin Cook, through to Blair's liberal zeal, one can see the ideological fingerprints.

However, despite the intensity of the relationship, it was not all plain sailing from the end of the civil war in 2002 up to the start of this study in 2010. While decentralisation and a large free healthcare initiative were both presidentially backed and rolled out on time, in 2004 and 2010 respectively, studies show these expensive projects have considerable flaws (Conteh 2016). In 2007, DFID went so far as to suspend budget support, stating that this was a benchmarks-informed decision. The year 2007 was, however, also an election year in which the 11-year incumbency of the SLPP was ended by the APC. The accusation by the SLPP of attempted regime change by suspending funds just before elections was to live with DFID for years to come (Cargill 2008: 3; Donor and GoSL officials 7.2010 Int.).

One might note that the Sierra Leonean governments of this period relied heavily on outsiders for support during the war and in post-conflict rebuilding in the immediate post-war period, and donor influence was thus high with many liberal reforms being outsider-inspired, driven and funded (Kanyako 2016). Many, however, did not gain much traction and the reforms that were best delivered, whatever their ideological compatibility, were those that fitted squarely with government imperatives of the time. This may be termed extraversion, although the 2007 temporary withdrawal of funds can be seen as an example of heavier exertion of donor influence.

However, with the insertion of the considerable stresses that iron ore price fluctuations and Ebola add to the equation, the stability in the many relationships is put further into question. Diamonds have long been the mainstay of the extraction economy in Sierra Leone, but it was iron ore that caused excitement in the early 2010s. Buoyed by needs in Asia, prices rose dramatically and in 2011 iron ore extraction began in Tonkolili and recommenced after a 35-year hiatus at Marampa. Estimates emerged of revenue in the billions of dollars and double digit GDP growth for years to come. In November 2011, Finance Minister Samura Kamara and the IMF predicted 50% GDP growth just for 2012 (Thomas n.d.; IMF 2011). Indeed, by early 2014, Sierra Leone was already the sixth-largest exporter of iron ore to China. However, a little over a year later both mines had ceased production and both companies had gone into administration, mostly a consequence of the precipitous drop in iron ore prices and the onset of Ebola (*Metal Bulletin* 2015), a situation that has remained largely unchanged, as illustrated in Table I.

In turn, the Ebola disease emerged in Guinea in December 2013, but hit crisis proportions in Sierra Leone in mid-2014. Both the domestic and international response to Ebola were highly criticised and, by the time the last case was recorded in January 2016, over 14,000 people had contracted the disease and nearly 4,000 had died; schools, farms and businesses had been closed or

TABLE I.
Sierra Leone: Recent Economic Developments, 2008–16.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
GDP at constant prices (% change)	5.2	3.2	5.3	6.0	15.2	20.1	4.5	-20.5	4.9
(GDP excluding iron ore)	5.2	3.2	5.3	5.8	5.3	5.5	0.8	3.2	3.7
Current account Balance (Including official grants)	-8.9	-6.3	-19.7	-45.0	-39.4	-20.5	-20.1	-16.3	-18.3

Source: International Monetary Fund (2013, 2016, 2017).

under-used for long periods; and the economy was reeling (Davis 2015). The international response was indeed late but large and continued into the Post-Ebola Recovery period.

There is in addition one further factor to consider, that of China. Chinese investment, trade and ‘gifts’ in Sierra Leone have been described as ‘unquestionably of extreme importance’ and primarily encompass infrastructure projects, such as a new foreign ministry building, roads, particularly in the capital, a stadium in Bo and mining ventures (Datzberger 2013: 1). A planned airport at Mamamah was also Chinese-backed but proved highly controversial, was resisted by Western donors (Datzberger 2013; senior diplomat, international NGO senior staff, and domestic advisor to GoSL 22, 20 & 25.7.2016 Int.), and was eventually scrapped when APC lost power. However, China was a relatively constant element during the 2010–16 period and so appears below only as a contributory factor.

DONOR INFLUENCE IN SIERRA LEONE

The role of donors in Sierra Leone’s post-war recovery and development has been remarkable. In fact, by the time the war ended in 2002, donors and Western international agencies ‘ended up literally taking over the governance function from local actors’ (Fukuyama 2004: 125). It has been estimated that the United Nations spent US\$16.4 billion a year in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, while DFID spent ‘about £100 million per year for Sierra Leone’s reconstruction process’ (Kanyako 2016: 27; Baker & May 2006). Although donors have adopted multiple mechanisms for delivering aid, the main vehicle through which they have done so is Direct Budget Support (DBS). A recent evaluation of DBS noted that between 2002 and 2014, Sierra Leone received ‘a total of US\$886 million in direct budget support, equivalent to an average of US\$68 million per year’ for a population of 5–6 million (ECORYS 2016: 16). The break down of the figures is shown in Table II.

Further, notwithstanding a few detractors, it is also remarkable how the donor–government relationship in Sierra Leone was so consistently painted on the ground. None at all suggested anything other than high donor influence on government, particularly with respect to the UK. Within the time-frame of the research, the UK was portrayed as having ‘unparalleled access’ and the relationship as ‘hugely permissive’ (International advisor to GoSL and senior diplomat 11 & 22.7.2016 Int.). UK influence was seen as ‘strong’ particularly during the Ebola and Post-Ebola period and the concurrent tenure of UK High Commissioner, Peter West (2013–16), and the UK always stood ‘a good chance of prevailing on issues’. GoSL was thought to have a particularly ‘positive’ and ‘appreciative’ view of the UK and saw the UK as the ‘preferred option’ (Senior diplomat and international agency head 22 & 24.11.2016 Int.). Finally, it was considered that connections were not just based on money, but were built on good individual relationships and were even ‘cultural’ in nature or encompassing ‘deference to the British’ (Senior diplomat and international advisor to GoSL 22 & 11.7.2016 Int.). The latter comment is a notion that has long troubled scholars of Sierra Leone and is discussed further below.

It was commented by many though that donor access to government was certainly not restricted to the UK and was, rightly or wrongly, very high across the board. It was suggested by one donor that access was ‘perhaps too easy’ and by a critical government official that it was ‘open door’ and ‘unlimited’ (International agency head and GoSL department head 15 & 19.7.2016 Int.). Most access to government was said to be on a personal basis, often with the President or his Chief of Staff or sometimes ministers, and as long as there were personal connections access could be arranged at any time (Donor, government and NGO officials 7 & 11.2016 Int.). Official donor–GoSL meetings were described as not working well or not happening mainly because the key links were personal, and because the traditional government interlocutor and one of the few centres of resistance, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED), was seen by some donors as disruptive and thus sidelined (International agency head and GoSL department head 15 & 19.7.2016 Int.). One international agency head noted that one can walk into ministers’ offices and, because of the absence of landlines, one calls a minister direct, not the secretary, and so there is no vetting of calls (26.7.2016 Int.). Sierra Leone does, however, have a long pre-mobile phone history of personalised politics, with the early part of the Stevens presidency providing the first model of the accessible patron. Concern was thus noted that many, if not all, contemporary donor agencies simply fitted themselves neatly into the pattern (International agency head 26.7.2016 Int.). However, this scenario is also not new: in 2010, it was described as ‘lighthouse politics’, where Koroma was considered to be the ‘lighthouse’ who could shine his political light on a policy and drive it through. Donors’ work was to regulate the light as it moved on from one point to the next (International NGO head 16.7.2010 Int.).

TABLE II.
Summary of Direct Budget Support (in millions of US\$): 2002–14.

Donor	2002–14
UK – DFID	284
EU	248
World Bank	161
AfDB	141
Others (including IMF and Global Fund)	52
Total	886

Source: Adapted from ECORYS (2016).

Hence, from the donor angle, business can be pushed forward. Indeed, reform measures were sometimes said to be pushed through this strategy even in unpromising avenues. Since 2010, the agricultural smallholder commercialisation programme and the establishment of an independent medical procurement unit were said to be derived almost entirely from donors, even if backed by the President. One area where donors were said to have had enormous influence was in public financial management (PFM) reforms. As one GoSL official noted, ‘all the laws enacted since 2009 that have to do with the management of the economy have the fingerprints of the donors’ (GoSL department senior official 2.7.2019 Int.). From within and either side of the study period, some of the notable results of donor pressure for PFM reforms include the Mines and Minerals Act 2009; Goods and Services Tax Act, 2009; Customs Act, 2011; Government Budgeting and Accountability (Amendment) Act, 2011; Public Debt Management Act, 2011; Telecommunications (Amendment) Act, 2015; Public Financial Management Act, 2016; and Fiscal Management and Control Act, 2017. However, despite these reforms, the status quo was not necessarily altered, and in some instances, GoSL was engaged in a game of mock compliance. For example, even though the latter act came into force in 2017, it was not implemented until 2018, when an executive order by the new SLPP government established the single treasury account, which officials in the APC government had resisted (GoSL department senior official 2.7.2019 Int.).

Within this study’s timescale, donor influence was said to have pushed the (partial) access of pregnant schoolgirls to schooling, the dismantling of the board of the medical procurement unit, the dismissal of the Director of Traffic after a report into police bribery, and payroll cleaning in the Ministry of Education (MoE) (Citizen’s Agenda for Prosperity Coalition 2016; Two international agency heads, senior diplomat, and GoSL department head 7 & 11.2016 Int.). All were seen as going against policies, values or vested interests held by some in the departments and ministries. More detail appears below.

In particular, the fight against Ebola and the establishment of the Post-Ebola Recovery Programme made some of the relationships more intense, even if sometimes contentious. The British military worked closely with its Sierra Leonean counterpart – but not with the police as it was believed only the army had sufficient capacity – and DFID played a leading role in the international effort. Many interlocutors noted that DFID went on to play the lead role in the two-year Post-Ebola Recovery period (June 2015 to June 2017), particularly by supporting the establishment and operations of the Delivery Team in the heart of the Executive in State House, a process that did not however secure the support of some other Western donors. These contestations are also elaborated below.

Indeed, some saw what might be called dependency or deference. Uncomfortable for some, a Sierra Leonean narrative of a ‘big brother’ (in the fraternal, not the Orwellian, sense) or ‘parent–child’ relationship was depicted at various points (International agency head and international advisor to GoSL 11.7 & 24.11.2016 Int.). A common phrase heard during the Ebola crisis was ‘*Papa don cam fo save pikin*’, meaning ‘Father has returned to save his children’ and mostly in reference to the British intervention. One international agency head raised the over-reliance on the international organisations to bail out government and illustrated by noting the dismal state of ministries and how a minister wrote to him asking for a ‘pittance’ for fixing a piece of ministerial infrastructure as the MoFED had no money (26.7.2016 Int.).

EXTRAVERSION IN SIERRA LEONE

Among government officials, there were varying interpretations of how the relationship with donors was unfolding, and the imperatives driving the government’s actions. One position was that the government was left with a restricted choice or without the political will to resist donor policies: ‘If you have been without food for a week and you are given wheat to eat and you are gluten intolerant, it is still your ‘choice’ whether to eat’ (Domestic advisor to GoSL 25.7.2016 Int.). Several inside and outside government derided the lack of GoSL ownership of policy. Others, however, saw a short-term instrumental or political imperative – extraversion – in allowing such access across the board (Donor and government officials 7.2016 Int.). The second phase of the Post-Ebola Recovery came under the title of the ‘President’s Recovery Priorities’ and billboards and government vehicles sported the President’s Recovery logo on them. Although Koroma constitutionally stepped down at the 2018 elections – not long after the end of the Post-Ebola Recovery – suspicion abounded that he wanted to use the programme to make a case for an elongation of his tenure, or at least boost his legacy and his party’s electoral chances (Donor and GoSL officials 7.2016 Int.). Indeed, by keeping the donors close, his hands could be kept somewhere close to the tiller.

One diplomat noted the unrealistic short-term expectations of one minister alongside thinly veiled threats that children might die and the news might

reach the (British tabloid) *Daily Mail* (22.7.2016 Int.). An international advisor to GoSL explained that government officials are better at sourcing money from various donors than donors are at coordinating and knowing what was going on (11.7.2016 Int.). As already noted, there are also cases of mock compliance, such as the hurried passage of the Access to Information Law in October 2013 – which had been in the making for almost a decade – in an apparent bid to influence the decision of the Millennium Challenge Corporation in that year (Domestic NGO head 12.7.2016 Int.); and the politically instrumental purposes served by the donor-supported decentralisation programme (Conteh 2017). Agency in government needs emphasis, as the availability of donor funds fosters a sense of moral hazard and allows the government to channel resources to other uses such as infrastructural projects and public and political goods, and from which officials can obtain personalised transactional gains (Conteh 2016).

In a clear case of the restrictions on donor engagements, a Sierra Leonean NGO head noted that it was risky for donors to say certain things because there may be accusations of meddling and because donor staff need to keep their jobs, so donors are ‘conflict averse’. The public silence of donors, after Vice President Samuel Sam-Sumana was controversially removed in 2015 and following the mooted elongation of President Koroma’s tenure were noted as examples of this reticence (18.7.2016 Int.).

IDEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN SIERRA LEONE

However, there were Sierra Leoneans in GoSL and domestic and international organisations who were at least somewhat aligned with the liberal international agenda and so would be in favour of close relations – even though such ties can be threatened by non-ideological agendas. Policy alternatives were occasionally raised in interviews, infrastructure being a key issue. The disagreements, of various hues, are detailed in the next section. Several interviews were held with high-ranking Sierra Leonean staff of donor agencies who mostly aligned with donor agendas. Many donors detailed policies taken to and wholeheartedly supported by the President (7.2016 Int.). The major introduction in 2015 of Service Level Agreements (SLA) between the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS) and mostly donor-funded NGO service providers in order to monitor and provide accountability for all programmes was broadly accepted by all concerned, even if there were contestations over its financing and sustainability (GoSL department head and international NGO head 25 & 22.7.2016 Int.). Tellingly, a Sierra Leonean NGO head went so far as to say that donors should push more in demanding reform (18.7.2016 Int.).

The donors clearly enjoy influence to push forward reform agendas, although often by compromising and playing within the largely personalised format of Sierra Leonean government. GoSL then often accepts or indeed embraces many donor imperatives either through lack of choice, for politically instrumental purposes, or due to ideological alignment. There are, however, significant

perturbations in this environment and the following section looks at particular issues, seemingly with GoSL or donor red lines, which illuminate the terrain.

GOVERNMENT AND DONOR ‘RED LINES’

One Sierra Leonean NGO head noted that, ‘donors have influence, but it’s not as heavy as we think. There is negotiation’ (19.7.2016 Int.). Indeed, there certainly was. As well as the above-mentioned areas where donors secured agreement and indeed where they managed to push or partially push through policies in the teeth of resistance from within government, there were also areas where they were not able to do the same and a few areas where government pushed policies. Exactly which areas were guarded by government ‘red lines’, and by whom, is instructive. Equally, there are policies agreed to and then discarded. Finally, there are ‘red lines’ to which the donors claimed to adhere.

Encounters with government ‘red lines’ emerge along three broad interlinking axes: democratically problematic policies, socially problematic policies and intra-governmentally problematic policies. In turn, the robustness of the red lines was sometimes linked to the quantity and GoSL proportion of revenue, e.g. payroll, but sometimes not, e.g. social issues. The policies which are liable to have direct and immediate effects on the populace come under the first banner of democratically problematic, and which coincidentally reflect donor demands for PFM reforms in order for GoSL to increase its revenue. Although, as noted above, popular democratic politics is informed by a high level of ethno-regional patron-clientelism, there are some key areas of policy where shifts in voter thinking are possible and hence problematic for the ruling party, regardless of GoSL’s long-term financial position. For instance, IMF insistence on the removal of fuel subsidy to save money and stop smuggling was agreed to by one part of GoSL but then resisted by another: one international agency head described this as ‘a merry dance’ (15.7.2016 Int.). Perhaps this was less of a ‘red line’: under severe fiscal pressure in November 2016 GoSL finally enacted a partial removal. Privatisation of water, electricity and telecommunications bodies was resisted on the basis that prices would rise for customers and Government Sales Tax on electricity was opposed for the same reasons (International agency head 20.7.2016 Int.). Some considered that as elections approach, donor traction usually deteriorates: for the 2012 elections it was thought 18 months in advance, and for the March 2018 elections the effect was believed to be inevitable but probably later as the Post-Ebola Recovery period was scheduled to continue until June 2017 (Donor officials 7.2010 & 7.2016 Int.).

The social aspect links with the democratic, but the two main social ‘red lines’ raised in interviews may be treated separately here as there are also societal mores involved. The first relates to a popular subject amongst donors, that of pregnant girls and access to education. Described as a ‘moral issue’, many including three ministers – one of whom was portrayed as ‘very stubborn’ – were noted as being

firmly against allowing access to classes and school examinations for the girls (International NGO head 22.7.2016 Int.). The President was noted by donors as being helpful and a compromise was reached so that the girls could access the core curriculum but separate from their classmates and still with no exams. Even this compromise would seemingly have gone nowhere without the President (International agency head and senior diplomat 15 & 22.7.2016 Int.; Amnesty International 2016). On female genital mutilation/circumcision there was no movement at all despite it being a donor concern for a long time, stretching back to the colonial era. Described by one Sierra Leonean NGO head as an issue seen by many as ‘our culture’, another Sierra Leonean head of an international NGO had been asked to go ‘softly-softly’ on this issue by a ministry sympathiser so as not to risk any small steps to progress (18 & 22.7.2016 Int.). The President had said some encouraging words but one international agency head thought that actually paying the political cost was much less likely (24.11.2016 Int.).

Finally, reasons for intra-governmental resistance beyond the social issues above may be segregated into three interlocking parts: power, corruption and policy. Considerable anxiety was expressed over perceived winners and losers in the government. The processes of donor access to government and of policy-making were seen by many as having shifted from the ministries and departments to State House and the President. This was particularly so concerning the post-Ebola Delivery Team, an aspect which is detailed below. Considering that Sierra Leone had long been an executive-heavy government, this more recent shift represented a further degree of centralisation. In addition, a considerable proportion of money and responsibility that once went via the ministries now went via the donors’ NGO implementing partners, who in turn may have been opposition supporters, or well-paid international consultants. Hence disgruntlement and spoilers in the system were generated. Several interlocutors noted that the President had needed to bring complaining ministers back in line (Donor and GoSL officials 7 & 11.2016 Int.).

Vested interests and corruption were another stumbling block to policy. Control of procurement was a common theme. Payroll cleaning at the MoE was considered a problem in 2010 and, although some reforms had been made, it remained a problem in 2016 (Donor officials 7.2010, 7.2011 & 7.2016 Int.). During negotiations leading to the setting up of the Delivery Team, an attempt by DFID to make payroll cleaning in the MoE and MoHS a condition for the post-Ebola Recovery financial aid was resisted by GoSL (Delivery Team official 19.7.2016 Int.). In a striking case of *realpolitik*, one international advisor to GoSL stated that ‘if you bang the table too hard, you don’t get asked to meetings’ and it is useless shouting from the side-lines, so some level of corruption is ‘tolerated’ in order to maintain access (17.7.2016 Int.). Even during the Ebola crisis, party politics down to the local level was reported to sometimes severely affect implementation. Corruption emerged in the form of low-level examples, such as ‘ghost worker’ claims for hazard pay and bribes for vehicle passes to enter or leave quarantine zones, through

to the two national audit reports which found widespread inadequate control mechanisms and accounting of response funds (Ross *et al.* 2017: 36). Similarly, advice by the World Bank to end the virtual rice monopoly by one favoured Lebanese importer at 0% tax was not heeded (International agency head 20.7.2016 Int.).

GoSL also sometimes had its own policies to push which did or did not align with the donors' agendas. Infrastructure, for example energy and roads, has always been a key government, but less often a donor, priority (Domestic advisor to GoSL 25.7.2016 Int.). Chinese funding has sometimes proved useful here. Despite the IMF taking a strong stance against construction of a new airport, the President maintained his commitment and billboards remained in place. In addition, although GoSL had signed up to a US\$31 million World Bank loan to land the fibre-optic cable in 2011 (*Web Africa* 2016), it resisted pressure to liberalise the international gateway, which was one of the loan conditions. Keen to preserve the monopoly of the state-owned telecom operator (SIERRATEL) over the gateway, the government persistently failed to meet its obligations, which forced the World Bank to warn in March 2014 that it would suspend the project (*Global Times* 2014). Despite the eventual suspension in September 2014, it was not until March 2015 that the government agreed to amend the Telecommunications Act to liberalise the gateway (*TeleGeography* 2015).

During fieldwork, two new government-generated policies were also in the spotlight. The SLAs appeared to have gained traction across the board. A proposed 5% levy on donor-supported health programmes ostensibly to support the MoHS and Local Councils in joint monitoring processes, however, was resisted by donors partly because this could then be rolled out across all ministries funded by them (International NGO head and GoSL department head 22 & 25.7.2016 Int.). Both of these policies, however, could be described as procedural in support of, or indeed endeavouring to take control of, donor agendas (GoSL department head and international agency head 25 & 26.7.2016 Int.).

One might note a complex and shifting pattern of government 'red lines', but as can also be seen from the above, donor 'red lines' can or have to be quite flexible as well. In general, there is strong impetus for liberal reform but some emphasised projects have historically taken off, such as decentralisation and the free health care initiative, while others have not, for example reforms in several ministries and departments including health, education and the National Revenue Authority (NRA) – leading perhaps to a phlegmatic attitude. During the period of interviewing in 2016, the areas of fisheries and justice reform were specifically noted by donors as areas of limited traction (International agency heads 18.7.2016 & 24.11.2016 Int.). The notion of 'good enough governance' began to gain currency in donor circles in the 2010s and it is perhaps with this idea that an explanation can be sought. Equally, it might be said that in Sierra Leone a policymaker that had the

President's ear was the one with the policy that was most likely to fly. If they did not, the chances of flight were quite slim.

Hence, GoSL officials may promote, acquiesce to, or successfully resist, divert or force compromise on donor reforms, in particular those that affect their own democratic, social or internal governmental imperatives, thereby manipulating the agenda. Extraversion can be seen in some of this manipulation, but it is much less compelling when resistance or actions along lines of societal mores or government-led policy are included. In turn, donors maintain considerable influence but are forced into their own compromises and may indeed back off from certain key policies. Changing conditions then play a part in these fluid relationships.

CHANGES OVER TIME IN DONOR–GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIPS

There do indeed appear to be changes over time in donor-government relations. These have been attributed to iron ore, Ebola and China, but also to changes which have occurred because of deliberate shifts in practice by key players either partly or wholly informed by these external factors. The changes might generally be apportioned under economic shifts, i.e. commodity prices, and humanitarian crises, i.e. Ebola; but also with influence from changes in global politics, i.e. China and shifts in Western donor policies, and events in domestic politics, i.e. elections. Views are necessarily restricted to interlocutors who had experience over a considerable proportion of the six years of the study.

One Sierra Leonean NGO head expressed the view that in the *longue durée* little in the relationships changed as iron ore revenues did not persist long enough to make a difference. A GoSL domestic advisor noted that GoSL confidence backed by iron ore lasted about one year (18 & 25.7.2016 Int.). However, this brief confidence did not go unnoticed. One international agency senior official reported that when iron ore was coming online, a minister told donors that in two years' time, he would no longer be talking to them. If iron ore had come on stream as predicted, the same interviewee thought that donors would have been 'going home'. GoSL was 'tough' with donors for a short period of time (20.7.2016 Int.).³ A domestic advisor for the government side attributed to iron ore confidence the promulgation of a new shipping law – unpopular with donors – and the ousting of the UN head, Michael von der Schulenburg, in 2012 (25.7.2016 Int.). Unbudgeted spending increased – albeit that this was also election time – and ambitious road and energy projects were started, partly financed through loans leading to an increase of 33% in external debt between 2011 and 2013. The government secured the US\$315 million loan for the new airport in this period (Mihalyi 2015). As noted above, the Chinese were also seen as a source for the strengthening position, probably though only as a contributory factor to the iron ore.

However, if iron ore brought about a brief swell of confidence in GoSL, largely unprecedented in the post-war era, the drop in iron ore prices and Ebola restored the status quo or even shifted the influence balance back to

the dire conditions of the immediate post-war period. Initial reactions to Ebola by both government and international bodies were characterised by ‘confusion, chaos and denial’ (Ross *et al.* 2017: 2). However, once the Ebola outbreak had been fully recognised as a humanitarian crisis, international assistance came very quickly and in early September 2014, the UK took over the lead international role. In turn, the National Ebola Response Centre (NERC) was opened in mid-October. It was the UK, UN and US which comprised the international element of the NERC and on the Sierra Leonean side the lead role was taken away from the MoHS, causing some friction, and handed to the seconded Minister of Defence who directly briefed the president (Ross *et al.* 2017). The British Army and DFID played major roles in organisation and implementation (International advisor to GoSL and senior diplomat 11 & 17.7.2016 Int.).

Importantly for the discussion here, one can begin to see the seeds of shifts in donor–government practices. Some saw the UK literally taking over. In a state of crisis this may be understandable, but some viewed the UK as running the show and even for a time in the early stages ‘operating in parallel to the NERC’ (Ross *et al.* 2017: 29). However, the President was also seen as having a detailed handle on the response and, probably more accurately, policy decisions were made by the President and the British in tandem, sometimes with UN input. Indeed, the idea of quarantines was pushed by the President against advice from the UK (Ross *et al.* 2017). Importantly, this was the beginning of a much closer presidential–UK association, relatively insulated from other international and governmental parties.

In some ways, donor–government relations in the post-Ebola recovery period reflected those of the Ebola crisis and response, with the UK re-emerging as the most dominant external actor. In an agreement between President Koroma and the UK International Development Minister, Justine Greening, the DFID plan was accepted over others. The central idea was to learn from the Ebola response: to focus narrowly on what was required for recovery in a two-year period (International agency heads 26.7.2016 & 24.11.2016 Int.). One key plank of the DFID strategy, and most likely another lesson from the Ebola response and in particular from the NERC, was the creation of the Delivery Team in State House. The Delivery Team was essentially two parallel groups, one governmental and one advisory, the latter expensively assembled and comprising about 25 members of two consultancy firms employed by DFID – McKinsey and Adam Smith International – and the then Africa Governance Initiative (AGI), an NGO established in 2008 by Tony Blair. Most importantly, due to its geographic location and the role of DFID and the President in setting up the team, the close association between these two actors was maintained.

From one angle, the donor rationale was explained as the need to strike while the iron is hot and to use the period of Post-Ebola Recovery to push through as much as possible, before the onset of campaigning for the 2018 elections and potentially before GoSL turned to the Chinese (Diplomat and international agency head 22.7.2016 & 24.11.2016 Int.). However, from another angle, the tone was different. DFID, particularly in 2015, was variously seen as ‘arrogant’,

‘bullying’, ‘resented’ and not a ‘team-player’, and as having ‘solved’ the Ebola crisis and so legitimated to take a similar approach into the future. The Delivery Team was labelled by government and donor officials as ‘DFID’s Delivery Team’ (Donor and GoSL officials 7.2016 Int.). It was noted by some that donor–donor relations had since improved, that DFID was more open to coordination by mid-2016, and that it was the DFID staff who had worked on the Ebola response that had been more insular (Donor and NGO officials 7.2016 Int.). However, the *modus operandi* of the Post-Ebola Recovery was established as one where DFID worked closely with the Delivery Team and hence the President, and implementation passed through NGOs, thereby further bypassing the ministries and local councils. Other donors ignored or worked when necessary with the Post-Ebola Recovery programme.

The disagreements did not however stop there. In policy terms, there were differences in substance and modes of delivery. One international NGO head argued that the Post-Ebola Recovery priorities were not actually focused but too broad in that there were, by then, 45 initiatives and over 150 sub-initiatives, the latter including such large projects as community health workers. It had been seen in the past that placing such heavy and wide responsibilities on a small number of people can lead to burn out and this was also raised by the same interlocutor as an issue for the Delivery Team (16.7.2016 Int.). While DFID focused heavily on the Post-Ebola Recovery priorities, the EU was noted as being long-term and ‘rigid’ or ‘unchangeable’ in its programming and disconnected from GoSL on a day-to-day basis, so not buying into the DFID strategy (Donor and NGO officials 7.2016 Int.). Equally, to a greater extent the World Bank continued to work through the ministries, and not directly with the Delivery Team; and while DFID shifted to working almost exclusively through NGO implementing partners, UNICEF shifted the other way (International agency senior official and international NGO head 20 & 22.7.2016 Int.).

External and largely uncontrollable conditions in the form of commodity prices and a humanitarian crisis appear, then, to heavily affect the operations of donor influence and extraversion. The presence of China and the domestic electoral cycle added further perturbations. GoSL confidence vis-à-vis donors appeared to wax and wane in almost direct proportion to conditions, although noteworthy is the brief period of government confidence which included a sense that reliance on outsiders – and by implication extraversion – might end. On the other hand, the Post-Ebola period saw the collapse of government confidence and the reassertion of donor influence, but within a more intensely personalised and centralised *modus operandi* clearly promoted by both president and a shift in thinking of one donor agency. This concentration appeared for a while to increase efficiency and then to increase possibilities for both influence and extraversion for exactly these two nodes of power, but simultaneously to spread disaffection in government and the donor community.

CONCLUSION

It can safely be said that, overall, the paradox of donor–government relations in Sierra Leone can be explained by relative stability over the long term and volatility over the short term. Bookended by the post-war years and the Ebola and iron ore crises, a short period of increased government confidence can be discerned. The relations at any time during the post-war era are rightly described as extraordinary in their closeness and in the depth of donor influence, but this masks a topography with considerable undulations.

Space for donors to push reform is curtailed. There are policies which are less problematic or welcomed by parts of government but others which are indeed troublesome to government on either democratic, social, or intra-governmental lines related to power, corruption or policy. There are areas where the government endeavours to pursue its own policies or resist those of the donors. For the latter, the government sometimes can resist but at other times for structural reasons in the end it cannot. Disaggregating, one can see President Koroma and certain ministries/ministers being more generally receptive and other ministries/ministers – such as the MoE and MoHS during this time period – being more resistant. Much is decided at a personal level, demonstrated in particular by the key position of the President and some of the political battles between him and ministers.

The Ebola and post-Ebola period shift towards centralisation – or perhaps going even further with the grain – led to a rather skewed system where there were a number of losers within the government side, in particular in the ministries and departments. Donor–donor coordination also suffered amid this centralisation and was not in the best of health in 2016. This might in other times have offered a degree of muscle to the government but Ebola and the loss in revenues on the one hand and a President looking at a Post-Ebola Recovery on the other saw off many sources of potential GoSL influence over donors.

So, who is in the driving seat? The answer lies in the particular and depends on the complex interplay of interests, ideas, structure and agency. It is indeed remarkable, given the superficial appearance of stability and apparent dependency on and overbearing influence of donors, that all these forces play a part. Equally, extraversion has its explanatory limits. It is plausible when considering those areas of acquiescence, resistance and obfuscation which affect elements in government, such as donor projects which financially benefit or deprive supporters or offer avenues for elite accumulation. It is also plausible in the clear limits to donor influence. However, there are times and instances when donor influence is indeed exerted via the structurally imbalanced conditions. Extraversion is also much less convincing in trying to explain resistance to donor reforms on lines of societal mores; or when looking at government policy which is not in line with donor priorities, although government can of course turn to other outside sources for some of these needs. In addition, it clearly shifts over time in its explanatory importance and is significantly affected by changing structural conditions, whereby dependency and extraversion

fluctuate in their explanatory powers. In concert with other processes there may be unexpected and potentially destructive ramifications such as acute centralisation of power. Importantly, the belief held for a short period of time by some in Sierra Leone that donors would be ‘going home’ does not seem to fit at all in extraversion theory.

In a wider sense, the Sierra Leone case has enough historical and socio-political peculiarities, particularly in the perturbations of the 2010–16 period, to make the transferability of the conclusions of this article limited. However, in other cases of small African states, there may be some comparable elements. For instance, Rwanda and Malawi show interesting comparisons, the former as more of a conductor – in the musical sense – of Western agencies and the latter with a donor–government relationship as complex as that of Sierra Leone (Hayman 2009; Wroe 2012). There is though one other general conclusion which has traction elsewhere. The number of factors considered in this article should lead us to think carefully before simplifying the donor–government terrain either in terms of structure or imperatives or over time. Relations are clearly an ongoing work of construction. Given that conclusion, it remains to be said that, in order to be aware of the full picture, either a severely sceptical view of the effects of Western aid, or an optimist prognosis, needs to take into account the details of fluctuating government-donor relations.

NOTES

1. Broken down: ‘strong’ and ‘positive’ (donors), ‘permissive’ (NGO), ‘influence’ (donors and NGOs), ‘big role’ and ‘open door’ (GoSL), and ‘appreciation’ (donor).
2. Limited returns include Sierra Leone’s position of 184 out of 189 ranked countries in the UNDP’s Human Development Index (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SLE>).
3. This correlates with donor interviewees relating a ‘hardening’ in the GoSL stance in July 2011.

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