

## Archiving Challenges in Africa: The Case of Post-Conflict Liberia<sup>21</sup>

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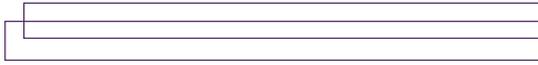
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This paper explores the challenges of archiving in Africa, drawing on a case study of Liberia, a country that has just emerged from a decade-long civil war. It examines the challenges of archiving/documenting of human rights abuses during the Liberian civil war by the recently established Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) but will also draw on experiences from the Sierra Leonean TRC. Archiving in Africa is beset with numerous problems and they include the lack of functioning national archives, adequate personnel, financial resources, lack of Internet diffusion, low literacy levels and capacities and the political will to make information available to the public. Yet, archiving is key to the promotion of transparency, accountability and democratic development and therefore of importance in societies where people have been repressed and where endemic corruption and resource distribution have led to civil wars. The Liberian TRC is likely to generate compound documents, which will include audiovisual files. While the developed world is grappling with the electronic preservation of information, the developing countries in Africa and elsewhere need to address the challenge of the management and establishment of information systems that will promote the freedom of information. This paper intends to come up with recommendations that will be useful for the planning of proper information systems for future TRC missions on the continent.

### Introduction

Documentation of war atrocities is crucial in addressing impunity and should be utilised to promote an understanding of the causes of conflict. This is done by post-war governments and supported by the international community, to enhance reconciliation, peace building and reconstruction processes. Since the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is expected to usher in a new beginning and a breakaway from the traumatic past, it is the proper platform on which the freedom of information and a meaningful public sphere should be built. The records generated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) should be taken care of in a manner that will enhance their dissemination to the citizens. The way post-conflict governments handle public records is key to the promotion of transparency and accountability, concepts that symbolize the goodwill of governments to run the affairs of a state in a democratic manner. Liberia in West Africa is transiting from a brutal civil war that lasted well over a decade and was characterised by massive killings, use of child soldiers, internal displacement, sexual violence and plunder (Jalloh and Marong, 2005:193-195). Against that background, the Liberian TRC was established in fulfilment of the Agreement reached during the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Accra, Ghana on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, 2003. The mandate of the TRC is to document crimes committed against humanity from 1979 - 2003. The CPA was brokered by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and signed by all parties to the conflict and that included the political parties, the rebels and the civil society actors. The CPA embodies

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commitments that were made by the parties and these included in particular the protection of civilians and the upholding of the rule of law during the transitional period. Under the agreement, a two-year National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) was established. Its mandate was to oversee the peace process until the next presidential elections that took place in October 2005, (Lamin, 2005:229). Lamin argues that the CPA was a political settlement that was struck to avoid a slide back to conflict by the different warring factions, (Lamin, 2005:230).

Article 26 of the African Charter also encourages African governments to carry out an official inquiry into human rights abuses and to establish national institutions to protect human rights, (African Watch, 1991:3 - 4). The findings of the inquiry should be made public to expose the wrongdoings of those involved in the atrocities. This promotes the independence and impartiality of the process. The call for official inquiry is to establish that governments should be held responsible for their actions (African Watch, 1991:6).

The on-going Liberian TRC was from the beginning granted a two-year lifespan to finish its work. It was scheduled to finish its work by the 22 of June 2008 with an addition of three months. It has now requested the House of Representatives to extend its tenure with an additional nine months (Sworh, 2008:1). The TRC will leave behind archives with compound documents that will include paper documents and digital records. This rich documentation includes ten thousand photos from all the TRC activities, meetings with donors and partners, workshops, program activities statements, hearings in 15 counties and the Diaspora, thematic and institutions hearings and hundreds of tapes, video footages, CDs and DVDs (Email communication with TRC staff-member). This documentation will require an information management infrastructure. The archives will logically need to be arranged to separate classified information from that which should be made available to the Liberian society. The proper preservation of the TRC documents would also prevent the misuse of records that could cause political unrest. The enlightenment of a society through access to information is vital to the country's development and human rights. For reconciliation and democratization to take place, the records that are being generated by the TRC will need a proper strategy for preservation and dissemination in order to effectively be used to educate the public about the causes of conflict and to avoid a recurrence.

This paper examines the challenges of archiving/documenting of human rights abuses by the recently established Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) but will also draw on experiences from the Sierra Leonean TRC. Lack of functioning national information institutions, adequate personnel, information management skills, financial resources, internet diffusion and low levels of education, are likely to prevent the proper diffusion of the information that is being generated by the TRC. The paper is divided into the introduction, historical background of the Liberian war and an analysis of the documentation process of the Liberian TRC. This is followed by the conclusion and some recommendations.

The study relies on a combination of primary and secondary data as well as the author's fieldwork. It is based on visits and interviews carried out in both Sierra Leone and Liberia in 2006 and 2007. Unstructured interviews were carried out with students, researchers, activists and ordinary people on the TRC process and post-conflict developments.

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## The Liberian Civil War: A Historical Background

In 1816, a group of distinguished Americans formed an organization called the American Colonization Society (ACS) under the leadership of Rev. Robert Finley, who was a Presbyterian Clergyman from New Jersey (Hyman, 2003:2). The organisation had the intent of founding a colony in West Africa for the freed slaves. The colony was later called Liberia adapted from liberty. The US gave US \$100,000 to the ACS to enable the organisation to acquire land, build infrastructure, and to enable the freed slave settlers to defend themselves against the indigenous people. This clarifies the historical linkage between Liberia and the USA. In 1821 - 1843 the organization resettled 4000 African Americans and in 1822 - 1867, it resettled 23,000. The arrival of Americo-Liberians created tension between them and the indigenous people, (Hyman, 2003:3). The conflict in Liberia was not only a result of tyrants wanting to hold on to power but also had its roots in the century and a half domination of the Americo-Liberians who were descendants of the freed slaves from America. They dominated the majority of the indigenous people and ruled through coercion (Ethnic Violence and Justice, 2003:80). The ACS agents governed Liberia for 25 years and in July 26 1847 Liberia became the first independent black republic (Hyman, 2003: 5 - 6). Under the leadership of President William V. S. Tubman (1944 - 1971) the tension between the Americo-Liberians and indigenous people worsened (Hyman, 2003:9) and led to the coup that over threw the Americo-Liberian President William R. Tolbert Jr by Samuel K. Doe in 1980. Although the Americo-Liberians only made up 2.5% of the population, they ruled and marginalised the rest of the population made of 15 ethnic groups (Akopari et al, 2007:77). Samuel Doe's coup d'état brought the rule of the True Whig Party (TWP) to an end. The Americo - Liberians ruled Liberia from 1847 until 1980 (Hyman, 2003) and Gberie further contends that Samuel Doe's coup ended the misrule of the Americo Liberian oligarchy that had established the Liberian state in 1822 (Gberie, 2005:52) and alienated the indigenous population.

The change of the regime did not stop the politics of exclusion but rather, Samuel Doe who took over power in 1980, embarked on partisan politics and favoured the Krahn ethnic group to whom he assigned top administrative and military posts. This generated disaffection and led to an armed rebellion against him by the Gio and Mano marginalised ethnic groups under Charles Ghankay Taylor, a former government official. Doe's regime came to an end in 1990 and triggered a cycle of civil wars. In December, 1989, a small group of 150 armed dissidents under the leadership of Charles G. Taylor tried to overthrow Samuel Doe. This resulted into a civil war that killed about 200, 000 people, (Gberie, 2005:51). In July 1997, Charles Taylor was elected President. Gberie posits, "At the time of the incursions there was a pervasive sense of bewilderment and gloomy anticipation among Liberians, who had been traumatised by violent upheavals and regime brutality for a long time," (Gberie, 2005:51).

Could this be one of the reasons why Charles Taylor was elected president even after leading a bloody rebellion? Liberia's transition from war to peace failed even under the leadership of Charles G. Taylor and in 2001 the country relapsed into war. The international community had to intervene in order to restore peace and security. In August 8, 2003, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was adopted in Accra, Ghana which brought a formal end to the war (TRC Act, n.d.). A National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) was formed to administer the country until the elections of October, 2005, (Lamin, 2005:229). The 2005 elections brought to power Africa's first woman President, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, (Akopari et al, 2007:75 - 76). The civil wars led to the heinous and gruesome acts that were committed

against humanity. The two decades of violent conflict were characterized by massive killings, displacement, property destruction, sexual violations, extra judicial killings, and economic crimes since natural resources were exploited to finance armed conflicts in the country. Like Sierra Leone, Liberia has suffered under the hands of repressive regimes.

### **The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Its Mandate**

Article 23 of the Liberia Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed by the Government of Liberia, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and Political Parties. The CPA defines the mandate of the Liberia TRC, which is to provide a forum for both victims and perpetrators to share their experiences in an effort to address impunity, facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation. Article 23 specifically states:

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission shall be established to provide a forum that will address issues of impunity, as well as an opportunity for both the victims and perpetrators of human rights violations to share their experiences, in order to get a clear picture of the past to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation.

In the spirit of national reconciliation, the Commission shall deal with the root causes of the crises in Liberia, including human rights violations.

This Commission shall among other things, recommend measures to be taken for the rehabilitation of victims of human rights violations.

Membership of the Commission shall be drawn from a cross-section of Liberian society. The Parties request that the International Community provide the necessary financial and technical support for the operation of the commission, (The CPA Article 23).

An Act to establish the TRC was enacted by the National Transitional Legislative Assembly on May 12, 2005 and in February 20, 2006 and it was inducted by Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, (Washington, 2007:3). The TRC was launched in June 22, 2006 and was like in the case of the Sierra Leonean, to investigate the root causes of the crises in Liberia, which led to the massive violation of human rights. The TRC is expected to come up with recommendations that will help in the rehabilitation of the victims, (Liberia Comprehensive Peace Agreement n.d.). There is a school of thought that TRCs are the most prominent complement to criminal justice. This is because of their potential to address mass human rights violations, to foster accountability and to establish the truth about the past thereby enhancing social reconciliation. The recommendations made by the TRC should improve the lives of the victims, promote public debate about the past and enhance a collective national memory and history. Therefore, in the absence of effective justice systems to address the human rights abuses, the TRC was seen as a possibility that would in an inclusive way help Liberians to address the legacies of violence. The TRC is to work with media, women and youth organisations, religious and traditional communities, the civil society and the Liberian Diaspora, (Washington, 2007:2).

Peace, security, unity and reconciliation are key to the attainment of development (TRC Act, n.d.:1). Therefore the focus of the TRC as argued by its Chairman Jerome Verdier is to help Liberians to find a way of living together as one people in one country (Cobban, 2006:3). The TRC is according to Mr. Nathaniel Kwabo, its Executive Secretary, a central element

in the democratisation process that will enable Liberians to achieve sustainable peace and avoid regressing to the nature of abuses and violations that they endured during the war, (Kwabo, 2007:1). The TRC is therefore to investigate human rights violations committed during the 24-year period (1979 – 2003). It has a two-year mandate and is headed by a Chairman and nine commissioners of which four are women. It also has three members of the International Technical Assistance Committee (ITAC) that work directly with the commissioners. The local staff of the TRC are directly employed and paid by the Liberian government. The Liberian TRC has partnerships with non-governmental organisations like the Foundation for Human Rights in South Africa, the Open Society Initiative (OSI) in New York, the International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and the Open Society Initiative in West Africa (OSIWA), (Washington, 2007:3).

**Table 1:**

The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners and Other Staff

<b>Name</b>	<b>Designation</b>
Cllr. Jerome J. Verdier, Sr	Chair
Ms. Dede Dolopei	Vice Chairperson
Ms. Oumu K. Syllah	Treasurer
Bishop Arthur F. Kulah	Commissioner
Mr. Kafumba F. Konneh	Commissioner
Cllr. Pear Brown Bull	Commissioner
Rev. Gerald B. Coleman	Commissioner
Mr. John H. T. Stewart	Commissioner
Ms. Massa Washington	Commissioner
Mr. Nathaniel Kwabo	Executive Secretary: A Secretariat for administrative and operational functioning of the TRC
Technical Staff	
An International Technical Advisor Committee (ITAC) consisting of 3 persons. *The TRC is also assisted by different categories of employees in its work.	

Sources: <https://www.trcofliberia.org/>  
<https://www.trcofliberia.org/forgive/about/trc-mandate>

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## Conceptual Issues: Documentation and Dissemination of Information in Post-War Contexts

### The Role of the Record in Establishing the Truth

The documentation of war atrocities involves the assessment of individual allegations, analysing the overall evolution of the human rights situation, identifying trends, processing information in a report, recording and storing information (UKWELI handbook: 2000:15). In Liberia, the documentation process is taking place amidst challenges of low levels of education/literacy, limited financial resources, lack of electricity and hence limited Internet access, lack of computers and a functioning information infrastructure. The TRC is expected to come up with a final report, which should be disseminated, to the members of the public and other interested parties. To restore the trust of a greatly traumatised people, the documentation of war atrocities should be utilised to promote an understanding of the causes of conflict in an effort to bring about national healing, reconciliation, freedom of information and a meaningful public sphere. New modes of information dissemination like drama in local languages/locally organised seminars, video/DVD screening to the non-literate societies should be integrated in the dissemination strategy in order to have an all-inclusive process.

Adami contends that the record and its evidential value is the *raison d'être* of any recordkeeping program (Adami, 2007:216). He further argues that accountability leads to trust in the rule of law and that reconciliation is a process that searches for truth, justice, healing and forgiveness (Adami, 2007:214). Repressive governments maintain vast records that are inherited by post-conflict governments and which should aid the reconciliation process. Hence, if captured and well maintained, archival legacies could aid in shaping future humanitarian law since they relate to prosecution of criminal acts (Adami, 2007:214).

Since TRC's are involved in a process of uncovering the truth, the way information is handled is crucial to the credibility of its work. An accurate record of the war atrocities is hoped to prevent future atrocities through the enlightenment of the citizenry and should prevent regression to conflict, (Hayner, 2002: 29). It is argued in the Amnesty International report, that "States should preserve archives and other evidence concerning gross violations of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law to facilitate knowledge of such violations to investigate allegations and to provide victims with access to an effective remedy in accordance with international law", (Amnesty International Report 2007:10). It is further argued that, "a truth commission should establish archives for the preservation of documents and evidence. An important legacy of the commission's work, such as archives should be made and remain public after the end of the commission's mandate", (Amnesty International Report, 2007:10).

Factual findings eliminate political speculations and exposure makes it hard for the perpetrators to deny the truth. The truth is the basis of true reconciliation. According to a report by Amnesty International, "The right to know the truth is a collective right that ensures society access to information that is essential for the workings of democratic systems, and it is also a private right for relatives of the victims, which affords a form of compensation...", (Amnesty International report, 2007:3). Exposing the true nature of massive violations that occurred during the conflict ensures that the past is never forgotten. Verdier contends that a people

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without a past are a people without a future; and that the past, once forgotten is bound to be repeated (Verdier, 2007:7).

### **Accountability Issues**

The exposure of the massive human rights violations and holding the perpetrators accountable for their deeds marks a new beginning and a break from the past. Like the Chairman of the Liberian TRC argues, “exposing the true nature of massive violations that occurred during the conflict will ensure that the past is not forgotten, thereby undermining the divisions, marginalization and exclusionary policies of the past which found themselves at the core of bad governance in Liberia and lingering social-political discontentment.”

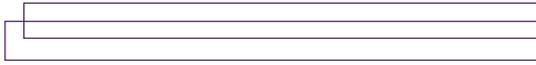
The fight against impunity requires accountability for crimes committed against humanity and the pursuit of justice is important for establishment of the rule of law (Verdier, 2007:23). Adami also argues that the exposure of the atrocities is an acknowledgment of the suffering of the victims and is important in preventing a repetition of future violations (Adami, 2007:214). Will full accountability be achieved in Liberia? Bosire posits “In Liberia, some of the key players in the current government are former warlords who have been largely implicated in human rights crimes”, (Bosire p. 34). The constitution and credibility of the TRC commissioners is also questioned in the Liberian media. The behaviour of some of the commissioners that included fist fighting has not promoted the unity that the TRC is striving for, (Sungbeh, 2008:1). Sungbeh posits,

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who has wielded enormous influence over the group and its members so much that since its inception, the call to summon her to testify before the commission for her alleged role in the civil war has been totally ignored by the political appointees that comprised the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As a result, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is all hype and no substance, and a cover for the politically rich and powerful who are talking peace and reconciliation in public on the one hand, but are also speaking deceit and indecision in private from the other side of their mouths, which leaves the commission open to political manipulation, the cooking of testimonies and the pressuring of witnesses to tell lies to meet the desired goals of this bloated commission.

Hayner is of the view that the TRC documentation contributes to accountability where the judicial system, enough accumulated evidence and political will exist, (Hayner, 2002:29). The TRC documentation cannot be fully utilised if people are not made aware of their right to information and if Liberia fails to enact a Freedom of Information Bill.

### **Freedom of Information and Access to Information**

The Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation is supposed to promote good information management and enhance access to government information by the electorate. It has therefore been adopted in a number of African countries like Angola, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe. However, Sebina argues, that according to a study that was done between 2003 and 2006 in countries where the FOI has been enacted, it has been done on weak records management regimes. This has therefore continued to hinder public access to government records, (Sebina, 2007:1). In Liberia, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2008, the civil society



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presented a draft of the Freedom of Information Act to the National Legislature (Press Release, 2008:1) urging the government to expedite the passage of the FOI Bill. It is also important that media has access to government information in order to play its surveillance role in national governance issues but also if it is to be used as an agency in the dissemination of the TRC findings to the people. The right to information is well articulated in both international and national laws. Article 19 in the Declaration of Human Rights and Liberian Constitution, regulates access to information as a human right:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (Gränström et. al. 2000) and Article 15 (b) of the Liberian Constitution grants Liberians, “The right to hold opinion without interference and the right to knowledge. It includes freedom of speech and of the press, academic freedom to receive and impart knowledge and information and the right of libraries to make such knowledge available. It includes non-interference with the use of the mail, telephone and telegraph. It likewise includes the right to remain silent. Part (c) of the same article states that “In pursuance of this right, there shall be no limitation on the public right to be informed about the government and its functionaries (Liberian Constitution).

The dissemination of the TRC findings by the media and other civil society organisations will require access to the information contained in the TRC report and the TRC archives. According to Article X on the Reporting and Recommendations of the TRC, Section 47 posits, “The archives of the TRC shall remain in the public domain except those records or documents classified by the TRC as “confidential” which shall remain classified for 20 years following the retirement of the TRC”, (Article X of TRC of Liberia, p. 11). The Chairman of the TRC argued during an interview that I held with him in April 2007, that a comprehensive dissemination strategy has been laid out and that it will embrace the experiences of the past, the culture and the current socio-economic conditions in the country. He also envisages that the recommendation of the TRC will reach each and every Liberian and that transitional justice processes will be taught in the Liberian schools (Svärd, 2007:18 - 19). My view is that dissemination does not take place in a vacuum but will require a functioning information infrastructure if it is to work. Experience in Sierra Leone shows that the same formulation was used about the dissemination of the TRC report but, when it came to the practical work, the report proved very difficult to get hold of even by the research community. Dissemination of information in today’s world is tremendously aided by the use of ICTs which Liberia lacks.

### **Access to ICTs and Information Dissemination**

The President of Liberia Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, is quoted in Best et al.’s article to have said that “our vision is for Liberia to become a globally competitive knowledge and information society where lasting improvement in social, economic and cultural developments is achieved through effective use of ICT”, (Best et al, 2007:34). The power of information technology today in knowledge and information distribution is well known and researched. Paragraph 4 of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) Declaration Principles states that:

“Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organizations. It is central to the Information Society.”

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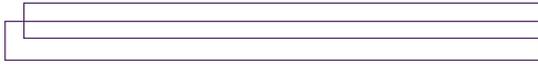
This principle shows the linkage between ICTs and the freedom of expression and opinion (Doria, 2005:30). Globally ICTs have improved the quality of life for those with access. Information and communication skills are a prerequisite in order to engage in the social, economic, cultural and political lives. The developing world is still grappling with the challenges of low literacy levels, access to ICTs and lack of technical skills, (Rassool, 1999:130). Rassool contends that the third phase of industrial development is driven by information and knowledge instead of energy (Rassool, 1999:131). Knowledge and information are central to national development goals in the post-industrial societies. The level of penetration of ICTs in all spheres of the economic and social processes of life is pivotal to the development paradigm. The national economic development requires a highly educated and skilled population, (Rassool, 1999:134). Information is power and through the Internet, access to information has been eased. However, it is not enough with information access; people need to convert information into a knowledge tool that will improve their lives. This requires a government that is ready to engage in awareness building, training and human resource development (Turahi, 2005:57).

An e-Readiness assessment that was done on Liberia by Best et. al established that Internet diffusion is low. In 2004, only one in 1000 Liberians had Internet access. Liberia has no outgoing fibre connectivity and its international connectivity is via satellite (Best et al. 2007:36). The country lacks a national network backbone, which hampers the expansion and availability of the Internet. Internet connectivity is therefore expensive since there is no major gateway provider and individual providers have their own inter gateway facilities. The Internet is therefore only available to a small portion of the Liberian population through Internet cafes or wireless Internet Service Providers (ISPs), (Best et al. 2007:36). The number of people with Internet access is according to Best et al approximately 3,300 people. Liberia released its ICT Policy in April 2006. 85% of the people do not enjoy ready access to ICTs. Since human capacity development is key to Liberia's post-conflict development, educational systems must effectively use ICTs to engage with the global world (Best et al., 2007:37 - 39). The Internet is a medium that enables the distribution of information from one to many and therefore lack of its access will hamper the dissemination of the TRC findings even to those Liberians with information and communication skills.

## **Challenges of Documenting War Crimes in Post-Conflict States**

### **The TRC Documentation**

The documentation of war atrocities and the establishment of the truth, is hoped to enable the people to forgive each other, reconcile and embark on the democratisation of their society. TRCs are empowered and protected by the state, which should take their recommendations seriously (Brahm, 2004:1). TRCs as argued by Hayner have the potential to evaluate institutional responsibilities for the committed atrocities and to outline their weaknesses. They can also suggest changes in laws that have been used to perpetuate the abuse of citizens, (Hayner, 2002:29). This will however require a national strategy that will utilise the archives or the knowledge contained in the TRC report to enlighten the masses about their rights and hence enable them to interrogate the government on the implementation of its recommendations. It is indeed a challenge to disseminate information in a country where a great majority of people are lowly educated. Nevertheless, different



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modes of dissemination should be embarked on to give the documentation a meaning by putting it to use and hence enabling it to function as an institutional memory.

The current scepticism towards TRCs is partly due to the fact that the findings are inadequately disseminated to the people. This has created suspicion among the victims of war since the TRC processes in countries like Sierra Leone and S. Africa have failed to address the social injustices and to deliver the promised reparations. Pricilla Hayner, the co-founder of the International Centre for Transitional Justice contends that what weakens the work of the TRCs is lack of political will for governments to implement their recommendations. Hayner sites Sierra Leone as a good example where none of the recommendations have been acted on. President Ernest Bai Koroma pledged in the September 2007 elections to respect the TRC recommendations (Irin, 2008.02.29). In an interview that I had with Ms. Hayner, in Stockholm, March, 2008 she was of the view that:

I think that the model is somehow still wrong and may be the best model would be to have a TRC that ends in a mini-commission which is a full-time commission with staff that has another year, when the TRC commission is over, the report is done, there is no more statement taking, it would work on dissemination, implementation, archiving and preservation, work with parliamentary and policy issues and to use more of the community based staff that TRCs often struggle to fit in. Once you have the information what do you with it? You need the community staff to go back to facilitate the processes of diffusing information into the communities through conversations. May be it is just the wrong model that the TRC drops dead and goes home and there is this sort of vacuum and that is the model that is everywhere right now. The problem is that it would require another commitment of resources but it commission. I am increasingly thinking that has to be the only answer because there are just too many places where people are so frustrated. And then what you are saying is another layer to it but the obvious thing is lack of implementation of recommendations and people not even knowing about the report, (Interview, 2008.03.31).

TRCs need to be implemented in a meaningful way so that the traumatised people can accept them as a solution in the reconciliation and national healing process. Lamin argues that even though TRCs have become fashionable approaches in countries that are transiting from war, the uniqueness of each country specific conflict will need a country specific solution (Lamin, 2005:238). The question to ask is whether the TRC documentation will be utilised by the Liberian government to address the social injustices that caused the war. Information management of TRC archives should be planned for at their commencement in order to effectively include a dissemination strategy, other than as a recommendation at the end of each mission. The South African TRC reconciliation process that has been used as a model for both the Sierra Leonean and Liberian TRCs has not fully delivered the promised reparations to some of the victims as per the recommendation of the TRC. It has only paid nominal amounts to some of the designated victims. This creates bitterness and resentment in a society where the standard of living is still low for some citizens and where class cleavages are highly emphasized. Daly et al further argue that this kind of situation is the reality in most countries where TRCs have been established, citing examples in Latin America and Guatemala, Africa and post-communist Europe where the economic situation for the marginalised has not changed, (Daly et al. 2007:130). Creating awareness about what

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the government of Liberia will be in a position to do for the victims of war is crucial to the sustainability of peace and unity. Therefore, information management through information institutions will have to play an important role.

### **Addressing some of the Post-War Records Management Challenges**

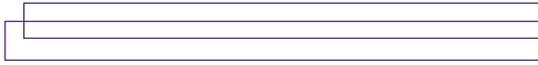
The diffusion of the TRC findings will require functioning information management institutions like the National Archives and libraries because of the need to promote the importance information in the society. However, a visit that was made in 2004 by Dr. Verlone Stone, Indiana University and Elwood Dunn, University of South Africa, was to assess the condition of document repositories and create conditions that would enable access to Liberia's Presidential and National Archives. The visit confirmed that the challenges that existed during the 1980s still persist and the civil war made matters worse because in the 1990s, ex-combatants looted the Centre for National Documents and Records/National Archives building and valuable documents were destroyed (Stone et al 2004:1). Some documents of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Republic of Liberia was founded were rescued. Today, the National Archives lack preservation materials, training, financial resources and proper storage facilities to cope with all these challenges. Government archives are scattered and the archival organisation of documents, which was done during the 1990s, has not been restored (Stone et al 2004:1).

The papers of the longest serving Liberian President V. S. Tubman that are about 30,000 in number were deteriorating and were to be rescued by a project with an award from the British Library Endangered Archives Program. The collection covers 1944-1950 and 1961 – 1971. The collection is of great importance in understanding the organisation of African Union's early years, the decolonisation era and the West African Diplomacy. The fragile documents were to be air shipped to the E. Lingle Craig Preservation Laboratory at Indiana University in the US because Liberia did not have the facilities to deep-freeze and freeze-dry the damp and insect infected documents. After treatment, the documents were to be microfilmed and sent back to Liberia. Micro film copies were to be sent to the University of Liberia, Cuttington University College, Centre for National Documents and Records, National Archives and the Tubman family to enhance local access (The Centre for Research Libraries).

Against this background, transitional societies with fragile institutions need the support of the international community to establish information infrastructure that can enhance the retrieval, dissemination and preservation of information. Since Truth Commissions are set up to investigate misrepresented facts, their documentation is indispensable in an effort to establish the truth. Bearman emphasizes the importance of constructing archives on an agreed ground, which legitimizes the building of a shared memory that would enhance a democratic society (Bearman, 2002:324). The Liberian TRC has according to its Chairman a dissemination strategy but preservation issues of its archives have not yet been addressed.

### **The Liberian TRC Archives: Preservation and Dissemination**

The author of this paper discussed the documentation and archiving of the TRC findings during the course of an interview with the TRC Chairman Jerome Verdier in April 2007 and he argued that it was still in its preliminary stage, (Svärd, 2007:18). During a visit to Liberia in



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September 2007, the author's meeting with the TRC commissioners revealed that document handling at the TRC headquarters was not integrated in the work of the TRC and there was no Archivist employed to advise, plan and take care of the documents that are being generated. Benetech, an organization that uses Information Technology to promote human rights is helping the Liberian TRC to improve the quality of statements in the data collection process to better reflect the experiences of statement-givers and to contribute to the TRC's analysis and research. This work is focused towards the final report and of course after all the data has been fed into the database the hardcopies will need to be indexed and taken care of.

The preservation and dissemination of records will pose numerous challenges and these will include lack of information management skills, storage facilities, financial and human resources and the lack of effective dissemination channels. The recording and preservation of information is crucial to the research process of the work of an investigative body. In order to logically organize the generated information, a records management system has to be put in place to ease retrieval and security risks given the sensitivity of the information (UKWELI handbook: 2000:22).

The Liberian TRC is clearly generating compound documents that will require an information infrastructure that will promote the dissemination of its findings. The audiovisual recordings effectively capture the lives of the people but they also pose challenges that a post-conflict country like Liberia is not equipped to handle, (Danielson, n.d.1). While paper records will require storage facilities, digital records will pose technological and financial challenges and will need to be in an environment, which will enable migration (Danielson n.d 1-4). Among the challenges are technology obsolescence, the need to preserve materials in their original formats, the hardship of establishing a faithful copy in the digital realm, changing media and temperature and humidity controlled storage for original tapes, (Cohen n.d.:1).

### **The Inclusion of the Diaspora Documentation**

The Liberian TRC partnered with The Advocates for Human Rights to collect statements from the Liberians in the Diaspora in an effort to create an all-inclusive process. In the US, public hearings have taken place in Minnesota and video clips can be accessed on the Internet. The Advocates for Human Rights have launched further public hearings in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York City, Washington, D.C. Newark and Atlanta and statement taking is underway in Accra, Ghana and the London, U.K, (The Advocates for Human Rights web page). All the generated documentation is naturally supposed to be taken back to Liberia but the issue is whether Liberia has an information infrastructure that can handle the preservation of all the documentation or whether a plan exists regarding its management. Via the Liberian TRC web page one can link to The Advocates for Human Rights web site and view the video clips but this requires access to a computer and Internet connectivity, which is out of reach of most Liberians.

### **The Dissemination of the TRC Findings**

In the absence of a proper information infrastructure and functioning information institutions and libraries, the dissemination of the Liberian TRC findings might not be easy. Even though the TRC Chairman argues that there is a dissemination strategy in place and that he hopes

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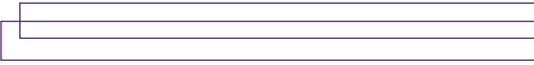
that the TRC recommendations will be effectively disseminated, experience from other TRCs that took place earlier has shown the opposite, (Svärd 2007: 18 – 19). The completed Sierra Leonean TRC work for example showed that even though a recommendation was made regarding the dissemination of the generated documentation, the fact that there was no follow-up institution left in place maintained the generated documentation in packed boxes that were stored away. It must be remembered, that the documentation is based on the contributions of already traumatized people and therefore any kind of neglect should be ethically wrong and against the objective of reconciliation. The dissemination of the Sierra Leone TRC findings has not effectively been carried out. If Liberia is to learn a lesson from the Sierra Leonean TRC, the government and its international partners should budget for an archiving component that will enhance local capacity building in document handling, a systematic arrangement of the archives that will lead to a meaningful use of the generated information. If plans to take care of the documentation were embarked on during the early stages of the TRC work, it would make the handover of the archives to an independent institution easier. This would also promote the dissemination of the findings to the people. The investment in the TRC mission should therefore include a component of an archival function that will see to it that the documents are taken care of in a way that will promote an understanding of the causes of the conflict, promote reconciliation and unity. The Liberians are the owners of these archives and therefore any further use of the information gathered during the process to produce more knowledge should be done in consultation with the Liberian state.

### **The Human Rights Commission**

An Independent Human Rights Institution will be established to take care of the follow-up activities of the TRC and to pursue the implementation of its recommendations (Svärd in News, 2007:20). Article X, Section 46 states that an Independent National Human Rights Commission shall have the responsibility to ensure that the TRC recommendations are implemented (Article X, The Civil society is also expected to play an important role towards achieving this goal. In April, 2008, the Acting Executive Director of the Independent National Commissioner of Human Rights (INCHR) Madam Ellen Z. White urged the President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to appoint a commissioner to the Independent National Commission on Human Rights (Borteh, 2008:1). The Human Rights Commission will be crucial to the follow-up activities of the TRC.

### **Analysis of the Documentation Process**

This paper has examined the on-going documentation process of the Liberian TRC and highlights the challenges ahead regarding the preservation and dissemination of the TRC findings to the Liberians. The analysis of the literature on the documentation process in Liberia that I have shows growing scepticism as to whether the TRC alone shall deliver justice, lead to reconciliation and promote accountability. Therefore, information will play a crucial role empowering Liberians and thereby enable them understand the TRC process better. If Liberians are to learn from the findings of the TRC in order to avoid regressing to conflict. The media has to operate freely in order to play its watchdog role and to digest information to the masses but also to be able to carry out investigative journalism that holds government officials responsible for the decisions they take on behalf of the electorate. Africa has just witnessed two recently concluded TRCs and that is the South African and the



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Sierra Leonean ones. The literature available on both TRCs clearly illustrates that there has been marginal effect on the lives of the poor.

Records management should be addressed at the commencement of the TRC missions. According to the TRC Act, the management of its archives comes at the end of the mission as a recommendation. The integration of the archival process at the beginning of the TRC work would safeguard the rights of the people to access the generated information. In order for TRC missions to be meaningful to the people whose tragedies they document, the findings should be nationally disseminated. The financial constraints, lack of political will and other reconstruction challenges like the creation of functioning government institutions that post-conflict governments are faced with, prevent the implementation of the TRC recommendations. The international community and post-conflict nations should draw lessons from the past TRC processes, especially the most recent ones of South Africa and Sierra Leone in order to enhance the voices of the poor.

TRCs are expensive institutions but are according to the reviewed literature considered to be the most suitable mechanisms in addressing issues of massive violation of human rights. TRCs generate important knowledge that is not fully utilised in countries where it is most needed. Since the TRCs are a sign of legitimacy for new governments, they should be utilised to enhance access to information in a manner that will enhance accountability, reconciliation and national unity. The freedom of information Act will need to be enacted by the Liberian government in order for media to be able to perform its role.

The literature consulted shows that TRCs have had very marginal impact on social injustices. This means that the current model should be revised in order to bring about change and meaning to the lives of the poor. The success of the Liberian TRC documentation process will depend on how well the dissemination of its findings will be effected and the implementation of its recommendations embraced by the government.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Since Truth Commissions are instruments that usher in new democratic regimes, their findings are crucial in enabling the people to understand the causes of conflict, the reconciliation and the democratisation processes. It should therefore be made accessible to the citizens as stated in the TRC mandates. Issues of information management should be included on the reconstruction agenda of the international community. Future TRC planners should include the suitable modes of diffusing the TRC findings to the members of the society with low literacy levels. Follow-up institutions should not be established years after the TRC has completed its mission but rather mini-commissions or Human Rights Commissions should immediately pursue the follow-up process after the TRC has completed its work. These institutions should have a focused fund to enable them to effectively see to it that the reparations are paid out to the victims and that the government embraces the recommendations. Legal frameworks that can ease information access should also be looked into in order to enable media to play an active role in digesting information to the citizenry. The TRC documentation should be used to formulate economic and social policies that will prevent the post-conflict societies from regressing into war. Given the multilingual nature of the Liberian society, various modes of diffusion of information should be included in the dissemination strategy.

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