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A Review Analysis of the Role of Higher Education Institutions in Promoting Sustainable Peace in Post-War Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

The trajectory of post-conflict recovery in Sierra Leone, following the devastating civil war (1991–2002), has been a subject of extensive scholarly and policy-oriented inquiry. While significant attention has been paid to formal processes of disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and transitional justice, the strategic role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as catalysts for sustainable peace remains a critically underexplored area. This review analysis seeks to address this gap by systematically synthesizing and evaluating the existing literature on the contributions, challenges, and latent potential of Sierra Leone universities in the peacebuilding landscape. The study was guided by a central research question of

“how have HEIs contributed to building sustainable peace, and what factors constrained or enabled the effectiveness of this effort?” Using the systematic review method, this analysis drew on a wide range of academic databases, institutional reports, and grey literature, framed through an integrated conceptual lens comprising four key elements of engagement. These included knowledge production and curriculum reform, skills development and capacity building, community engagement and social cohesion, and policy advocacy and research. The findings suggested that HEIs, notably Fourah Bay College (for University of Sierra Leone) and Njala University, have undertaken significant initiatives since the war officially ended. These included the introduction of peace and conflict studies programs, serving as neutral spaces for national dialogue and training of professional workforce essential for reconstruction. However, the analysis uncovered a pronounced disconnect between systemic impact in theoretical and practical potentials of HEIs in the country. The contributions of HEIs were consistently hampered by a confluence of severe challenges, including chronic underfunding, infrastructural decay, political interference, a persistent “brain drain” of intellectual capital, and a legacy of elitism that often creates disconnect with the broader society. Furthermore, community engagement efforts were frequently project-based and dependent on transient external funding, while significant research-policy gap prevented valuable academic insights from effectively informing national recovery strategies. The synthesis of evidence suggested that HEIs in Sierra Leone were an indispensable yet under-optimized actor in the peacebuilding ecosystem. For the institutions to transition from symbols of hope to agents of sustainable peace, a concerted and multi-stakeholder effort is required. It was recommended that university leadership, national government, and international partners emphasize strategic investment in institutional capacity and pedagogical innovation. This will foster critical thinking and civic responsibility, thereby strengthening policy-university-community linkages. This review provided a foundational framework for reimagining the role of academia in not just post-war reconstruction, but in fostering a resilient and cohesive society.

Keywords: Sierra Leone, Post-Conflict Peacebuilding, Higher Education Institution, Curriculum Reform, Community Engagement Advocacy.

INTRODUCTION

The Sierra Leone civil war, which raged from 1991 to 2002, stands as one of the most brutal and devastating conflicts in modern African history. Characterized by extreme violence, widespread mobilization of youth, and deliberate mutilation of social fabric, the conflict resulted in the death of an estimated 50,000 people, the

displacement of over two million, and the profound psychological scarring of a generation (Abdullah, 2004; Keen, 2005). The legacy of the war was not merely one of physical destruction but a deep-seated crisis of trust in public institutions, collapse of social contract, and shattering of the very norms that bind societies together (Gberie, 2005). In the two decades since the declaration of peace, Sierra Leone has been the focus of extensive international intervention and scholarly analysis, with significant attention directed towards the formal processes of post-conflict reconstruction. The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and the subsequent efforts to re-establish democratic governance and the rule of law have been widely documented and critiqued (Kelsall, 2005; Mutwol, 2009).

However, amidst this extensive body of work, a critical actor in the long-term project of building sustainable peace has remained relatively on the periphery of academic and policy discourse — the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country. The existing literature on post-conflict Sierra Leone has often framed recovery through the lenses of security, justice, and grassroots reconciliation. The transformative potential of universities as systemic agents of change has been largely overlooked or relegated to nothing more than symbolism. This gap is particularly paradoxical given that the root causes of the war (including rampant corruption, politicization of youth, challenging educational opportunities, and profound socio-economic inequalities) are precisely the kinds of complex structural issues that universities are uniquely equipped to address through their core functions of education, research, and civic engagement (World Bank, 2007; Davies, 2010). While schools and basic education are recognized as crucial for healing, the role of tertiary education in shaping the national leadership, intellectual discourse, and professional ethos of post-war societies demands a more focused examination.

The concept of sustainable peace moves beyond the mere absence of violence (negative peace) to encompass the presence of social justice, political participation, economic equity, and institutional capacity to manage conflict non-violently (Galtung, 1969; Lederach, 1997). In this more profound sense, peace is a dynamic and ongoing process of building resilience against recurrence of conflict. HEIs are, in theory, foundational to this endeavor. They are not merely ivory towers for knowledge dissemination (in fragile and post-conflict states), but can function as crucial "zones of peace", incubators for generation of new ethical leaders, and hubs for co-production of locally-relevant knowledge informs national policies (Bickmore, 2011; Milton & Barakat, 2016). The potential contributions of HEIs can be conceptualized across four interconnected pillars: i) the production and reform of knowledge through relevant curricula; ii) the development of human capital and professional skills; iii) direct engagement with and service to surrounding

communities; and iv) advocacy for evidence-based policy through rigorous research (Shields & Paulson, 2015).

In the specific context of Sierra Leone, HEIs carry a historical weight and a contemporary burden. Institutions like FBC (established in 1827 and once hailed as the "Athens of West Africa"), represent a deep-seated tradition of learning and intellectual leadership on the continent (Cole, 2007). Yet, this legacy was severely eroded by decades of state decline and the ravages of the war, which left university infrastructure in ruins, academic staff demoralized and underpaid, and the student body grappling with direct traumas of conflict (Zack-Williams, 1999). The post-war period, therefore, presented a dual challenge — the physical and institutional reconstruction of HEIs, and the simultaneous expectation of HEIs to play a pivotal role in moral and intellectual reconstruction of society. Initial responses were indeed visible; for instance, FBC established the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), and curriculum reforms began with the introduction of modules on peace education, human rights, and governance across various disciplines (IPCS, 2005).

Despite these nascent efforts, the journey of HEIs in Sierra Leone as effective peacebuilding actors has been fraught with systemic constraints and complex challenges. Chronic underfunding, political interference in university affairs, exodus of qualified academics (the "brain drain" syndrome) and persistent disconnect between academic research and practical needs of policymakers and communities have significantly hampered their impact (Banya, 2005; Lenga, 2010). Furthermore, the model of engagement has often been reactive and project-based, heavily reliant on fluctuating priorities and short-term funding cycles of international donors, rather than being anchored in a cohesive, long-term, and nationally-owned strategy for the higher education sector (N'gai & Dunne, 2017). This has created a paradox where recognized potential of HEIs for peacebuilding stands in stark contrast to documented realities of their operational limitations and sometimes marginal positions in national peacebuilding architecture.

Therefore, a comprehensive and systematic analysis was urgently needed to synthesize scattered evidence, critically evaluate progress made, and identify persistent gaps that prevent universities in Sierra Leone from fully realizing their peacebuilding mandate. This work addressed this need by asking the central research question as to "how have HEIs in Sierra Leone contributed to the promotion of sustainable peace in the post-war period, and what are the key factors that have constrained or enabled the effectiveness of this effort?" To answer these questions, a systematic review analysis of the extant literature was conducted. It sought to map the landscape of HEI activities related to peacebuilding, analyze the

outcomes through the four-pillar integrated framework, and offer a critical appraisal of the interplay between HEIs and the structural constraints faced.

By providing a synthesized and critical overview, this work aimed to make two significant contributions. First, it sought to consolidate the fragmented body of knowledge, bringing insights from education, development studies, and peace and conflict studies into a coherent dialogue specifically focused on the case in Sierra Leone. Second and more practically, the analysis aimed to generate evidence-based recommendations for university administrators, national government policymakers, and international development partners. The ultimate goal was to inform strategies that can strengthen the capacity of HEIs in Sierra Leone to transition from being peripheral or symbolic actors to become central transformative engines for sustainable peace and continued development of the country.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze the role of HEIs in post-war Sierra Leone, an integrated theoretical framework was used to conceptualize the peacebuilding functions across four interconnected pillars. This model synthesizes concepts from peace and conflict studies, critical pedagogy, and the sociology of higher education to move beyond the simplistic view of universities as mere knowledge factories. Instead, it positions them as dynamic multi-scalar actors operating at the nexus of individual transformation, community reconciliation, and national policy. The framework is built on the foundational understanding that sustainable peace, as defined by [Galtung \(1969\)](#), extends beyond the absence of direct violence (negative peace) to the presence of social justice, equitable relationships, and the capacity to resolve conflicts non-violently (positive peace). In post-conflict context like Sierra Leone, achieving this positive peace requires addressing the root causes of the conflict, which are often embedded in structures of political exclusion, economic marginalization, and historical grievance ([Lederach, 1997](#)). With their unique positioning in society, HEIs are theorized as critical agents of this transformative process through concurrent and synergistic operation of knowledge production, skills development, community engagement, and policy advocacy.

The first pillar of this framework, Knowledge Production and Curriculum Reform, is rooted in the concept of education as a means of both cultural reproduction and social transformation. The traditional, "banking" model of education, criticized by [Freire \(1970\)](#), views students as passive receptacles of knowledge and can perpetuate the very hierarchies and uncritical acceptance of authority that may have underpinned the pre-war status quo. In contrast, a peacebuilding-oriented curriculum embraces critical pedagogy, helping students

build the ability to question, analyze, and understand the complex historical, political, and economic drivers of conflict in their own societies (Bickmore, 2011). This involves the explicit integration of peace and conflict studies, human rights, and governance into academic programs, not as isolated disciplines, but as cross-cutting themes that can be woven into the fabric of law, education, economics, and the social sciences (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). The theoretical premise here is that by reforming what is taught (the curriculum) and how it is taught (the pedagogy), HEIs can disrupt the narratives of intolerance and equip students with the intellectual tools to deconstruct the ideologies of hatred and othering that fuel violence. This process of critical knowledge production is not neutral; it is an active intervention aimed at fostering a culture of peace, democratic citizenship, and historical reckoning, thereby sowing the seeds of long-term conflict resilience (Davies, 2004).

The second pillar, Skills Development and Capacity Building, addresses the urgent human capital needs of a post-war state. The theoretical link between this function and peacebuilding is articulated through human capital theory and its critiques, as well as the concept of "peace competencies." From a pragmatic standpoint, the war in Sierra Leone decimated the professional class, creating a critical shortage of skilled individuals (teachers, health workers, engineers, accountants, and civil servants) necessary to rebuild a functioning state and economy (World Bank, 2007). HEIs are the primary engines for producing this professional workforce. By training competent and ethical professionals, they directly contribute to the material reconstruction of the country and the restoration of essential public services, which are tangible peace dividends that bolster the legitimacy of post-conflict states (Barakat & Milton, 2015). However, this pillar transcends mere technical training. It encompasses what Bergh (2010) terms as "peacebuilding competencies", which include critical thinking, ethical reasoning, intercultural communication, and collaborative problem-solving skills. The development of these transversal skills ensures that graduates are not only technically efficient but also ethically grounded citizens and leaders who can navigate the complexities of divided societies, resist corruption, and contribute to the establishment of robust and accountable public spheres (Milton & Barakat, 2016).

The third pillar, Community Engagement and Social Cohesion, theorizes the university not as an isolated "ivory tower" but as an embedded social institution with a responsibility to its immediate and national community. This concept draws upon the "engaged university" model and social capital theory (Putnam, 2000). In fractured landscapes of post-conflict societies, trust (both among citizens and between citizens and the state) is a scarce commodity. By virtue of their perceived

(though often contested) neutrality and intellectual authority, HEIs can act as "zones of peace" and trusted intermediaries (Lederach, 1997). This pillar requires HEIs to actively convene dialogues between conflicting groups, facilitate truth-telling, reconcile processes, and provide direct services to the community; including legal aid clinics, public health outreach, and agricultural extension programs (McKell & O'Neill, 2018). The theoretical mechanism at work here is bridging social capital. By creating spaces and initiatives that bring together diverse segments of society (youth and elders, ex-combatants and victims, different ethnic or political groups), HEIs can help to rebuild horizontal networks of trust and reciprocity that are the bedrock of social cohesion. This outward-facing role challenges universities to deconstruct their own elitism and become resources for and partners with communities in the mutual project of healing and rebuilding, thereby operationalizing civic missions in contexts most critically needed (Brennan, 2008).

The fourth pillar, Policy Advocacy and Research, positions HEIs as crucial contributors to evidence-based peacebuilding and governance. The theory here hinges on the concept of "knowledge for policy" and the role of epistemic communities in shaping public discourse and state practice (Haas, 1992). The challenges of post-conflict recovery (from managing mineral resources to reforming security sector, from addressing youth unemployment to promoting gender justice) are complex and require solutions grounded in rigorous context-specific research. As centers of research, HEIs are uniquely positioned to generate this critical knowledge through applied policy-relevant studies on the drivers of conflict, the effectiveness of reconciliation mechanisms, and the pathways to sustainable development (King, 2015). However, knowledge production alone is insufficient. This pillar also involves active advocacy and engagement, where academics and research centers serve as independent and credible sources of analysis and advice for government, civil society, and international actors. By translating academic research into accessible policy briefs, participating in public debates, and serving on government commissions, HEIs can help to ensure that post-conflict policy is informed by evidence rather than ideology or political expediency. This function strengthens the intellectual foundations of the state and fosters a culture of accountability and informed public deliberation, which are essential for preventing a return to conflict (Shields & Paulson, 2015).

This integrated four-pillar framework provides a robust lens through which the contributions of HEIs in Sierra Leone were analyzed. It is crucial to emphasize that these pillars are not discrete or sequential but deeply interconnected and often synergistic. For instance, community-engaged research (linking Pillars 3 and 4) can both inform policy and enrich the curriculum (Pillar 1). Then ethical leaders developed through skills training (Pillar 2) become the very actors who implement

sound policies and effectively engage communities. The framework allows for critical analysis not only of what HEIs do but also of the gaps and tensions between the pillars. By applying this model to the Sierra Leone context, this review systematically evaluated the extent to which its HEIs have fulfilled this multi-connected peacebuilding mandate and identified the factors that have enabled or hindered their progress in becoming the anchors of sustainable peace.

METHODOLOGY

The systematic literature review methodology was used to ensure that a comprehensive, transparent, and reproducible analysis was done of the existing body of work on the role of HEIs in promoting sustainable peace in post-war Sierra Leone. The systematic approach was selected over the traditional narrative review to minimize selection bias and to provide structured audit trail from the identification of literature to the synthesis of findings, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn (Jesson et al., 2011). The review process was conducted in three distinct sequential stages: i) a comprehensive search strategy to identify relevant literature, ii) the application of strict inclusion and exclusion criteria to filter the results, and iii) a systematic data extraction and thematic synthesis to analyze the findings. The main goal of this methodological approach was to map out the scholarly terrain, synthesize evidence across discrete sources, and critically identify the central themes, contradictions, and significant gaps within the literature, all framed through the integrated four-pillar theoretical framework earlier outlined.

The first stage of the process involved a planned search strategy designed to capture the breadth of relevant academic and grey literature. Electronic search was conducted in four major multidisciplinary databases and repositories to ensure a wide coverage. These included Scopus and Web of Science for their high-quality peer-reviewed journal indices; JSTOR for its deep archive of humanities and social sciences literature; and Google Scholar for capturing emerging research, doctoral theses, and publications not indexed in the other databases (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020). The search query was built using the Boolean operators to combine keywords and phrases related to three core concepts — geographical context, institutional focus, and thematic concern. The primary search string used was ("Sierra Leone" OR "post-conflict Sierra Leone") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "tertiary education") AND ("peacebuilding" OR "reconciliation" OR "social cohesion" OR "post-war recovery"). This search string was tailored to the specific syntax requirements of each database. To mitigate the risk of missing seminal texts, a secondary snowballing technique was used, whereby the reference lists of all included full-text articles were scanned for

additional relevant sources (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). The initial search was for up to December 2024, encompassing the period from the official end of the civil war in 2002 up to the present, thereby capturing the entire post-conflict period of analysis.

Following the initial search, a rigorous set of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria was applied to screen the identified records, a process critical for ensuring the relevance and focus of the review. The inclusion criteria were deliberately broad in terms of publication type to capture diverse forms of knowledge but specific in terms of content and context. Included in the search were peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and book chapters, unpublished doctoral dissertations, and rigorously produced reports from major international organizations known to work in the intersecting fields of education and peacebuilding. These included the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). The temporal scope was restricted to publications from 2002 to 2024 to align with the post-war era in Sierra Leone. Conversely, the exclusion criteria were applied to maintain a sharp focus. Publications were excluded if their primary focus was not on HEIs. For instance, studies concentrating solely on primary or secondary education in Sierra Leone were omitted. Furthermore, publications not available in English language were excluded due to resource constraints for translation, and non-systematic review articles, editorials, and simple opinion pieces were excluded to maintain an analytical focus on primary research and in-depth analyses. The screening process was conducted in two phases: an initial screening of titles and abstracts, followed by a full-text review of the remaining articles to make the final determination for inclusion, a method that enhances efficiency without compromising thoroughness (Moher et al., 2009).

The final stage of the methodology involved data extraction and synthesis. For every source that met the inclusion criteria, data were systematically extracted into a standardized matrix created in a spreadsheet. This matrix was designed to facilitate cross-comparison and thematic analysis, with columns dedicated to key descriptive and analytical categories. These included author and year of publication; primary research focus or objective of source; methodology used in original study (e.g., qualitative case study, quantitative survey, mixed methods, policy analysis); key findings and empirical evidence relevant to each of the four pillars of the theoretical framework (Knowledge Production, Skills Development, Community Engagement, and Policy Advocacy); and primary challenges or constraints identified by authors regarding HEI peacebuilding. This extraction process allowed for the organization of a large and diverse body of literature into a structured format for analysis. The synthesis of this data was conducted using a thematic analysis

approach, as outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). This involved a recursive process of reading and re-reading the extracted data, generating initial codes, and then collating these codes into potential themes that cut across the individual studies. The four-pillar framework served as an initial coding structure, but the analysis remained open to the emergence of new, unanticipated themes such as specific role of digital technology or gendered dimensions of HEI access. This iterative process allowed for the identification of recurring patterns, convergent and divergent findings across the literature, and most importantly, salient gaps where evidence was thin or non-existent, thereby providing a clear and evidence-based foundation for the discussion and conclusion of this review.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Knowledge Production and Curriculum Reform

The systematic review revealed that a complex and nuanced landscape that existed regarding the role of HEIs in post-war Sierra Leone was characterized by pockets of innovation against systemic constraints. Analysis through the four-pillar framework demonstrated that while HEIs have made identifiable and commendable strides in formalizing peacebuilding mission, their overall impact was marred by significant challenges that prevent a deeper, more transformative contribution to sustainable peace. A critical finding across all the pillars was the persistent gap between institutional intent and practical execution, a theme explored in the synthesis. Beginning with the foundational pillar of Knowledge Production and Curriculum Reform, the review identified the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) at FBC as a seminal development, establishing a dedicated academic space for the study of conflict and reconciliation in direct response to recent national history ([IPCS, 2005](#)). The establishment of the institute, alongside new programs in Human Rights and Development Studies at other universities, signified a conscious effort to align academic project with national need for healing. However, evidence strongly suggested that these initiatives largely remained siloed within specific departments or institutes, failing to achieve comprehensive curriculum mainstreaming necessary for paradigm shift across higher education sector ([Lenga, 2010](#)). The introduction of a dedicated peace studies program, while valuable, has not consistently been accompanied by the integration of peace, ethics, and conflict-sensitive modules into core curricula of disciplines such as Law, Economics, Education, and Engineering, which train the future architects of the legal, economic, and social systems of the state ([Davies, 2010](#)).

This siloed approach was compounded by a second critical finding: the predominance of traditional, lecture-based pedagogical methods. Literature indicated that despite the introduction of new peace-related content, teaching

methodologies often remained didactic, prioritizing passive absorption of knowledge over participatory, critical pedagogy essential for post-conflict recovery (Freire, 1970). The skills of critical thinking, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving (precisely the competencies needed to challenge authoritarian mindsets and grievance narratives that fueled the conflict) were less effectively cultivated through rote learning (Bickmore, 2011). This has created a contradiction where course contents speak of peace and human rights, but pedagogical practice in the classroom inadvertently reinforces hierarchical relationships and uncritical acceptance of authority. Thus, the crucial opportunity to model democratic and participatory values that underpin sustainable peace was missed out (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). The discussion therefore must recognize that the contribution of HEIs to knowledge production for peace was currently dualistic. On one hand, explicit creation of academic programs dedicated to peace was a significant symbolic and substantive achievement that provided a formal platform for research and teaching. On the other hand, failure to permeate both broader curriculum and fundamental teaching methods across the university limits its transformative potential. This confines "peace education" to a specialty rather than establishing it as a core educational principle for all future leaders and professionals in Sierra Leone.

Skills Development and Capacity Building

The findings regarding Skills Development and Capacity Building suggested that a central paradox has evolved in the peacebuilding effort of HEIs in Sierra Leone. On one hand, the evidence unequivocally showed that HEIs have been instrumental in responding to the profound human capital crisis precipitated by the civil war. In the immediate post-war period, universities experienced significant surge in enrollment (World Bank, 2007). This framed education not only as a path to personal advancement but also as a critical alternative to the idleness and disillusionment that could easily slide back into violence for a large youth population. By training thousands of essential professionals (teachers to rebuild shattered education system, nurses and doctors to staff under-resourced health clinics, and civil servants to restore basic functions of the state), HEIs directly contributed to material foundations of peace (Barakat & Milton, 2015). This function aligned directly with human capital theory, positing that investment in education is a fundamental driver of economic recovery and state stability. The very act of absorbing and educating a post-conflict generation provided a vital social safety valve and fostered a sense of purpose, thereby making a tangible, albeit indirect contribution to short-term security and restoration of public services which bolster state legitimacy.

However, this critical contribution was severely undermined by a countervailing trend in the literature, which is persistent debilitating "brain drain" of most talented graduate citizens. As documented by [Lenga \(2010\)](#) and further supported by country analyses by [UNDP \(2017\)](#), the limited domestic job prospects, poor remuneration in the public sector, and perceived lack of professional opportunities in Sierra Leone create a powerful push factor, compelling the best and brightest to seek employment abroad. This exodus represented a critical failure to capture the full return on investment in higher education and constituted a severe leakage in the national capacity-building effort. The discussion must therefore grapple with the irony that the very institutions tasked with rebuilding the professional capacity of the state were, in effect, producing high-quality export commodities for global labor market. This phenomenon fundamentally compromised the long-term sustainability of peacebuilding efforts, as it perpetuated a cycle of institutional weakness. For instance, the very universities struggling to retain qualified staff were themselves victims of brain drain, which in turn affected the quality of future graduates ([Banya, 2005](#)). Therefore, while HEIs were successfully executing the initial stages of skills development, the domestic environment failed to provide the ecosystem necessary for skills retention and utilization. This suggested that the capacity-building efforts of HEIs cannot be viewed in isolation from broader national policies on economic development, public sector wages, and the creation of an enabling environment for innovation and entrepreneurship. Without a concerted strategy to address the root causes of brain drain, the vital work of HEIs in training the architects of a new Sierra Leone will continue to be an incomplete effort, with the potential to inadvertently reinforce the very inequalities and frustrations that contributed to the initial conflict.

Community Engagement and Social Cohesion

The analysis of Community Engagement and Social Cohesion revealed a profound tension between aspirational role of HEIs as societal healers and practical realities that limit their sustained impact. The literature provided compelling evidence, primarily from the immediate post-war period, of universities, particularly FBC, fulfilling a critical function as neutral conveners and trusted intermediaries. In the fragile years following the Lomé Peace Agreement, these institutions offered their campuses as sanctioned "zones of peace" for national dialogues and truth-telling sessions, leveraging their perceived intellectual authority to facilitate difficult conversations between conflicting groups and state actors; an essential role for rebuilding broken social networks ([Lederach, 1997](#)). Furthermore, the review documented ongoing initiatives where university-based law clinics provided pro-bono legal aid to marginalized populations and medical students conducted public health outreach, delivering tangible services that addressed critical justice and health deficits in surrounding communities ([McKell & O'Neill, 2018](#)). These

activities represented a practical application of university resources towards immediate human security needs, thereby building a form of social capital and demonstrating commitment to public good.

However, a deeper critical analysis revealed that those commendable efforts were frequently hampered by their transient and externally-driven nature. The findings consistently indicated that such community engagement projects were often funded by short-term grants from international donors, tying their existence and scope to the shifting priorities of external agencies rather than to a deeply institutionalized core mandate of the universities (N'gai & Dunne, 2017). This donor dependency creates a cycle of pilot projects that rarely achieved sustainability or scale, disappearing once funding ended and preventing long-term trust-building that is the cornerstone of genuine social cohesion. The problem was exacerbated by persistent "town-gown" tensions identified in the literature, where local communities often perceived the university as an elitist enclave, physically present but socially and economically disconnected from their daily struggles (Brennan, 2008). This historical legacy of elitism, noted by Zack-Williams (1999), means that despite the provision of services, the relationship can remain paternalistic (a one-way transfer of expertise from the university to the community) rather than mutually transformative partnership. Consequently, while university facilities and expertise were deployed for peacebuilding, the underlying social distance and economic disparities that fueled community resentment were often left unaddressed. The discussion must therefore conclude that community engagement, while demonstrating clear potential of HEIs to act as agents of social cohesion, remained the most vulnerable to the volatilities of external funding and were critically limited by unresolved historical and social divides. For this to mature, community engagement must evolve from isolated, project-based outreach to strategic embedded and dialogical partnership that actively works to deconstruct the very elitism that constrains its potential for deep, sustainable impact.

Policy Advocacy and Research

The examination of the fourth pillar, Policy Advocacy and Research, suggested a disjuncture between robust production of academic knowledge in HEIs in Sierra Leone and its tangible influence on national peacebuilding and governance agenda. The review confirmed that university-based researchers, particularly within centers like the Institute for Governance Reform and academic departments of sociology and political sciences, have generated a substantial and valuable body of work analyzing the structural drivers of the conflict and the challenges of the post-war era. This includes incisive research on the perils of youth marginalization, the systemic nature of public sector corruption, and the governance challenges within the mineral resource sector, all of which constitute critical evidence for formulating

effective, context-sensitive public policy (King, 2014; Abdullah, 2004). This intellectual output demonstrated the capacity of HEIs to fulfill their role as epistemic communities, defined by Haas (1992) as networks of knowledge-based experts who can articulate cause-and-effect relationships and propose solutions in complex policy domains. However, the synthesis of findings across multiple sources pointed to a pervasive and significant research-policy gap, indicating that this potential was largely unfulfilled. The valuable analyses produced within the academy frequently remained confined to scholarly journals and academic conferences, failing to make the crucial transition into the halls of government where policy was formulated and implemented.

The discussion must therefore focus on the systemic barriers that created this chasm. The literature identified a triad of interrelated challenges. First, there was the conspicuous absence of formal institutionalized channels for communication between universities and government ministries, resulting in a disconnect where policymakers were often simply unaware of relevant timely research (Shields & Paulson, 2015). Second, even when awareness existed, academic researchers were often socialized to prioritize peer-reviewed publications for career advancement, leading to widespread lack of skills and incentives for translating complex research findings into accessible formats like policy briefs, infographics, or direct stakeholder engagement that were palatable and useful for busy policymakers (Milton & Barakat, 2016). Third, and perhaps most critically, the review highlighted the constraining effect of political sensitivities. Research that critically examined issues of corruption, governance failures, or elite capture of resources was often perceived as threat by those in power, leading to the marginalization of critical academic voices and, in some cases, implicit or explicit pressure that fostered self-censorship (Banya, 2005). This political economy of knowledge production meant that the most politically-salient research (precisely the kind needed to address the root causes of conflict) was often the least likely to be adopted. Consequently, policy advocacy remained the most under-leveraged in HEI peacebuilding arsenal. While HEIs were successfully generating the substance for evidence-based policy, they were failing to overcome the political and communicative barriers to its adoption. This failure not only represented a lost opportunity for improving governance but also perpetuated a cycle where policy was made based on political expediency or donor preference rather than on locally-generated, empirically-grounded evidence, thereby potentially reinforcing the very governance deficits that underpinned the conflict.

Synthesis and Critical Analysis

The synthesis of evidence across the four pillars led to the critical conclusion that while HEIs in Sierra Leonean were universally acknowledged in the literature as

entities with immense potential for fostering sustainable peace, their practical impact was systematically constrained by a confluence of deep-seated structural and operational factors that collectively inhibited their transformative capacity. The review identified a recurring pattern where well-intentioned initiatives across knowledge production, skills development, community engagement, and policy research were ultimately mediated and often diluted by these pervasive constraints. Foremost among these was the chronic and systemic underfunding of public university system, a theme extensively documented by [World Bank \(2007\)](#) and [Banya \(2005\)](#). This financial precarity manifested in dilapidated infrastructure, inadequate research libraries, and demoralized academic staff who were often forced to seek supplemental income, thereby curtailing the time and resources available for deep scholarship, innovative teaching, and sustained community outreach required for effective peacebuilding. This financial strain was compounded by persistent political and bureaucratic interference in university governance, which compromised institutional autonomy and academic freedom essential for HEIs to function as critical, independent voices in a post-conflict society. When appointment of university leaders or direction of research was subject to political patronage, the ability of HEIs to critically analyze sensitive issues like corruption or governance failures (a core function of policy advocacy pillar) was severely curtailed, undermining their credibility and role as honest brokers of social change.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that historical legacy of elitism, hangover from colonial era where institutions like FBC were seen as training grounds for select few, continued to create social distance between university and the broader populace ([Zack-Williams, 1999](#)). This legacy hindered social cohesion, as community engagement was perceived as, or inadvertently became, paternalistic outreach rather than genuine partnership of co-learning and mutual respect; thereby reinforcing the very social divides that peacebuilding aimed to bridge. Perhaps the most paradoxical finding was the dual role of international aid, which emerged as both a crucial enabler and a significant distorting factor. While donor funding was instrumental in launching new programs, funding research, and supporting infrastructure repair in the wake of the war, this review synthesized a critical consensus that this support often came with strings attached ([N'gai & Dunne, 2017](#)). The project-based short-term and output-driven nature of much international funding skewed institutional priorities away from long-term, locally-owned agendas grounded in the four-pillar framework, and towards short-term, externally-defined outcomes that did not align with sustained, nuanced work of building peace. This created dependency that crowded out endogenous innovation and prioritized reporting to donors over meaningful engagement with local communities and national policy needs. The synthesis posited out that the journey of HEIs in Sierra

Leone from symbolic pillars of potential to transformative agents of sustainable peace was contingent upon addressing fundamental structural constraints. Peacebuilding contributions of HEIs, while real and commendable, remained fragmented and sub-optimal, not for lack of will or vision, but because the operational environment was shaped by forces (financial, political, social, and international) that they have limited power to control. This highlighted the need for a holistic and systemic approach to strengthening the entire higher education sector as a core component of national peace infrastructure.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This systematic review involved a comprehensive analysis of extant literature to evaluate the role of HEIs in promoting sustainable peace in Sierra Leone since the end of its brutal civil war in 2002. The evidence, synthesized through the integrated framework of four key pillars (knowledge production, skills development, community engagement, and policy advocacy) presented a nuanced and sobering portrait. The key conclusion that emerged was that HEIs in Sierra Leone were critical, yet profoundly under-optimized, actors in peacebuilding ecosystem of the country. HEIs demonstrably moved beyond pure symbolic role to undertake tangible initiatives that had contributed to the post-war landscape. The establishment of peace and conflict studies programs, the training of thousands of teachers and health workers, the provision of essential services through legal and medical clinics, and the production of critical research on conflict drivers all attested to a conscious engagement with the challenges of building a peaceful society. These efforts represented a significant and often heroic endeavor by academic staff and students to fulfill the civic mission of universities under exceptionally difficult circumstances. The institutional response, particularly in the immediate post-war years, was a vital component of national effort to avert a relapse into violence and to lay the foundations for a new generation of leaders and professionals.

However, the review simultaneously concluded that the cumulative impact of these efforts fell short of their transformative potential. The contributions of HEIs were largely fragmented, project-based, and reactive, rather than being the product of cohesive, system-wide, and sustainably funded strategies. The analysis across all four pillars consistently suggested a stark gap between intent and outcome, a chasm created by a powerful combination of structural and operational constraints. The chronic systemic underfunding crippled institutional capacity, while political interference compromised the autonomy necessary for HEIs to serve as independent agents of democratic society. The historical legacy of elitism often

hindered the deep trust-based relationships required for genuine social cohesion. Then the paradoxical nature of international aid (while providing essential resources) frequently skewed institutional priorities towards short-term, externally-defined outcomes at the expense of long-term, locally-owned agendas. Consequently, peacebuilding role of HEIs was more additive than transformative; treating the symptoms of fragile state without empowerment to address underlying pathologies. HEIs produced graduates, but debilitating brain drain siphoned off the best talent of the country. HEIs generated critical research, but yawning research-policy gap prevented this knowledge from informing governance. HEIs engaged with communities, but often in transient and paternalistic manner that failed to dismantle "town-gown" divide. Therefore, the central thesis of this review was that for HEIs in Sierra Leone to transition from being peripheral or symbolic actors to becoming central transformative engines of sustainable peace, fundamental re-evaluation and strategic role reinforcement were imperative. The peace HEIs helped to sustain remained precarious, and their full potential as catalysts for a just, equitable, and resilient society were largely untapped.

Recommendations

To bridge the identified gaps and unlock the transformative potential of HEIs in Sierra Leone, a concerted, multi-stakeholder effort was required. The following recommendations were proposed, targeting the key actors in the higher education and peacebuilding landscape.

University Leadership and Academic Staff. The onus was on HEIs to proactively redefine their identity and operations to better align with their peacebuilding mission. This will begin with a strategic commitment to mainstream peace, ethics, and conflict-sensitive education across the entire curriculum, moving beyond the silos of specialized institutes. Faculties of Law, Economics, Education, and Engineering must integrate modules on social justice, ethical governance, and the social dimensions of their professions, using pedagogical methods that foster critical thinking, dialogue, and participatory learning. Furthermore, university leadership must institutionalize and valorize community engagement, shifting from ad-hoc projects to long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships. This will involve creating dedicated offices for community outreach, recognizing such work in promotion criteria, and developing programs that are co-designed with community stakeholders to ensure relevance and dismantle perceptions of elitism. Finally, HEIs must establish robust research management and policy outreach units tasked specifically with translating academic research into accessible formats (such as policy briefs, workshops, and public forums) to actively bridge the research-policy gap and position universities as an indispensable source of evidence-based advice.

National Government and Policymakers. The government must recognize a strong, autonomous higher education sector not as a cost, but as a strategic investment in national security, stability, and sustainable development. This will require a firm commitment to increasing public funding for HEIs to a level that will allow for infrastructural development, competitive faculty salaries, and meaningful research grants, thereby addressing the root causes of brain drain and institutional precarity. Concurrently, the government must formally establish and respect mechanisms that safeguard university autonomy, ensuring that institutional leadership and academic inquiry are free from political interference. To harness the intellectual capital in HEIs, the government should formalize pathways for academic expertise to feed into policy. For instance, by mandating that key national development and peacebuilding strategies are informed by commissioned research from a consortium of national universities and by appointing academics to key advisory positions within ministries.

International Development Partners and Donors. The international community must critically reassess its mode of engagement with higher education sector in Sierra Leone. The prevailing model of short-term, project-based funding, while often necessary, has proven insufficient for building sustainable institutional capacity. A paradigm shift is needed towards providing long-term, predictable and flexible core funding that will allow universities to set their own strategic priorities based on a locally-owned vision of peacebuilding role, rather than reacting to donor-driven agendas. Support should increasingly focus on strengthening systemic foundations (such as library systems, ICT infrastructure, and faculty development programs) rather than solely funding discrete, time-bound projects. Furthermore, donors should prioritize and fund south-south partnerships and academic exchanges that allow institutions in Sierra Leone to share and gain knowledge from peers in similar post-conflict contexts, fostering relationships that are more equitable and contextually relevant than traditional north-south models.

Future Research Directions. To build on this review, future research should pursue several critical avenues. First, there is need for longitudinal and mixed-methods studies that move beyond documenting activities to measuring tangible impact of specific HEI initiatives on social cohesion, civic attitudes, and conflict resilience among graduates and beneficiary communities. Second, comparative analyses with other post-conflict nations such as Rwanda, Liberia, or Colombia, could yield valuable insights into effective models of HEI engagement in peacebuilding and strategies for overcoming common constraints. Finally, dedicated research is needed to explore the political economy of research-policy gap in greater depth, investigating specific incentives, disincentives, and power dynamics that prevent academic knowledge from influencing public policy in the

context of Sierra Leone. By pursuing these recommendations and research directions, all stakeholders can contribute to a future where universities in Sierra Leone are fully empowered to fulfill their historic mandate as the “Athens of West Africa”, not merely in prestige, but as dynamic and indispensable architects of a durable and just peace.

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