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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Peacebuilding Recipient to Regional Contributor?

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Abstract

For more than a decade after Liberia's civil unrest ended, it served as a clear case study in international peacebuilding and conflict studies. This article asks whether, between 2015 and 2025, the country began to contribute to the regional security arrangements from which it had benefited, and what limited that shift. Research has examined Liberia as a site of intervention and ECOWAS as a security institution, but rarely the regional role of a small state after stabilization. The study uses an interpretivist qualitative case design. It draws on eight semi-structured key-informant interviews conducted in 2026 with three government or diplomatic officials, three security-sector representatives, and two civil-society or governance practitioners. It also draws on fourteen dated documents from the Government of Liberia, ECOWAS, the United Nations, the Mano River Union, and the press, used to verify interview claims. Coding followed liberal institutionalism, Regional Security Complex Theory, and post-conflict peacebuilding theory. The documents confirm that Liberian soldiers served in Mali, almost entirely under the UN mission, from 2013 to 2023, growing to about 150 personnel, and that President Sirleaf chaired ECOWAS during the 2016 Gambia mediation. Respondents also cited cross-border police cooperation and the peaceful transfers of power in 2017 and 2023, and named dependence on external funding as the main constraint. The findings record participant perceptions, partly corroborated by documents, rather than measured regional effects. They show a real but modest contribution, channeled through institutions and dependent on outside resources.

Keywords: *ECOWAS; peacekeeping; regional security; post-conflict peacebuilding; small-state diplomacy*

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1. Introduction

After a prolonged conflict, Liberia emerged in 2003 from fourteen years of intermittent civil war (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, n.d.) as one of West Africa's most heavily assisted states (Mross, 2025). ECOWAS troops, a United Nations mission that remained for nearly fifteen years, bilateral donors, and Liberian civil society all contributed to rebuilding its security forces, courts, and political institutions (Blair, 2020; Ministry of National Defense of Liberia, n.d.; United Nations Mission in Liberia, 2018; United Nations Security Council, 2003). Scholarship soon followed the intervention. It has asked how peacekeepers, donors and local actors kept the country from returning to war (Blair, 2020; Mross, 2025) and how far outside engagement substituted for weak domestic institutions (Mross, 2025). That literature remains essential. It leaves open a later question: whether Liberia, once stabilized, began to contribute to the regional security arrangements from which it had benefited.

The decade from 2015 to 2025 makes that question timely. The UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) handed security responsibility to national authorities on 30 June 2016 and closed on 30 March 2018 (Butty, 2016; United Nations Mission in Liberia, 2018). During the same years, Liberian soldiers served in the UN mission in Mali (Executive Mansion of Liberia, 2023), Liberia's president chaired ECOWAS during the 2016–2017 Gambian crisis (ECOWAS Commission, 2016), and the country completed two peaceful transfers of executive power, in 2018 and 2024, after the 2017 and 2023 elections (Busari, 2023; Freedom House, 2019). These transfers took place while much of the region moved in the opposite direction.

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Military coups in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso marked what Gyimah-Boadi (2022) called West Africa's "authoritarian turn"; Niger followed in July 2023 (UN News, 2023), and in January 2025 the three Sahelian juntas completed their withdrawal from ECOWAS (Olugbode, 2025). Liberia's election in June 2025 to a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2026–2027 falls just outside this article's window and is not treated as evidence. It does show how far the country's international position had moved since the immediate postwar years (Permanent Mission of Liberia to the United Nations, 2025).

This article asks three questions. What did Liberia contribute to regional security and conflict resolution between 2015 and 2025? Through which diplomatic and institutional channels did it act? What domestic conditions limited that role? Behind them lies a theoretical question: can the post-conflict experience of a small state become a resource for regional security cooperation, or does continued dependence on outside money and expertise prevent the shift from becoming durable?

The article makes three arguments. First, Liberia's regional role is institutionally mediated. Respondents rarely described Liberian action taken alone; they placed the country's contributions within ECOWAS, UN peacekeeping, the Mano River Union (MRU) and bilateral diplomacy. Second, the study separates direct operational contributions, such as troop deployments, from reputational assets, such as peaceful elections, which respondents see as domestic achievements that lend Liberia credibility in regional debates. Third, institutional capacity constrains the role, above all, through dependence on external funding and technical support. The result is neither a success story nor continued recipient status. It is a bounded transition.

The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it documents the post-stabilization role of a state that the literature has mostly studied as a recipient. Conceptually, it offers working definitions that separate participation, contribution, influence, and impact, so that claims about small states' regional roles can be stated at the level the evidence supports. Methodologically, it pairs elite interviews with a dated documentary record and reports, claim by claim, which the documents confirm and which they do not.

1.1 Key Concepts and Indicators

Claims about a small state's regional role often slide from presence to power. To prevent that slide, the article uses the four concepts in Table 1, each with indicators that distinguish it from the others. The concepts form a ladder: each higher level requires the evidence of the level below plus something more. This study's evidence reaches the first two levels; it does not reach the third or fourth.

Table 1. Operational definitions and indicators

Concept	Working definition	Indicators used in this study	Evidence that would be needed but is not claimed here
Participation	Liberia is present in a regional or multilateral security process.	Membership; attendance at summits; offices or seats held; representation in secretariats.	—
Contribution	Liberia supplies personnel, services, mediation or information to a collective security task. Operational contributions are deployments and joint mechanisms; reputational contributions are domestic records that Liberian actors invoke in regional diplomacy.	Personnel deployed, with dates and size; mediation roles held; participation in formal cross-border mechanisms; documented use of national experience in regional fora.	—
Influence	Liberia changes what other actors decide.	—	Documented agenda-setting; proposals adopted; acknowledgement by ECOWAS, MRU or neighbouring-state officials.
Impact	A change in regional security outcomes that can be attributed to Liberia's contribution.	—	Comparative or counterfactual evidence linking Liberian action to reduced violence or resolved disputes.

A regional contributor, in this article, is a state that makes operational contributions to collective security tasks in its region, through recognized institutions, over several years. The term describes what a state does, not what it achieves. "Regional" refers to West Africa as a geographic security complex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). A UN operation in a West African state therefore counts as a contribution to West African security, but the article keeps it separate from operations led by ECOWAS itself, because the two channels say different things about Liberia's standing within the regional organization.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and sets out how each theoretical lens shaped coding. Section 3 describes the methods, including the documentary corpus and ethics. Section 4 reports the results, and Section 5 interprets them, sets out limitations, and draws implications. Section 6 concludes.

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2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Liberia as a Recipient of Peacebuilding

Research on postwar Liberia has concentrated on what kept the country from returning to war. Comparative work supplies the starting point. Doyle and Sambanis (2006) show that peace after civil war depends on the balance between the depth of hostility, local capacity, and international capacity, and that multidimensional UN operations improve the odds. Fortna (2008) finds that peacekeepers reduce the risk of renewed war by changing belligerents' incentives and information, and Fortna et al. (2021) restate that, by most measures, peacekeeping has worked better than its reputation suggests. Liberian evidence fits this pattern but adds texture. Blair (2019, 2020) finds that contact with UNMIL personnel made Liberians more willing to take serious disputes to the police and courts. Mross (2025) shows that intense international engagement after 2003 eased the risks of democratizing after war by compensating for weak domestic institutions. Field experiments add that jobs for high-risk men reduced their involvement in illicit and mercenary work (Blattman & Annan, 2016), and that civic programmes shaped political participation (Mvukiyehe & Samii, 2017). Together these studies show that Liberia's peace had many sources. They also share a frame: Liberia is the place where intervention happens.

A second strand stresses local agency. The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace pressed armed factions toward the 2003 Accra talks through organized nonviolent protest (Adjei, 2021). Autesserre (2017) argues more broadly that peacebuilding succeeds when it builds on local knowledge and ownership, and her later critique of UN operations warns that top-down missions often miss the local drivers of conflict (Autesserre, 2019). This literature does not settle why the war ended; it shows that external intervention, local collective action and political bargaining interacted. This matters for this study because respondents' claims about "lessons" from Liberia draw on all three.

2.2 Regional Institutions and Post-Conflict Troop Contributors

A third body of work concerns ECOWAS, which grew from an economic community into a security actor with protocols on conflict prevention, democracy, and intervention. Hartmann (2017) shows how ECOWAS diplomacy, backed by a credible threat of force and broader international support, restored the 2017 Gambian election outcome. That case is relevant here because Liberia's president chaired the ECOWAS Authority during the crisis. Yet the regional organization's authority has also been tested. The 2020–2023 coups and the 2025 exits of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger showed the limits of its democratic norms (Gyimah-Boadi, 2022; Olugbode, 2025).

A fourth, smaller literature examines African states that move "from peacekept to peacekeeper". Fisher and Wilén (2022) show that post-conflict governments send troops abroad to rebuild and professionalize their armies with outside help, gain resources, and construct a new national identity as peacekeepers. Wilén (2018) warns that tying security-sector reform to troop contribution can favor quick, donor-funded pre-deployment training over harder domestic reform. This literature is the closest to the present study, but its main cases are Burundi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo, not Liberia.

2.3 The Gap

These studies meet but do not overlap. Liberia is well studied as a recipient, and ECOWAS is well studied as an institution. The troop-contributor literature explains why post-conflict states deploy, but has not examined Liberia's deployment or connected it to the country's diplomacy within ECOWAS and the MRU. What remains unexamined is Liberia's position after stabilization: whether, and in what form, its experience has turned into diplomatic participation, peacekeeping, cross-border cooperation, or lessons for others. The question is not whether Liberia has fully recovered, which this article does not claim, but whether recovery has produced a regional role and how that role can be assessed without overstating thin evidence.

2.4 Theoretical Lenses and How They Shaped Coding

The study uses three theories. Rather than describe them in parallel, this section states what each lens led the analysis to look for, which codes it produced, and what evidence would count against it. Table 2 summarizes the results.

Liberal institutionalism. Institutions lower the costs of cooperation by providing rules, forums, and information, and they let states coordinate even when no single state can impose order (Keohane, 1984). For a small state, institutions also serve as channels: they provide access to collective decisions that its material power alone could not secure. This lens led the analysis to code every reported Liberian action by the institution through which it occurred, and to ask whether the institution enabled the action. If Liberia had become a regional contributor, the lens predicts that its role would appear in collective mechanisms (peacekeeping, mediation, representation, joint border units) rather than in unilateral action. Accounts of independent Liberian power projection, or of institutions that made no difference, would count against it.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). RSCT holds that security concerns in a geographically connected region are so interlinked that one state's security cannot be understood apart from its neighbors' (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The Mano River basin illustrates the point: in the 1990s and early 2000s, war in Liberia spilled into Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, and fighters, refugees and weapons crossed those borders in both directions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This lens led the analysis to

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code threats that respondents treated as cross-border, the neighbors with whom Liberia cooperates, and formal border mechanisms. RSCT also allows outside powers to "penetrate" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The analysis therefore coded references to extra-regional actors, which became important when respondents explained constraints. Accounts that treated Liberia's security as purely national would count against the lens.

Post-conflict peacebuilding theory. This literature focuses on the processes that prevent renewed war: disarmament and reintegration, security-sector reform, reconciliation, credible elections and the rule of law (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006; Paris, 2004). It also warns against exporting templates that ignore local ownership (Autesserre, 2017; Paris, 2004). Elections are a contested element: Paris (2004) cautions that early elections can destabilize fragile states, while Matanock (2017) finds that settlements that bring former combatants into electoral politics are more likely to last. This lens led the analysis to code which parts of Liberia's recovery respondents presented as lessons, which conditions they attached, and which criticisms they made. Uncritical claims that Liberia is a template would count against the lens's emphasis on context.

Institutional capacity as a moderating condition. Across all three lenses, the analysis coded references to funding, staffing, training, and logistics. State capacity in Africa has long been constrained by the cost of projecting authority (Herbst, 2014), and Doyle and Sambanis (2006) treat local capacity as one side of their peacebuilding triangle. The study therefore treats capacity not as a fourth theory but as the condition that decides whether institutional access and post-conflict experience become operational contributions.

Table 2. How each lens informed coding

Lens	Guiding question	Codes applied	Disconfirming evidence
Liberal institutionalism	Through which institutions does Liberia act, and what do they make possible?	Institutional channel (ECOWAS, MRU, UN, AU); office or representation; collective mandate; regional protocols	Unilateral action; institutions described as irrelevant
Regional Security Complex Theory	Which threats and partners do respondents treat as interdependent?	Cross-border threat; neighbour cooperation; formal border mechanism; regional spillover; extra-regional actors	Security described as purely national
Post-conflict peacebuilding	Which parts of Liberia's recovery are offered as lessons, and on what conditions?	DDRR lesson; electoral transfer of power; security-sector reform; conditions for transfer; critique	Liberia presented as a template without conditions
Capacity (moderating condition)	What limits Liberia's ability to act on access and experience?	Funding dependence; staffing; training; logistics	Constraints absent or unrelated to capacity

2.5 Integrated Proposition

Taken together, the lenses yield one restrained proposition. Liberia's regional contribution should be strongest where three elements coincide: access to institutions, relevant post-conflict experience, and enough domestic capacity to turn commitments into action. Regional interdependence creates the need for cooperation; institutions provide the channels; post-conflict experience can supply credibility; and capacity decides whether participation becomes contribution.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

The study used a single-case qualitative design within an interpretivist approach. The design suits research on perceptions, institutional practice, and lessons drawn from experience, aiming to explain a case rather than estimate statistical relationships (Gerring, 2017). The study treats Liberia as one case within the ECOWAS and Mano River

Union security environment. The analytical window is 2015–2025. Earlier events, such as the 2013 start of the Mali deployment, are reported where they explain later activity.

3.2 Participants and Recruitment

The study used purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball referrals, to recruit informants with direct professional knowledge of Liberia's diplomacy or security institutions. The researcher identified initial informants through professional networks in government and civil society, and asked them to suggest colleagues. Eight people took part (Table 3). Six reported at least eleven years of relevant professional experience, and all eight reported at least six. The sample size was judged against the study's narrow aim, the specialist knowledge of participants and the depth of the dialogue, consistent with the "information power" approach to qualitative sampling (Malterud et al., 2016).

Table 3. Interview sample

Participant category	Number
Government or diplomatic officials	3
Security-sector representatives	3
Civil-society or governance practitioners	2
Total	8

The original target population was broader, including former peacebuilding practitioners, international organization staff, and academic experts. We did not

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reach any of these groups within the time available. This gap is substantive: six of the eight participants worked in government or security institutions, so the findings may lean toward Liberian institutional self-assessment.

3.3 Interview Data Collection

Interviews took place in 2026 and followed a semi-structured guide organized around five themes: diplomatic engagement, regional security contribution, internal constraints, transferable lessons, and policy implications. The researcher administered the guide through an online form (Google Forms) with open-ended questions and asked follow-up questions when an answer needed clarification. The researcher assigned each participant a code (P1–P8) at the point of collection and removed identifying details before analysis. Quotations in this article are attributed by code and professional category only.

3.4 Documentary Corpus

Documents served one purpose: to check, claim by claim, what respondents said about events and institutions. The corpus was assembled with three selection criteria. First, a document had to come from an authoritative source: the Government of Liberia, ECOWAS, the United Nations or the MRU, or, when no official text was publicly available, an established news organization. Second, it had to include a date or, for an undated government web page, describe dated events. Third, it had to bear on a specific claim made in the interviews. The researcher searched official websites and news archives for each claim about a datable event or institution and recorded the source, date, and finding. The final corpus contains fourteen documents: eight official sources and six news reports (Table 4). The numbers in Table 4 are used only to cross-reference Table 5; in the text, every document is cited in author–date form and listed in full in the references. One news report, from March 2026, falls after the study window and is used only to explain why a respondent's border claim was set aside.

Table 4. Documentary corpus

No.	Citation	Date	Type	Claim checked
D1	Embassy of the Republic of Liberia in the United States (2016)	6 June 2016	Official	Sirleaf elected ECOWAS Chair
D2	ECOWAS Commission (2016)	14 December 2016	Official	ECOWAS mediation in The Gambia
D3	FrontPageAfrica (2017)	1 June 2017	News (signed by a Liberian embassy official)	Record of Sirleaf's ECOWAS chairmanship
D4	Butty (2016), Voice of America	7 July 2016	News	UNMIL security handover
D5	United Nations Mission in Liberia (2018)	30 March 2018	Official	UNMIL closure
D6	United Nations (2023), SC/15341	30 June 2023	Official	MINUSMA mandate terminated
D7	Executive Mansion of Liberia (2023)	21 December 2023	Official	End of AFL deployment in Mali
D8	Ministry of National Defense of Liberia (n.d.)	Undated; events to 2020	Official	Size and rotations of the AFL contingent
D9	United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (2019)	26 November 2019	Official	MRU Joint Border Security and Confidence Building Units
D10	Ehui (2025), Agence Ivoirienne de Presse	30 March 2025	News (national news agency)	New MRU border units on the Liberia–Côte d'Ivoire border
D11	Olugbode (2025), ThisDay	29 January 2025	News (quoting ECOWAS Commission)	Sahelian states' exit from ECOWAS
D12	Permanent Mission of Liberia to the United Nations (2025)	4 June 2025	Official	UN Security Council election
D13	Busari (2023), CNN	18 November 2023	News	2023 concession and transfer of power
D14	Bortue and Clayeh (2026), FrontPageAfrica	13 March 2026	News	Liberia–Guinea border episode (outside window)

3.5 Analysis and Triangulation

Analysis combined deductive and inductive coding, following the phases of thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher read all responses in full, applied the codes in Table 2, added inductive codes where respondents raised issues the lenses did not anticipate (for example, the difference between participating in a decision and influencing it), grouped codes into themes, and compared agreement and disagreement across the three participant groups. For each theme, we recorded how many respondents raised it. Counts describe how widely a view was shared in this sample; they are not estimates for any wider population.

We followed a set procedure for triangulation (Bowen, 2009). Each respondent claim about a datable event, office, deployment or mechanism was checked against the corpus and classified in one of three ways: corroborated, where a document confirmed the claim; partly corroborated, where a document confirmed the existence

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of the activity but not the respondent's specific account or its effect; and not corroborated, where no document was found. Claims that could not be corroborated are reported as respondent accounts and are not used as the sole basis for any conclusion. Perceptions and evaluations, such as whether peaceful elections lend Liberia credibility, cannot be corroborated by documents and are reported as perceptions.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted as part of a supervised master's thesis at the AMEU School of Professional Studies, and the thesis process provided ethical oversight. The thesis records no separate research-ethics committee approval number, and none is reported here. Before participating, each participant was told the study's purpose, that participation was voluntary, how confidentiality would be protected, and that they could withdraw at any time. All eight gave informed consent. Because several participants hold public office, the article reports no names, job titles, or institutional affiliations beyond broad professional categories.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

The study assessed trustworthiness against the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported by documentary triangulation and follow-up questions; dependability by an audit trail of coding decisions; and confirmability by reporting disagreement and uncorroborated claims alongside agreement. The researcher works for a Government of Liberia program. That position eased access to officials, but it could also incline both participants and the researcher toward a favorable view of state institutions. The analysis addressed this risk by reporting critical accounts in full, by separating respondent claims from documentary evidence, and by setting aside claims that could not be checked.

4. Results

Table 5 summarizes the main themes, how widely respondents shared them, and their documentary status. The subsections that follow report each theme, first as respondents described it and then as the documents record it.

4.1 Diplomacy Through Institutions

Respondent accounts. Respondents described Liberia's diplomacy as participation in collective institutions and occasional bilateral engagement, not as independent regional leadership. They cited the 2016–2017 Gambian crisis most often. One government participant described Liberia's president working with other West African leaders to persuade Yahya Jammeh to accept his defeat. A security-sector participant pointed to institutional representation as a continuing channel after UNMIL's departure:

> "Liberia had its representative assigned at the ECOWAS Department of Peace and Security in order to coordinate and support regional safety." (P3, security-sector representative)

Documentary record. The documents confirm the Gambia account. President Sirleaf was elected Chair of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government at the Dakar summit on 4 June 2016 (Embassy of the Republic of Liberia in the United States, 2016). On 13 December 2016, she joined Presidents Buhari of Nigeria, Mahama of Ghana and Koroma of Sierra Leone on an ECOWAS mediation mission to Banjul, which met Jammeh twice and consulted President-elect Adama Barrow, opposition leaders, the electoral commission and the security chiefs (ECOWAS Commission, 2016). A review of her chairmanship published in June 2017 lists the Gambia mediation first among its peace-and-security results (FrontPageAfrica, 2017); because it closes with the name of a Liberian embassy official in Abuja, it is treated as a statement of Liberia's own view. No public document confirms P3's account of a Liberian representative at the ECOWAS peace and security department. That account is therefore reported as a respondent claim.

Table 5. Themes, respondent counts and documentary status

Theme	Respondents raising it (n = 8)	Documentary status
Peacekeeping deployment as Liberia's clearest contribution	5 unprompted; 8 when asked directly	Corroborated (D6–D8)
Diplomacy through ECOWAS, including the Gambia crisis	Most frequently cited diplomatic example	Corroborated for the Gambia mediation (D1–D3); Liberian post at the ECOWAS peace and security department not corroborated
Cross-border police and border cooperation	Security-sector respondents	Partly corroborated (D9, D10)
Peaceful transfers of power in 2017 and 2023	3 (a fourth cited elections and peacekeeping together)	Transfers corroborated (D13; Freedom House, 2019, not part of the corpus); their regional significance is a perception
Dependence on external funding and technical support	6	Partly corroborated (D7, D10)
Participation without influence	2	Context corroborated (D11); Liberia's role not documented
Conditional transfer of DDRR and electoral lessons	Most respondents	Perception; not subject to documentary check

Two respondents separated participation from influence. A government participant said Liberia engaged

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with the regional consequences of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's withdrawal from ECOWAS but had little influence over the outcome. The withdrawal itself is documented: it took effect on 29 January 2025, a year after the three states gave notice (Olugbode, 2025). No document describes a specific role for Liberia. A civil-society respondent argued that keeping peace at home alone did not amount to a strong regional role in reconciliation.

A governance participant cited bilateral engagement with Guinea over a border issue in 2025. No document from 2025 was found. The press reported a border confrontation in Foya District, Lofa County, in March 2026, after which the government sent an inter-ministerial delegation to Guinea and said it engaged ECOWAS and the African Union (Bortue & Clayeh, 2026). That episode falls outside the study window, and it is not clear whether the respondent was referring to it. The claim is therefore set aside, as is a separate, uncorroborated claim by one participant about a border incident involving Guinea.

4.2 Peacekeeping and Cross-Border Cooperation

Respondent accounts. Peacekeeping was the most consistent finding. Five of eight respondents named Liberia's peacekeeping deployment, without prompting, as its clearest security contribution, and all eight listed it among the leading examples when asked directly. They specifically referred to Liberian personnel serving in Mali. Security-sector respondents also described police information sharing with neighbouring and regional counterparts to address transnational crime, human trafficking and drug routes.

Documentary record. The documents confirm the Mali deployment and show its scale. The Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) entered Mali in June 2013 as a platoon under the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), which became the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) on 1 July 2013 (Executive Mansion of Liberia, 2023; Ministry of National Defense of Liberia, n.d.). It was Liberia's first peacekeeping deployment since its civil wars, five decades after the country's first UN deployment, in the Congo (Executive Mansion of Liberia, 2023). The contingent grew from 46 personnel in 2013–2015 to 75 after a 2016 agreement with the UN, to 105 in September 2018, and to about 150 by 2020, when it served as a base-defence unit in Timbuktu; 13 Liberian staff officers and four military observers in Sudan and South Sudan served alongside it (Ministry of National Defense of Liberia, n.d.). The Ministry of National Defense reports about six rotations and, in 2017, one soldier killed and six wounded in a mortar attack on the Liberian camp (Ministry of National Defense of Liberia, n.d.). The deployment ended when the Security Council terminated MINUSMA's mandate on 30 June 2023 and required withdrawal by 31 December 2023 (United Nations, 2023); the contingent's end-of-mission ceremony was held in Monrovia on 21 December 2023 (Executive Mansion of Liberia, 2023). No document in the corpus records Liberian troops in an ECOWAS-led operation during the study window, such as the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia.

The documents partly corroborate the cross-border theme. The MRU operates Joint Border Security and Confidence Building Units among its member states; in November 2019 the MRU and the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel reviewed how to make them fully operational and proposed upgrading them into an early-warning mechanism (United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, 2019). In March 2025, the MRU installed the last two of forty planned units, at Buutuo and Loguatuo on the Liberia–Côte d'Ivoire border, with support from the UN Development Program (Ehui, 2025). These documents confirm that a formal cross-border mechanism exists and includes Liberia. They do not describe the police information-sharing network respondents mentioned, or its results.

4.3 Peaceful Transfers of Power

Respondent accounts. The peaceful transfers of power after the 2017 and 2023 elections were the second main category of evidence. Three respondents named them among the strongest evidence of Liberia's contribution to regional stability, and a fourth cited both elections and peacekeeping. Respondents described these transfers less as proof that Liberian democracy is complete than as evidence that leaders and citizens had used ballots and courts, rather than violence, to settle the contest for executive power.

Documentary record. The transfers are well documented. George Weah's inauguration in January 2018 marked Liberia's first peaceful transfer of power since 1944 (Freedom House, 2019), after an election shaped by fluid party loyalties (Pailey & Harris, 2020). In November 2023 President George Weah conceded defeat after a close run-off, and the Nigerian president, then Chair of ECOWAS, praised the concession as a sign that peaceful transfers of power can work in West Africa (Busari, 2023). Respondents' perceptions of whether these transfers strengthen Liberia's voice in regional diplomacy. Documents cannot confirm it.

4.4 Constraints: External Dependence and Institutional Depth

Respondent accounts. Agreement was strongest on constraints. Six of eight respondents named funding and dependence on international support as the main limit on Liberia's regional role. They cited reliance on outside finance and technical help for peacekeeping and domestic security capacity. A security-sector participant linked resource shortages to a persistent gap between planned police expansion after UNMIL and actual staffing. The specific staffing figures given in the interview could not be verified, so only the general finding is reported. A government participant described a capacity gap among service personnel, pointing to training, specialist skills, organizational development, and budget size.

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Documentary record. The documents do not measure dependence, but they show it. The government's account of the Mali deployment credits the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Nigeria as partners and notes that the government first allocated US$700,000 to peace support operations in the 2022 fiscal year, nine years after the deployment began (Executive Mansion of Liberia, 2023). The MRU border units installed in 2025 were supported by the UN Development Program (Ehui, 2025).

4.5 Transferable Lessons and Their Conditions

Respondents converged on two lessons. The first concerned accepted transfers of power. The second concerned disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR), which most respondents viewed as useful but incomplete. One security-sector participant stressed the need for a longer horizon:

> "If recommended for other countries, training should be long-term to get targeted impacts." (P2, security-sector representative)

Another respondent criticized the process for emphasizing disarmament while giving victims too little support. When asked what would allow Liberia's experience to be used elsewhere, respondents named no single condition. They listed political will, national ownership, functioning institutions, sustained reintegration support, and public willingness to accept the outcome of a peace process.

5. Discussion

5.1 What the Study Found

The study set out to establish what Liberia contributed to regional security between 2015 and 2025, through which channels, and under what constraints. Three findings stand out. First, Liberia made a documented operational contribution: a decade-long deployment to the UN mission in Mali that grew from a platoon to about 150 personnel. Second, its diplomacy worked through institutions; the clearest documented case is President Sirleaf's role as ECOWAS Chair during the Gambia mediation. Third, respondents agreed that dependence on external funding and technical support limits what Liberia can do, and the documents show outside partners financing both the Mali deployment and new border units.

Measured against Table 1, the evidence establishes participation and contribution. It does not establish influence or impact. The study recorded no instance in which a document showed Liberia changing a regional decision, and it did not interview the ECOWAS, MRU, or neighboring-state officials who could say whether such influence exists. Liberia's move from recipient to contributor is therefore supported by what the country did, not by what it changed.

5.2 The Scope of the Regional Contribution

Two qualifications define the scope of the contribution. The first concerns the channel. Liberia's documented operational contribution came through the United Nations, not ECOWAS. MINUSMA operated in a West African state facing threats that spilled across the Sahel and into coastal states, so the deployment contributed to West African security in the geographic sense that RSCT emphasizes. But it was a UN operation under a UN mandate, and the corpus contains no record of Liberian troops in ECOWAS-led missions during the study window. Liberia's standing in ECOWAS rests on diplomacy, above all its 2016–2017 chairmanship, rather than on military contributions to the regional organization's operations.

The second qualification concerns scale. A contingent of about 150 was a meaningful commitment for an army rebuilt from scratch after 2006 (Ministry of National Defense of Liberia, n.d.), and the contingent served under fire, including the 2017 mortar attack on its camp (Ministry of National Defense of Liberia, n.d.). It was also a small share of a large multinational force. The deployment shows that Liberia could sustain a contribution under fire for a decade; it does not show that Liberian troops shaped the mission's results. The cross-border theme is narrower still: the MRU units exist and include Liberia, but their effect is not documented.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

The evidence fits liberal institutionalism most closely. Every documented Liberian contribution ran through an institution: the UN for peacekeeping, ECOWAS for mediation in The Gambia, and the MRU for border cooperation. None rested on superior military or economic power. As Keohane (1984) argued, institutions let states cooperate without a dominant power enforcing order; for a state of Liberia's size, they also provide a seat at the table that its material resources would not. The ECOWAS chairmanship, to which Sirleaf was elected by her fellow heads of state (Embassy of the Republic of Liberia in the United States, 2016), illustrates the point: an office open to a small state gave its president a central role in one of the region's most consequential mediations.

The evidence also supports the troop-contributor literature. The Liberian deployment follows the path Fisher and Wilén (2022) describe, in which a post-conflict state rebuilds its army partly through international peacekeeping and uses deployment to present itself as a provider, not only a recipient, of security. Respondents' emphasis on outside funding is consistent with Wilén's (2018) warning that donor support for pre-deployment training can outrun the slower work of building domestic institutions. Blair's (2019, 2020) finding that UNMIL strengthened Liberians' trust in state institutions suggests one link between the two phases: the peacekeeping Liberia received may have helped build the state capacity that later allowed it to contribute.

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Post-conflict peacebuilding theory explains why Liberia's domestic history matters to its diplomacy. Respondents drew on the 2003 peace process, DDRR, and the 2017 and 2023 elections when describing what Liberia can offer the region. Matanock (2017) helps explain why elections carry this weight: where electoral competition replaces armed competition, settlements tend to last. Against the backdrop of the region's coups (Gyimah-Boadi, 2022), two peaceful transfers stand out. Yet respondents' insistence on conditions, and one respondent's critique of DDRR, align with the literature's warning against templates (Autesserre, 2017; Paris, 2004). Liberia is better presented as a comparative case with transferable lessons than as a model to be copied.

RSCT receives partial support. Border units and the attention to the Mano River basin fit the theory's focus on interdependence. But respondents emphasized that the biggest constraint was not a regional relationship. Instead, they emphasized dependence on funders largely outside West Africa. RSCT recognizes external penetration of regional complexes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), but explains the geography of interdependence better than the material conditions under which a small state can respond to it. Herbst's (2014) account of the costs of building state capacity in Africa, and Doyle and Sambanis's (2006) treatment of local capacity as a pillar of peace, help fill that gap.

Together, these insights suggest that post-conflict recovery does not automatically produce regional influence. A state can gain experience without the institutions to share it, institutional access without the capacity to act, or capacity without the credibility to mediate. As these respondents and documents portray it, Liberia has institutional access, a substantial record of post-conflict reform, and some operational contributions, but its capacity remains uneven and depends on outside support.

5.4 Limitations

The study has five limitations. First, the sample was small and weighted toward the state: six of eight participants worked in government or security institutions, and the study did not reach former peacebuilding practitioners, international-organization staff, or academics. The findings may therefore reflect Liberian institutional self-assessment.

Second, the study did not include external perspectives. Without interviews with ECOWAS and MRU officials, diplomats from neighboring states, or independent observers, it cannot establish whether others recognize the role Liberian respondents describe. This limitation bears directly on influence: claims about recognition and agenda-setting would require evidence from the actors supposedly influenced. Liberia's election to the UN Security Council in 2025, with 181 of 187 votes (Permanent Mission of Liberia to the United Nations, 2025), signals broad international goodwill, but it falls outside the study window and reflects global, not regional, standing.

Third, documentary verification was incomplete. The corpus relies on publicly available sources, including several Liberian government and press accounts that present the country favorably. Some diplomatic and security activity is sensitive and undocumented, and the researcher could not verify three respondent claims at all.

Fourth, respondent counts are descriptive. They show how widely a view was shared among eight people, not how common it is among Liberian officials generally.

Fifth, the researcher's position in a government program may have shaped access and responses, despite the steps described in Section 3.7.

5.5 Strengths

The study has three strengths. It defines its central concepts with indicators, which keeps its claims at the level the evidence supports. It checks each datable respondent claim against dated documents and reports the result, including where documents are silent. It also draws on informants with long professional experience in the institutions through which Liberia exercises its regional role.

5.6 Implications for Future Research

Three lines of research would test and extend these findings. First, interviews with ECOWAS and MRU staff and officials from Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire would show whether Liberia's neighbors share its self-image and would allow the study of influence rather than participation. Second, a comparison with Sierra Leone, another post-conflict state that became a troop contributor, would show whether Liberia's path is typical (Fisher & Wilén, 2022). Third, systematic indicators, such as personnel deployed per year, posts held in regional secretariats, assessed contributions paid, and incidents handled by joint border units, would allow change over time to be measured rather than inferred.

5.7 Implications for Policy

The findings suggest four modest implications, which should be read in light of the small sample. First, a funded, multi-year plan for police recruitment, training and welfare would address the capacity gap respondents described more durably than continued reliance on outside technical assistance. Second, the MRU border units and the police information sharing that respondents value could be formalized and given regular domestic funding, so that cooperation does not depend on donor cycles. Third, Liberia should share its DDRR experience, including its shortcomings, especially the need for long-term training and stronger support for victims and receiving communities. Fourth, the 2022 decision to budget for peace support operations (Executive Mansion of Liberia, 2023) is a step toward owning Liberia's regional contribution; sustaining that commitment would make the country's role less dependent on partners' priorities.

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6. Conclusion

Liberia's post-conflict path shows a real but easily overstated change. Between 2015 and 2025, the country did more than receive peacebuilding support. Its soldiers served for a decade in the UN mission in Mali, often under attack, and grew into a company-sized contingent of about 150. Its president chaired ECOWAS and joined the mediation that helped end The Gambia's constitutional crisis. It participated in Mano River Union border cooperation and twice transferred executive power peacefully while much of the region turned toward military rule.

The evidence supports a bounded conclusion. Liberia's shift from recipient to contributor is evident in its participation and contributions. The study does not show that Liberia influenced regional decisions or caused identifiable regional outcomes, and its documented military contribution ran through the United Nations rather than through ECOWAS operations. The strongest constraint is continuing dependence on external finance and technical support.

The case's theoretical value lies in how institutions, interdependence, and post-conflict experience interact. Liberal institutionalism explains the channels through which Liberia acts. RSCT explains why cross-border cooperation is necessary. Post-conflict peacebuilding theory explains why Liberia's recovery matters to its diplomacy. None is sufficient alone, and all three depend on domestic capacity. Liberia's experience should be read neither as a finished success nor as proof that dependence has ended. It is a state beginning to turn recovery into regional contribution while still carrying the constraints of recovery itself.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate. The study was conducted as part of a supervised master's thesis at the African Methodist Episcopal University School of Professional Studies, which provided academic supervision and ethical oversight. No separate research-ethics committee approval number was issued. All participants received information on the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, and all gave informed consent.

Consent for publication. Participants consented to the use of anonymized quotations. No identifying information is published.

Data availability statement. The interview data are not publicly available because participants were promised confidentiality and several hold public office. The author can provide anonymized excerpts supporting the findings upon reasonable request, subject to participants' consent. All documents in the corpus (Table 4) are publicly available at the locations given in the references.

Competing interests. The author is employed by the President's Young Professionals Program, a Government of Liberia program. The author declares no other competing interests.

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure. The authors used Claude (Anthropic), the paid version, to conduct random, related literature searches on the subject matter and to analyze voluminous documents from the authors' own perspective to illustrate theories on how it applies to the study's focus on Liberia's contribution to regional peace and conflict resolution in the ECOWAS region from 2015 – 2025. Claude was used to perform a manner-based review of the study using Google Scholar, reports from the Government of Liberia, the ECOWAS Commission, and other trusted, verifiable sources as secondary sources.

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