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Commanding abuse or abusing command? Ex-command structures and drugs in Liberia

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary discourses on post-war reconstruction in West Africa, ex-command structures are often assumed to play a key role in the drug economy. Such assertions have, however, not been systematically investigated. Based on in-depth field research in Liberia, this article holds that ex-command structures have not only played a limited role in the country's drug economy, the use of and trade in drugs has had a destructive impact on ex-military networks. These findings highlight that rather than seeking to dismantle strong ex-command structures, efforts to combat the drug economy may benefit from integrating them into the statebuilding process.

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Introduction

In contemporary discourses on West Africa, the drug economy is commonly identified as a key challenge to post-civil war reconstruction. The presence of criminal groupings trading drugs¹ in war-ridden countries such as Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria (Niger Delta), Senegal (Casamance), and Sierra Leone,² has generated concerns over the risk of illicit networks being integrated into the state. At worst, such dynamics can lead to the criminalisation of the latter. In these depictions, ex-command structures are often assumed to play a prominent role.³ The reason for this is twofold. First, ex-commanders are commonly well positioned to use the labour of their ex-fighters to engage in illicit activities, such as drug-trading. Despite large-scale efforts to break up the command-and-control structures of armed groups by investing in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes (DDR), ex-commanders often continue to have influence over their ex-fighters.⁴ Ex-commanders can utilise this clout to transform their former armed units into drug running outfits; not only are members of the former accustomed to obeying orders and working together, they also have a history of using violence in what are often clandestine settings.⁵ Second, ex-commanders are often assumed to use drugs to ensure the continued loyalty of their former subordinates. In many armed conflicts, combatants employ drugs to cope with the pressure of battle. By

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continuing to feed this abuse during peacetime, drug-dealing ex-commanders cannot only ensure a pool of loyal customers, but also keep their military capacity intact.⁶

The threat of ex-military networks being employed in the trade of drugs has generated a number of assumptions concerning the relationship between ex-command structures and illegal substances in West Africa. Not only are ex-military networks often presumed to thrive in milieus where drugs are traded and used, they are also believed to play a prominent role in the drug trade in the sub-region.⁷ This, in conjecture with the risk that such structures are used for other social vices – such as warfare and electoral violence – has prompted policymakers to frame lingering ex-command structures as an obstacle to post-war reconstruction. However, even if there are examples of some ex-commanders and fighters having engaged in such activities in Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, and Sierra Leone, it is not clear if this is part of a broader trend. For instance, to what extent are drug-running outfits in war-ridden countries in West Africa actually based on ex-military personnel? Furthermore, does the empirical evidence actually support the idea that efforts to combat drug trafficking benefit from the dismantlement of strong ex-command structures? The burgeoning literature on DDR has so far failed to address these questions, both from a West African and global perspective. In this exploratory study, I seek to address these questions by tracing the intricate relationship between (ex) command structures and drugs during Liberia's two civil wars, and the peace implementation process that followed them. The reason for including a historical analysis of wartime drug use, is that it allows us to assess claims about ex-commanders' ability to manipulate their ex-fighters' drug addiction⁸ – developed during the hostilities – to retain influence over the latter.

The article's findings speak to a number of interrelated debates concerning post-war reconstruction and the drug economy in West Africa, and beyond.⁹ First, experiences from Liberia underlines the need to reassess previous assumptions in the DDR literature that ex-command structures prosper in environments where drugs are consumed and traded. In fact, due to the social stigma attached to drug abuse – especially of heavier substances – 'clean' ex-commanders and combatants tend to avoid wartime comrades who are dealers or addicts. This means that ex-command structures composed of many of the latter often crumble. This is in sharp contrast to ex-military networks situated in more legitimate economic sectors and attached to governing elites. Ex-commanders operating in similar settings are often better positioned to offer employment opportunities to their ex-fighters. As 'job brokers', such ex-commanders are commonly more successful in ensuring the loyalty of their former subordinates. By tracing the conditions under which ex-military structures are most likely to thrive contra dissolve, the article connects to a growing literature on social cohesion in the aftermath of war.¹⁰ Second, the article highlights that contrary to previous assumptions, ex-military networks may play a rather limited role in post-war drug economies. In fact, even if some Liberian ex-commanders and fighters were involved in the drug economy they were just one of many actors. The drug distribution infrastructure also involved actors ranging from ordinary Liberians with no connections to the war, and police officers, to security personnel and foreign citizens (especially, Nigerians).

Based on these conclusions, it is questionable whether efforts to address the distribution and consumption of drugs are furthered by the dismantlement of strong informal command structures. In fact, rather than leading to the criminalisation of the state, the integration of such structures into the statebuilding process may facilitate efforts to combat the trade in drugs. By generating employment, such an approach can create incentives for ex-fighters to shun the economic opportunities present in the drug economy. As such, the article predominantly

speaks to the literature on DDR and the larger debate about the benefits of using ex-wartime structures to integrate ex-military actors into the new post-war order being built.

Drugs, wars, and command structures in West Africa

In order to understand why ex-command structures are often assumed to play a key role in the drug economy in West Africa, it is first necessary to trace how scholars have, historically, depicted the usage of and trade in drugs in internal armed conflicts in the region, as well as globally.

With the end of the cold war, the international community began giving greater attention to the resolution of civil wars. Even though there had been a steady increase in the number of internal armed conflicts since the 1970s,¹¹ many 'Western' observers were shocked by what some believed to be a 'new' kind of wars characterised by mass-atrocities and a desire for wanton economic profit.¹² In this context, drugs became one lens through which to interpret the dynamics of intra-state violence. For instance, accounts from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, described how the use of illegal substances blossomed amongst fighters.¹³ Wartime drug abuse was particularly identified as a problem in countries suffering from civil strife in West Africa. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, the vilest abuses were attributed to combatants doped up on amphetamines, cocaine and crack-cocaine.¹⁴ According to Gberie, drugs and violence were employed by Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to induct children into the Sierra Leonean rebel group.¹⁵ In addition, before battle, commanders commonly distributed drugs to combatants to give them the courage to attack the enemy. Being high also made it easier for fighters to commit atrocities against civilians by dehumanising them. In many instances, combatants appear to have taken the drugs out of free will, simply to make war bearable. However, according to other accounts commanders obliged fighters to use drugs.¹⁶ By referring to the presence of drugs – irrespective if it was employed voluntarily or through force – the violence somehow became more understandable for many commentators; it was simply incomprehensible that sober individuals could engage in such 'barbarism'.

A second strand of literature emphasised the economic role drugs had in financing armed struggles. By applying a 'greed' perspective, scholars sought to explain why some ideological conflicts – such as in Afghanistan and Colombia – degenerated into wars of profit.¹⁷ Once rebel and militia leaders began taxing and controlling drug routes, access to the latter became a goal in itself rather than a means to win the war. Similar dynamics were also identified in several West African countries.¹⁸ For instance, rebels of Movement for Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) have for a long time financed their armed struggle against the Senegalese regime through the cultivation and distribution of marijuana.¹⁹ Hence, according to this logic, there was also a reverse link between drugs and command structures. Instead of drugs being employed to control fighters, military elites use the latter to control the trade in drugs.

Drugs, post-war societies, and ex-command structures in West Africa

Increasingly, drugs have also been framed as a threat to post-civil war stability.²⁰ Scholars and practitioners have, for instance, highlighted how weak state institutions in war-ridden countries may be penetrated by internationally sponsored drug networks and turned into transit hubs for smuggling illegal substances.²¹ Such developments appear to be particularly daunting in post-civil war societies in West Africa. The reason for this is that 'smuggling is widely

tolerated, law enforcement is fitful and inefficient, and politicians are easily bribed or even involved in the drug trade themselves.²² Drugs are, however, not only negatively affecting the sub-region by criminalising formal institutions; there is also a growing domestic consumption of drugs, which risk aggravating existing problems of social marginalisation and crime.²³

In this processes, ex-command structures are often assumed to play a key role.²⁴ One reason for this is that after the arrival of peace, it can be tempting for ex-commanders and fighters to try to control drug distribution routes. Incomes generated from such activities can be superior to the benefits available through participation in DDR programmes. For instance, despite efforts to reintegrate Tuareg ex-rebels in Mali during the 1990s, members of the latter employed their ex-command structures to retain control over parts of the Sahel drug trade.²⁵ In some instances, ex-commanders may choose to reinvent themselves as drug barons even though they had not been engaged in the drug trade during the war. In Sierra Leone, for instance, drugs played a limited role in financing the armed factions. Despite this, evidence suggests that several ex-rebel commanders transformed themselves into local drug dealers after the war, oftentimes employing their ex-fighters as pushers or mules.²⁶ Having wartime experiences of collectively employing violence and operating in what are often clandestine environment, ex-commanders and fighters have a competitive advantage over other actors involved in the drug trade.²⁷

Irrespective if ex-military structures' involvement in the drug trade can be traced back to the previous war or not, such criminalised networks are often found in spaces of marginality – areas largely outside the control of the state and characterised by informal economies, such as urban ghettos or border areas. The reason for this is twofold. First, it is in these environments that many customers live, making it rational for ex-commanders to focus their drug business to, for instance, ghettos. Second, the people who are willing to work for ex-commanders and go on drug 'missions' – such as ex-fighters with bleak prospects of social advancement – commonly live in marginal spaces.²⁸

An additional reason for why ex-command structures are believed to play an instrumental part in the post-war drug economy, is that ex-commanders have incentives to manipulate the drug addiction of their ex-fighters. In countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone demobilisation produced a large pool of ex-fighters that were drug addicts.²⁹ This created an opportunity for ex-commanders to continue to control the labour of their former undermen by feeding their abuse. In fact, a popular narrative amongst local NGO representatives in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, was that ex-commanders were able to continue to ensure the loyalty of child ex-combatants by offering them drugs.³⁰ From a patronage perspective, this was a rational strategy; by ensuring a continued access to ex-fighters, ex-commanders could build up a network of clients that could be used for different legal or illicit business ventures or mobilised on behalf of different elites. In addition, by nurturing their ex-fighters' drug addiction, ex-commanders could ensure a loyal pool of customers that contributed to sustaining the drug trade.³¹

A new research agenda to unpack the drug–ex-command structure nexus

Even though previous research has made a vital contribution by highlighting the role that drugs can play in transitions from war to peace, it suffers from a number of shortcomings.

First, previous studies have failed to disaggregate between different types of drugs. In fact, heavier substances that are associated with higher levels of addiction (heroin, cocaine,

and crack-cocaine) are often conflated with lighter drugs (marijuana, hashish, and khat). This constitutes a problem since there is growing evidence that not all forms of drug trade are detrimental to socio-economic development. Carrier and Klantschnig have, for instance, traced how the production and sale of khat and cannabis has played a vital role in reducing poverty in Lesotho, Nigeria, and Kenya.³² These findings speak to the possibility that the role ex-command structures play in the trade and consumption of drugs, partly depends on the kind of substances involved.

Second, depictions of the trade in and usage of drugs in war-ridden societies are commonly based on the narratives of a few key informants, rather than systematic empirical analysis. To some extent this is understandable. Not only has the drug economy seldom been the key focus of previous studies analysing post-civil war dynamics, it is also notoriously difficult to receive reliable information about illegal activities such as the drug trade. However, recent studies by Carrier and Klantschnig, Laudati, and Suckling have shown that it is possible to do rigorous and systematic studies about the drug economy based on in-depth fieldwork.³³

Third, much of the literature dealing with ex-command structures has so far focused on describing the role such ties have in marginal spaces. This inclination for studying ex-military networks in urban ghettos or border areas, gives the impression that it is above all in these milieus – dominated by illicit economic activities, such as drug trading – where ex-command structures thrive. However, the assumption that there is a correlation between drug dealing and the strength of ex-command structures needs to be empirically assessed. This requires comparisons between ex-military networks operating in various socio-economic environments, for instances, marginal spaces and areas dominated by more licit activities.

Finally, there is a lack of studies investigating claims that drug dealing ex-commanders can manipulate the wartime addiction of their ex-fighters to either control the labour of the latter, or ensure a loyal pool of customers. In order to assess claims concerning the drug–ex-command structure nexus, it is necessary to historically trace what types of drugs fighters employ during war, whether the same kind of substances are used after demobilising, and if combatants predominantly acquire these illicit substances from their former superiors or other suppliers. An additional benefit of including an historical approach is that it allows us to trace the origins of the drug economy and establish what role wartime command structures had in its development.

Hence, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between drugs and ex-command structures, it is necessary to develop a research design that: (a) compares ex-military networks in different socio-economic environments (i.e. with higher and lower levels of drug penetration); (b) is based on systematic empirical collection and analysis; (c) disaggregates between different types of drugs; and (d) traces drug use from war to peacetime. Only then is it possible to ascertain whether uprooting ex-command structures should be a corner stone of policies seeking to tackle the drug economy.

A note on methods and sources

In order to critically analyse the relationship between drugs and ex-command structures, Liberia will be employed as a case study. There are several reasons for this. First, previous studies have highlighted that drugs played a vital military and psychosocial role during Liberia's two civil wars – 1989–1996 and 1999–2003.³⁴ Second, there is growing evidence suggesting that drugs have continued to affect the life of many ex-fighters and commanders

also after demobilising, either through continued substance abuse or efforts to engage in drug trading.³⁵ A third reason to employ Liberia as a case study is that it shares a number of similar characteristics with other post-civil war societies in West Africa: weak state institutions, long destructive wars, growing tendency to be integrated into the international drug economy, and high levels of corruption.³⁶

The empirical material comes from a research project, co-headed by the author and implemented in Liberia, which sought to understand when and why ex-commander structures continue to thrive after demobilising.³⁷ This project collected data on a variety of factors ranging from ex-fighters and ex-commanders' economic livelihood and participation in DDR, to access to patronage and drugs. The reason for why the collected data are useful for the purposes of this study is that it employed a network-sensitive approach. In fact, focus was on how ex-commanders and their ex-fighters interacted with each other and which types of services and resources (such as drugs) were exchanged.

More specifically, two approaches were used to gather the necessary data. First, in-depth egocentric analyses were conducted with five ex-commanders and their respective ex-military networks (defined as a group of individuals made up of an ex-commander and those ex-subordinates that the former meets or has contact with at least once a year). While one of the selected ex-commanders (from ex-National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)) was involved in drug dealing, the remaining four operated in other socio-economic contexts (a broker distributing patronage for governing elites (ex-NPFL), a miner (ex-Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD)), a military recruiter (ex-NPFL), and an MC-taxi driver/farmer (ex-LURD)). While the drug dealer, broker, and military recruiter resided in Monrovia, the remaining two (the miner and MC-taxi driver/farmer) lived in two different mid-sized towns.³⁸ Besides the manner in which these five ex-commanders made their living, they shared a number of similar characteristics with many other Liberian ex-commanders. For instance, even if they cannot be described as poor, they were constantly seeking new economic opportunities and the chance to attach themselves to different elites. In this process, their ex-fighters were seen as a valuable resource. By contrasting the experiences of one drug-dealing ex-commander with that of ex-commanders engaged in other economic activities, it is possible to critically assess assumptions about the relationship between drugs and ex-military networks.

As part of the egocentric analysis, each ex-commander was interviewed on several occasions, while the individual ex-fighters were interviewed once. The ex-commanders assisted the author to get in touch with the ex-combatants. In addition, a number of ex-fighters, who were not on the list compiled by the ex-commanders, but had fought under the latter, were also interviewed (these 'sleepers' were 17 in total). This allowed the author to control the information given by the ex-commander and the other ex-fighters. In total, 158 interviews were conducted, during September 2011, March–April and October–November 2012.

Second, as a compliment to the in-depth egocentric analyses, the author implemented a survey comprised of 56 Liberian ex-commanders and 43 ex-fighters. The latter had fought under one of the surveyed ex-commanders. By also interviewing some of the ex-commanders' ex-fighters, it was possible to control the information provided by the former. The author and seven research assistants³⁹ conducted the survey during 2011–2012. To ensure a broad geographical spread, work was carried out in Bomi, Bong, Grand Cape Mount, Grand Gedeh, Lofa, Montserrado, and Nimba Counties.

For the purposes of this study, a combatant is held as a person – without military rank – who takes direct part in hostilities on behalf of an armed group. Meanwhile, a commander is defined as the category of military personnel that is situated between rank-and-file combatants and the highest military leadership of an armed group, and who personally lead their subordinates in battle. These two categories of individuals become *ex-combatants* and *ex-commanders* when they have either been discharged from or voluntarily left the military faction they were serving in.⁴⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, the empirical material is based on the interviews with ex-commanders and fighters. I only refer to specific interviews when I use direct quotes.

Findings in previous research has highlighted the difficulties of gathering high quality and systematic data on illicit activities such as the drug economy.⁴¹ Even though this study seeks to overcome this problem using source anonymity and data generated from interviews with well over 200 individuals, it is important not to dismiss potential biases. Due to the social stigma attached to drug use, the interviewees have incentives to downplay their own involvement in both using and trading drugs. For these reasons, all numbers should be seen as indications and trends, rather than empirical truths.

War and peace in Liberia

War, command structures, and drugs

When Charles Taylor and his NPFL launched their rebellion in 1989, drug trade and addiction took new dimensions in Liberia. This was due to two reasons. First, from an early start, the war degenerated into warlordism, which made it easier for drug operators to gain a foothold in the country. This development was facilitated by the stationing of Nigerian peacekeepers. In fact, using their connection to Nigerian drug barons, members of the former became key providers of drugs – such as cocaine, marijuana, and amphetamines – in Liberia.⁴² Links to the international drug trade also continued after the 1996 Abuja Peace Accord, Taylor's electoral victory in 1997, and during the 1999–2003 civil war (the latter pitted LURD and Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), against the regime of President Taylor – often referred to as the Government of Liberia (GoL) and primarily composed of ex-NPFL leaders and fighters). As president, Taylor appears to have allied himself with Dutch drug dealers and allowed the country to be used as a transit point for hashish smuggling.⁴³

The second reason for why drugs played an increasingly important role during the war, was that the fighting created a large domestic demand for illegal substances. Using drugs became a vital coping mechanism for combatants. A common explanation for taking drugs – such as cocaine and crack-cocaine ('Italian white') – was to become 'brave' and 'feel strong'. The role drugs had in overcoming fear was lucidly expressed by one ex-NPFL combatant:

Yes, sometimes we smoke, yeah we smoke, drink sometime we take something to be active, even fighting ... you can't feel it. Firing at our enemy and to get that way through to capture him. So that we had to take some things to go our way.⁴⁴

Others talked about the need to 'look mad', in order to intimidate opponents. Interestingly, the ex-fighters differed in their narratives concerning whether it was their commanders, or even Taylor, who wanted to make them 'brave' or 'look mad', or whether this was their own wish. Such variations in narratives can probably partly be explained by different coping strategies; by assigning blame to their wartime leaders, it is possible for ex-fighters to

distance themselves from violence they have committed against others during episodes of intoxication. Aggressiveness was, however, not the only state of mind that fighters sought to achieve. Just as vital was 'numbness', both vis-à-vis feelings of remorse and physical pain caused by injury. 'Numbness' was particularly attained by taking various sleeping pills ('bubbles' or 'ten-ten').

Of the 142 ex-combatants interviewed in the egocentric analyses, 46% stated that they employed drugs during the war. In reality, this number may have been higher when considering that 21% of the respondents declined to answer. Studies conducted after the first civil war, point to similar levels of substance abuse, where an estimated 50–60% of the ex-fighters were believed to have taken drugs.⁴⁵ When looking at which type of substances that were used, marijuana was by far the most popular (taken by 65% of those ex-combatants who stated that they did drugs), followed by sleeping pills (26%), cocaine (22%) and crack-cocaine (20%). An additional 11% referred to 'drugs', without specifying the type.

Interestingly, when asked from where they received the drugs, 65% of the ex-fighters – who stated that they employed drugs – said that it was their commanders who had supplied them. Of these, 55% claimed that the latter, in turn, had received the drugs via supplies that came from the headquarters, while only 4% indicated that their superiors had attained the substances through other means, such as personally purchasing the drugs. An additional 41%, did not provide any information about where their commanders had received the drugs. Irrespective of the original source, the fact that commanders *de facto* controlled such a large portion of the distribution, underlines the central role played by command structures in the creation of wartime drug abuse. Having said this, it is vital to stress that some fighters had their own means to access drugs, such as stealing them from civilian cultivators or traders (13%), buying them from dealers (12%), and capturing them from the enemy (9%).

When disaggregating the empirical data, it becomes clear that there were important factional variations in the above-mentioned trends. For instance, drug use was much more common amongst ex-NPFL fighters. While 63% of the latter declared that they had taken drugs during the war, the corresponding figure for their LURD counterparts was only 22%. One explanation for this is that NPFL had access to a more advanced logistics systems, which could deliver various drugs to the front lines (see below for more information). In addition, ex-NPFL fighters were much more dependent on their commanders in order to gain access to drugs. In fact, all interviewed ex-NPFL combatants stated that at least some of their drugs came from the former. Most of these substances (at least 54%) were distributed by the commanders on behalf of their military leaders via logistical channels. A common narrative amongst ex-NPFL fighters was that the drugs were 'flown in' or 'sent by Taylor', indicating a belief that it was the will of their leader to intoxicate them. For instance, one ex-NPFL fighter explained how Taylor used to send 'whole bags' of marijuana and bubbles to front line troops.⁴⁶ The centrality of command structures is further underlined by the fact that the second most common drug source – purchasing – was employed by a mere 15% of the NPFL combatants.

The situation was markedly different for LURD fighters, who were largely compelled to acquire drugs on their own. In fact, parasitical strategies were most central; while 69% of the interviewees (who stated that they used drugs) declared that they obtained drugs by stealing from civilians, 46% indicated that looting enemy supplies was also a common source. Perhaps most interestingly, only 31% of the ex-LURD fighters received drugs from their commanders. The fact that command structures played a much larger role in ex-NPFL fighters' drug

acquisition was probably due to the fact that their faction controlled the reins of power. Institutional control and international recognition arguably facilitated efforts by GoL leaders to buy and distribute drugs. This was not an option for LURD, who largely lived off the land and the infrequent supplies provided by their Guinean sponsors.

The Taylor regime's control of state institutions and greater access to international actors also meant that they had an easier time acquiring and distributing heavier drugs. For instance, even if marijuana was the most commonly used substance amongst ex-NPFL fighters (67% of those who said that they used drugs), as many as 27% took crack-cocaine, while 25% used sleeping pills and 25% cocaine. The experiences of the latter were in stark contrast to that of their ex-LURD counterparts. Lacking access to state institutions and with less international connections, it was difficult for the latter to get their hands on more intoxicating drugs. A mere 8% of the ex-LURD fighters – who took drugs – indicated that they had access to cocaine. In fact, within LURD cocaine seems to have been reserved for commanders. In addition, no ex-LURD interviewee said that they used crack-cocaine. The only exception was sleeping pills, which were employed by 30%. However, these were generally captured from government soldiers. Instead, most ex-LURD fighters were confined to marijuana – employed by 92% – which could be more readily acquired from local communities.

Even if evidence suggests that the Taylor regime systematically distributed drugs to its fighters, it is less clear exactly why it did so. Although respondents often referred to Taylor's desire to make them 'brave', it is questionable whether drug use actually increased military efficiency. There is ample evidence of how 'high' soldiers behaved recklessly. At times, this realisation seems to have forced the regime to rethink its policy towards drugs. According to one ex-NPFL combatant, his unit stopped receiving cocaine when the soldiers were unable to perform. Instead, they were given cane juice – a locally brewed liquor.

Providing drugs should probably rather be seen as part of a larger strategy, where logistic systems were employed to ensure group cohesion. A major challenge for all armed groups was how to prevent combatants from deserting or defecting. One way to ensure loyalty was to provide regular access to goods that fighters demanded, such as food, ammunition, money, and alcohol.⁴⁷ Since taking drugs constituted a vital coping mechanism for fighters, it was rational to also provide access to such substances. In these logistic systems, commanders played a key role; it was they who were mandated to distribute goods, including drugs, sent from the headquarters. However, due to the patrimonial character of Liberia's armed factions, all commanders did not receive the same amount or kind of supplies. In fact, there was often a fierce competition between commanders when it came to allocation of goods. The rationale for such in-fighting was simple; with more supplies, commanders attracted more fighters, and subsequently increased their chances for social advancement. From this perspective, it was beneficial for commanders to provide drugs to their subordinates in order to be perceived as good providers. There is, however, little evidence suggesting that commanders forced their subordinates to take drugs. In fact, of the ex-fighters who used the latter, only 3% stated that they used drugs under duress. This figure may be higher if one takes into account the evasive phenomenon of peer pressure. It was particularly difficult for child combatants to withstand such pressure, as is indicated in this depiction by one ex-NPFL combatant:

The war was fought under the influence of drugs You take one joint and eat less ... You become brave and hard. I was recruited small ... I was captured when I was still a child. I grew up in that life, taking drugs.⁴⁸

To what extent did military leaders employ command structures to profit from the trade in drugs? Even if there were such tendencies, they were dwarfed by the much more profitable exploitation of natural resources. In fact, a key objective of all factions was to use their manpower to conquer land where diamonds, gold, rubber, and timber could be extracted, as well as ports and border areas from where the latter could be exported. Having said this, evidence suggests that NPFL at least partly financed their struggle by exporting marijuana.⁴⁹

Peace, ex-command structures, and drugs

After the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2003, drug trade and abuse continued to thrive in Liberia. Just as during the war, international drug syndicates – especially dealing with cocaine and hashish – had a presence in the country.⁵⁰ This was not confined to Nigerian and Dutch nationals; evidence suggests that Latin American smugglers also sought to establish themselves in Liberia.⁵¹ In addition, there was also a booming domestic and regional market for marijuana, prompting farming of the latter in counties such as Bong, Lofa, and Nimba.⁵²

These actors had a ready market amongst ex-fighters who had become addicts or socially accustomed to drugs during the wars. In fact, of the ex-fighters interviewed in the egocentric analyses, approximately 28% stated that they were using drugs. This was an 18% drop compared to wartime levels. Perhaps most importantly, there was a shift from heavier drugs to marijuana. In fact, while the vast majority employed the latter, only a small minority abused crack-cocaine.⁵³ In addition, no one reported taking cocaine or sleeping pills.

Evidence also suggests that there was some correlation between war- and peacetime drug use. Just as during the war, drugs were more prevalent amongst ex-NPFL, than ex-LURD combatants. In fact, while 47% of the former took some sort of drug, the corresponding figure for ex-LURD fighters was only 2%. In reality, the latter figure was probably higher. For instance, one of the ex-LURD commanders studied in the egocentric analyses – the miner – claimed that he had assisted several of his ex-fighters to get clean. This could, however, not be corroborated.

Ex-fighters who employed drugs did not necessarily view it as a problem. This was especially true for those who smoked marijuana, a more socially acceptable and less addictive drug. In fact, a common pastime amongst ex-combatant friends was to ‘smoke’, ‘share fun’, and ‘lecture’. Even those who used heavier substances, such as crack-cocaine, showed little remorse. The latter was sometimes seen as an important coping mechanism, that helped ex-fighters endure the heavy burden of every-day hustling. When explaining why he smoked crack-cocaine, one ex-NPFL fighter explained:

Sometimes when I don't take it, I can be feeling if you take it gives you power to walk long distances and do things over time. If you don't take it you will not be able to do it over time ... it will take away your power.

Of the interviewed ex-combatants who had used drugs after the war, it was only those who had become sober that talked about their abuse in negative terms. Commonly, these ex-fighters would depict themselves as having lived ‘bad’ or ‘wicked’ lives before they changed their ways, often through the help of their families, friends, or religious communities.

With the arrival of peace, drug distribution was largely decentralised. Unlike during the war, when illicit substances – at least for ex-NPFL combatants – constituted an integral part

of wartime patronage networks, ex-fighters had to acquire drugs through their own means. This meant buying drugs from a wide spectrum of dealers, ranging from ordinary Liberian civilians and Nigerians, to ex-commanders and other ex-fighters. While buying marijuana was not that expensive – one ‘joint’ cost around 0.15 USD – financing heavier drug abuse was a major enterprise. In fact, one dose of crack-cocaine cost as much as four USD. What was worse, three or four doses were needed to ensure a continuous ‘buzz’ throughout the day. For many Liberians, who lived on less than five USD per day, it was subsequently not possible to abuse crack-cocaine without engaging in crime. In fact, some of the interviewed ex-fighters who took the latter substance, made their living through illicit activities, such as pickpocketing or card-hustling (‘Three-card Monte’). The post-war transition from heavier drugs to marijuana can probably partially be explained by this commercialisation of drugs. Without access to military elites, who had *de facto* financed ex-fighters’ wartime abuse, it was not economically feasible for the latter to take heavier drugs. This is especially true when considering that the very rationale for employing heavy substances – coping with the pressures of war – had disappeared. In addition, ex-commanders appear to have been unwilling or unable to step in and finance their ex-fighters’ drug abuse. In this sense, drug consumption reverted to what is more normal in peacetime African societies – use of lighter substances such as marijuana.⁵⁴

Drugs did, however, not only cease to function as a ‘glue’ that bond ex-commanders and fighters together; evidence suggests that drugs had an outright negative effect on informal command structures. First, many ex-commanders were reluctant to have ‘high’ ex-fighters around them. The latter constituted a social liability for ex-commanders seeking to carve out a peacetime platform for themselves (community members often frowned upon having such associations) and drug-using ex-fighters were also a security risk. In fact, there was always a risk that frustrated ex-combatant addicts attacked or robbed ex-commanders who refused to help them. This was particularly true for ex-combatants who employed crack-cocaine. The situation was different when it came to marijuana. In fact, several of the interviewed ex-commanders explained how they sometimes smoked marijuana and hung-out with their ex-fighters. Second, there were more efficient ways for ex-commanders to ensure the loyalty of their ex-fighters, than to provide them with drugs. A key strategy was to offer economic patronage, ranging from money, food, and clothes, to medicine and employment. The latter resource was particularly valuable. After the war, many ex-fighters lacked the connections needed to land jobs. Thanks to their links to different elites some ex-commanders could recommend their former subordinates to different employers. Oftentimes, ex-commanders who succeeded in establishing themselves as such broker figures, had a steady stream of ex-combatant callers asking to be ‘connected’. Finally, even ex-commanders engaged in the drug trade struggled to keep ex-combatant addicts in their networks. In fact, there was a fierce competition between different dealers, and it was not uncommon that ex-fighters preferred to go to other suppliers who offered a better price.

It was, however, not only drug abuse that had a detrimental effect on ex-command structures. Evidence also suggests that participation in the drug trade had a similar effect. There was, for instance, a social cost associated with befriending ex-commanders working as drug distributors. By merely visiting the house of the latter, community members assumed that ex-fighters were there to purchase illegal substances. To avoid such social stigma, ‘clean’ ex-fighters often preferred to shun ex-military superiors involved in the drug business. Another factor that put a wedge between such ex-commanders and ex-fighters, was that

the former were often reluctant to hire drug addicts – deemed as unreliable – as pushers. This constituted a problem since it was, as previously mentioned, foremost ex-combatant users that continued to befriend drug dealing ex-superiors. With limited employment opportunities to offer their ex-combatant clients, ex-commanders in the drug trade appear to have struggled to uphold their ex-military networks.

A tale of two ex-commanders

To provide a more detailed understanding of the destructive role drug distribution and consumption can have on ex-command structures, the post-war experiences of two ex-commanders is presented in the following – a drug dealer (Adam) and a broker of patronage (Desmond).

The social cost of dealing. By the end of the second civil war, Adam had established himself as a high-ranking Taylor ‘general’, said to have controlled more than 500 fighters. After demobilising in 2004, Adam settled down in one of Monrovia’s less affluent quarters and launched a career in the drug business. Using his relations with a Liberian businessman, Adam distributed crack-cocaine on behalf of the latter. Most of the actual selling was, however, done by three pushers, none of which had fought under him during the war. When asked why he did not employ any of his ex-fighters, Adam explained that: ‘I do not want to be bothered with them. I do not want to be in the same habit (drug addiction) like them [...] I do not want them to come very close to me’. Put differently, Adam did not trust his ex-fighters due to their addiction.⁵⁵ Many of his customers were, however, ex-fighters from his unit. Although Adam could not afford to give crack-cocaine for free, he did often provide discounts or merchandise on credit. Even if this made him popular amongst some of his ex-subordinates, it was not enough to fend off competition from the upstream of other dealers operating in his community. As a consequence, several of the users in Adam’s network preferred to go to other distributors.

The nature of Adam’s business enterprise put a limit on the size of his ex-military network. In fact, Adam was only in regular contact (at least once per month), with 12 of his ex-fighters. There are two reasons for why Adam struggled to retain his wartime status. First, due to the social stigma associated with interacting with a drug operator – it was a well-known fact in the community how Adam made his money – ‘clean’ ex-fighters tended to shy away. In fact, 67% of the ex-fighters in Adam’s network took some kind of drug, and half of these abused crack-cocaine. These high usage rates probably explain Adam’s response when asked why his ex-fighters continued to befriend him: ‘The reason why they still contact me is because of the kind of business that I am doing.’⁵⁶ Second, besides access to drugs, Adam had little to offer his ex-fighters. Even if Adam at times provided them with small money, loans, food, clothes, and cigarettes, he could not offer them employment opportunities. This was not only due to his scepticism about hiring his ex-fighters as drug peddlers, but also a function of the limited elite connections that he had. Without the latter, Adam could not broker jobs on behalf of his ex-fighters. As a consequence, the latter had few incentives to continue to pay homage to Adam.

Brokering jobs and retaining wartime loyalties. During the war, Desmond fashioned himself as a ‘commanding general’ and controlled a pro-Taylor militia unit composed of 150–200 fighters. After his militia was disbanded in 2004, Desmond settled down in a mid-income

area of Monrovia. In order to support himself, Desmond engaged in a number of economic activities; he became head of security of the Ministry of Public Works, had a taxi-car that he let one of his ex-fighters drive on his behalf, head-hunted security personnel for businessmen, and at times worked as a body guard/assistant for a senator. Even if Desmond did not personally use drugs, several of his former undermen did. In fact, 38% of the ex-fighters in his network stated that they used drugs after the war. However, none of these employed heavier substances, such as crack-cocaine. Instead, all smoked marijuana.

The fact that drugs did not have an economic or social function for Desmond, did not affect the size of his ex-command structure; the latter was composed of as many as 28 ex-fighters. Of these Desmond met as many as 68% on a weekly basis. Many of the latter made it a habit to pass by his house. During these meetings, gossip and information was shared, and ex-fighters often received small sums of money, food, or used clothes. However, the most important reason for why Desmond's former subordinates continued to pay homage to him, was that he was a well-reputed job-broker. Because Desmond was a respected figure in the community, local businessmen, politicians, and other community members often turned to him when they needed labourers (e.g. security guards, plumbers, shop-keepers). Desmond's brokerage capacity was lucidly articulated by one of his ex-fighters. When asked why he continued to interact with Desmond he declared that 'people know that Desmond is a star, a big man, they usually go to him to ask "Do you have a guy" [somebody that they can employ]'.⁵⁷

Concluding discussion

The point of departure for this article is an apparent lacuna in the study of post-war reconstruction and the drug economy in West Africa. Not only have previous studies assumed that ex-command structures play a key role in the distribution of drugs in post-civil war societies, it is often held that such networks thrive in environments that are heavily penetrated by the trade in and use of drugs. The problem is that such claims have not been assessed using systematically collected empirical data. Experiences from Liberia highlight that such assumptions may not only be incorrect, but also risk generating faulty policy recommendations concerning the benefits of up-rooting lingering ex-military networks. In fact, ex-commanders and fighters were only one of many actors engaged in post-war Liberia's drug economy. Drug trading networks were rather a configuration of divergent actors, including ordinary Liberian civilians who had played a minimal role during the war, police officers,⁵⁸ security personnel,⁵⁹ foreign citizens (particularly Nigerians), as well as ex-military personnel. What more, ex-command structures associated with the trade and consumption of drugs tended to be weak and faltering. The social stigma attached to drug abuse – especially of heavier types – meant that 'clean' ex-commanders and fighters often shunned former colleagues who were dealers or addicts. As a result, ex-command structures associated with heavier substances tended to disintegrate. This was in sharp contrast to networks where ex-commanders were active in more legitimate economic sectors and where the latter had the capacity to 'broker' jobs on behalf of their former subordinates. Such ex-military networks were often more resilient, since they had a stronger economic function. In addition, drug-dealing ex-commanders were largely unsuccessful in their attempts to retain influence over their ex-fighters by manipulating the wartime drug addiction of the latter. For some, the very rationale for abusing heavier substances had disappeared with the cessation of hostilities

(coping with the pressures of war). For those who continued to employ hard drugs, the decentralisation of the drug economy meant that there was a multitude of suppliers – besides their former superiors – to choose from.

These findings provide important insights for the literature on DDR. It underlines the risks of securitising ex-command structures solely based on the observation that *some* ex-commanders and fighters – operating in marginal spaces – engage in illicit economic activities, such as drug dealing. Even if such depictions are not factually wrong, they risk generating biased assumptions that ex-command structures thrive in spaces of marginality. However, by broadening the scope of enquiry and comparing ex-military networks in different socio-economic milieus, it becomes clear that such structures are often more prosperous in more official settings. This indicates that efforts to uproot strong ex-command structures are unlikely to address the problem of drug trade and addiction in post-civil war societies. On the contrary, such strategies may prove counterproductive due to the role ex-military networks have in providing employment to ex-combatants.

A crucial question is how well these findings travel to other war-afflicted countries, particularly in West Africa. Presumably, similar dynamics are most likely to be observed in societies, such as Liberia, where the trade in drugs had a limited role in financing armed groups and patronage politics plays a key role in sustaining citizens' socio-economic well-being. In such countries, it is arguably less socially acceptable and economic profitable for ex-commanders and fighters to engage in drug business. The latter are, instead, more likely to seek to attach themselves to governing elites who can assist them in gaining access to jobs, money, and schooling. The situation may, however, be different in countries, such as Colombia, where armed groups have a long history of profiting from the drug trade. In such contexts, it may be more economically gainful and socially tolerated for ex-military personnel to engage in the distribution and selling of drugs.

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Notes

1. Drugs are held as psychoactive substances and their precursors whose production, distribution, sale, and use is forbidden by law or limited to medical and pharmaceutical channels. This definition has been derived from World Health Organization ('Lexicon of Alcohol', 25, 41). It is important to note that countries vary in which substances are classified as illegal.
2. Bøås, "Castles in the Sand"; Christensen, "Shadow Soldiering"; Ellis, "West Africa's", 194; Lewis, "Casamance Conflict"; Utas, "Sweet Battlefields"; Vigh, "From Warlord."
3. The terms ex-command structures, ex-combatant networks, and ex-military networks are employed interchangeably.
4. Christensen, "Shadow Soldiering"; Themner, *Violence in Post-Conflict Societies*; Utas, "Sweet Battlefields."
5. Nilsson, "Reintegrating Ex-Combatants."
6. A popular narrative amongst NGO representatives in both Liberia and Sierra Leone was that ex-commanders were able to continue to ensure the loyalty of child ex-combatants by offering them drugs. In turn, this also ensured that they had access to a loyal pool of clients. Observation based on fieldwork by the author in Liberia and Sierra Leone.
7. Christensen, "Shadow Soldiering"; Themner, *Violence in Post-Conflict Societies*; Utas, "Sweet Battlefields."
8. In this study, I define addiction as 'the repeated use of a psychoactive substance or substances, to the extent that the user is periodically or chronically intoxicated, shows a compulsion to take the preferred substance (or substances), has great difficulty in voluntarily ceasing or modifying substance use, and exhibits determination to obtain psychoactive substances by almost any means' (United Nations, 'Terminology and Information').
9. Carrier and Klantschnig, "Illicit Livelihoods"; Ellis, "West Africa's"; Laudati, "Securing (In)security"; Suckling, "Chain Work"; Vorrath, "From War to Illicit."
10. Cox et al., "Religion, Peacebuilding, and Social."
11. Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). See <http://www.ucdp.uu.se/>.
12. Collier and Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance"; Kaldor, *New and old wars*; Kaplan, "The Coming of Anarchy."
13. Kan, *Drugs and Contemporary Warfare*.
14. Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*; Gberie, *A Dirty War*, 137, 149; Peters, "Footpaths to Reintegration," 67, 72; Keen *Conflict and Collusion*.
15. Gberie, *A Dirty War*, 149.
16. Keen, *Conflict and Collusion*, 76, 105, 231; Peters, "Footpaths to Reintegration," 67.
17. Collier and Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance."
18. Ellis, "West Africa's"; Lewis, "Casamance Conflict"; Vigh, "From Warlord."
19. Lewis, "Casamance Conflict"; Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 169.
20. Ellis, "West Africa's"; Kan, *Drugs and Contemporary Warfare*; Reno, "Liberia: Durable Illicit Power"; Vorrath, "From War to Illicit."
21. Ellis, "West Africa's"; UNODC, "Cocaine Trafficking"; Vigh, "From Warlord."
22. Ellis, "West Africa's", 173.
23. Vorrath, "From War to Illicit."
24. Christensen, "Shadow Soldiering"; Kan, *Drugs and Contemporary Warfare*; Nussio and Howe, "What if the FARC"; Themner, *Violence in Post-conflict Societies*.
25. Stratfor, "The Tuaregs."
26. Christensen, "Shadow Soldiering"; Themner, *Violence in Post-conflict Societies*.

27. Nilsson, "Reintegrating Ex-Combatants."
28. Christensen, "Shadow Soldiering"; Themnér, *Violence in Post-Conflict Societies*; Utas, "Sweet Battlefields."
29. IRIN, "Rehabilitating Child Soldiers"; Keen, *Conflict and Collusion*; Utas, "Sweet Battlefields."
30. Observation based on fieldwork by the author in Liberia and Sierra Leone.
31. See note 6 above.
32. Carrier and Klantschnig, "Illicit Livelihoods."
33. Carrier and Klantschnig, "Illicit Livelihoods"; Laudati, "Securing (In)security"; Suckling, "Chain Work."
34. Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*; Utas, "Sweet Battlefields."
35. Utas, "Sweet Battlefields."
36. Ellis, "West Africa's"; Reno, "Liberia: Durable Illicit Power"; Vorrath, "From War to Illicit."
37. This project was conducted in collaboration with Mats Utas.
38. The names of these towns are not mentioned, in order to ensure the anonymity of the informants.
39. The research assistants were Pindarous Allison, Johnson Borh, Arthur Johnson, Ilmari Käihkö, Mariam Persson, Allan Quee, and Morlee Zawoo.
40. Themnér, "Former Mid-Level Commanders."
41. Carrier and Klantschnig, "Illicit Livelihoods"; Laudati, "Securing (In)security."
42. Ellis, "West Africa's," 170, 172, 183; Keen, *Conflict and Collusion*, 130.
43. Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 170; Utas, "Sweet Battlefields," 11.
44. Interview with ex-NPFL combatant 1, Monrovia, September 15, 2011.
45. Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 134.
46. Interview with ex-NPFL combatant 2, Monrovia, November 15, 2012.
47. Käihkö, "Taylor Must Go."
48. Interview with ex-NPFL combatant 3, Monrovia, September 6, 2011.
49. Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 91; "West Africa's," 169.
50. Ellis, "West Africa's," 191; Vorrath, "From War to Illicit," 20, 21.
51. Reno, "Liberia: Durable Illicit Power," 114.
52. Vorrath, "From War to Illicit," 22.
53. It is not always easy to distinguish between marijuana and crack-cocaine. Both substances are generally inhaled via smoking and sometimes crack-cocaine is mixed with marijuana. Complicating things further people often talk about 'smokes', which mostly refers to marijuana, but can sometimes mean cigarettes or crack-cocaine. I am therefore reluctant to use specific percentages when describing the distribution in consumption between marijuana and crack-cocaine.
54. Carrier and Klantschnig, "Illicit Livelihoods," 175.
55. Interview with Adam, Monrovia, Liberia, November 21, 2012.
56. Ibid.
57. Interview with ex-NPFL combatant 4, Monrovia, Liberia, September 7, 2011.
58. Vorrath, "From War to Illicit," 21.
59. Ibid.

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